

Progressiveness, Camp, and Tremulous Delight: *Vim and Vigor* On The Arkansas Radio Theatre

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You are listening to the Arkansas Radio Theatre . . . Tonight's broadcast is a dance musical entitled Vim and Vigor. A dance musical for the radio, you ask?

(Slight pause)

Yes.

In April and May 2010, listeners in Russellville, Arkansas, tuned in to *Vim and Vigor*, a dance musical that I wrote and performed for the Arkansas Radio Theatre. Set in Hot Springs Village, Arkansas's retirement mecca, *Vim and Vigor* follows a pair of senior citizens who fall in love at a senior dance class. Written as a multi-character play, the production is nevertheless presented as a wholly solo effort: I wrote the script; I wrote the music; I play all the characters; and I hum all the dance numbers. As the quote at the start of this essay suggests, *Vim and Vigor* sets out to do too much. Its very inception—"a dance musical for the radio"—is ridiculous, setting it out from the very beginning on a campy, Ludlam-esque track. I would suggest that, while maintaining a conventional narrative structure, *Vim and Vigor* is deceptively innovative through choice of representation, parodic plot elements, and exaggerated performance style. As scholars like Jill Dolan find themselves becoming more and more comfortable with terms like "progressive" over "transgressive," our changing 21st century world gives us cause to look at strategies more subtle than open artistic rebellion. In such a space lies the potential power of *Vim and Vigor*.

Vim and Vigor is a production of the Arkansas Radio Theatre, the most public and technologically innovative arm of the new play and performance program at Arkansas Tech University. The Arkansas Radio Theatre had its inaugural broadcast in 2007. Since that time, there have been eight plays produced, each aired multiple times. The avowed mission of the Radio Theatre is to produce "new plays by contemporary playwrights and adaptations from classic literature." The offerings can be roughly separated into these two categories. From classic literature, the Radio Theatre has

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presented dramatic adaptations of *She*, an H. Rider Haggard adventure novel from 1887; *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's allegory from 1678; and a Sherlock Holmes story entitled, "The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb." The Radio Theatre also presented Susan Glaspell's 1916 play, *Trifles*. As far as newer works go, the Arkansas Radio Theatre has produced *Fallout, or Your Friend the Atom*—a comedy by Catherine Pierce, a poet and professor at Mississippi State—and two of my own musicals, *Bathysphere* and *Vim and Vigor*. In addition, the Radio Theatre presented a dramatic adaptation of the works of Liz Scott, a local schoolteacher whose humorous musings on single motherhood are serialized in the Russellville, Arkansas, Sunday paper. At the time of writing this article, the Radio Theatre is working on the production of a four-episode soap opera, *Tomorrow's a New Day*, written by Arkansas Tech student Aaron Wallis.

The audience for the Arkansas Radio Theatre is difficult to analyze. Shows are broadcast on the local radio station, run by the university. The audience for the station is presumably senior citizens. Except for weeknights, when the students have their hour-long radio shows, the station plays exclusively jazz standards by artists such as Shirley Bassey, Peggy Lee, Paul Anka, and Louis Armstrong. It is difficult to assess how many listeners actually tune in. Occasionally, the local newspaper provides publicity for the broadcasts; and, though the broadcasts are not yet available in podcast format, listeners around the world are able to tune in via an internet simulcast. Nevertheless, the Radio Theatre is known primarily by word of mouth. With each broadcast, it grows more popular, as shown by auditioners who now show up at casting calls knowing the Arkansas Radio Theatre exclusively from its broadcasts.

While it may seem that radio theatre—with artistic roots stretching back into the 1930s and '40s—is just a fossil of the past, it has applications in the hip fields of podcasting and other internet broadcasting. In fact, this forward leaning and backward grounding is significant to Arkansas Radio Theatre's underlying philosophy: just as its programming consists of "the classics" and "the new," so the newer plays—like the soap opera *Tomorrow's a New Day* and the dance musical *Vim and Vigor*—play with old forms while leaving room for contemporary innovation.¹

Old Age And The Romantic Comedy Genre

The plot for *Vim and Vigor* is fairly straightforward: against the odds, two senior citizens find love. The plot centers on Helen, a retired librarian. Having moved to Hot Springs Village in order to live with and take care of her older sister, Helen decides to take a senior dance class that she has read about in the *Bingo Bugle*. When she goes to

¹ The portions of this paper describing the Arkansas Radio Theatre were originally presented as part of a panel at the 2010 Central States Communication Association Convention. The author was able to attend this convention because of a grant from the Arkansas Tech University College of Arts and Humanities.

the class, she is saddened to learn that the instructor, Ceel, does not feel that she can teach without male participants. Ceel cites a common complaint—the paucity of male companions for senior women—through a song, “Where Are All the Men?” Rather than give up her dreams of dancing, though, Helen goes down the hall of the senior center and attempts to recruit Warren, the only present member of a war veterans’ group. After some hemming and hawing, Warren and Helen dance together, fall in love, and end the play with a sense of promise for their budding relationship.

As usual, the road to romance is made bumpy, mostly by way of two characters who serve as antagonists. Warren’s greatest obstacle is Grace, his deceased wife of fifty years. When he first sees Grace’s ghostly presence, he assumes that she is frowning on his romance with Helen; only later, however, he discovers that he has her blessing. The main problem faced by Helen is her invalid older sister, Norma, who is demanding and conniving and—in my view, as you will later see—delightful. While utterly dependent on her younger sister, Norma is absurdly mean. For example, when she learns that Helen is meeting a man for lunch, she responds, “It’s too late. You waited too long;” and then she launches into an inappropriately up-tempo ditty called, “You’re Old (And You Don’t Deserve Love).”

While I believe that there is inherent value in choosing to represent senior citizens as main characters—for, certainly, there are not enough plays that do as much—I do not want to overstate my accomplishments. Critics would be justified in pointing out that, while *representing* senior citizens, the play does not truly *include* them in any material way. First, I did not consult senior citizens in the writing—that is, for example, I did not write the piece based on ethnographies gathered at a retirement home. Also, the cast is not age-appropriate; instead, all the roles are played by me, a thirty-two year-old. Such performance is really “age drag.” And, as Kate Davy writes when discussing female impersonation by males, drag by males—or by the young, I might add—has the potential to marginalize, generalize, and eliminate the subjects of imitation (366). Nonetheless, I like to believe that *Vim and Vigor* has progressive elements—especially the plot’s deviation from the romantic comedy form.

Vim and Vigor’s playful disruption of romantic comedy convention is most obvious at the end of the play. In the last two scenes—where Helen and Warren come close to losing their love only to find it reinvigorated—the storyline appears to head down well-trodden paths only to veer away at the last moment. *Vim and Vigor*, like all romantic comedies, has a happy ending. More interesting, though, are the bumps that precede the ending: the bumps are set up as though they will be significant, but the play—in a somewhat self-conscious way—undermines the romantic trajectory. It is as if the plot *tries* to proceed with romantic zeal, but the concerns of the real world—including concerns stemming from age—just won’t let it.

In explanation, consider the following exchange that takes place when Warren shows up at Helen’s and Norma’s house claiming that he “need[s] to talk.” This exchange occurs near the end of the play, after all paths to romance are cleared. Warren wants to say something significant, but cannot do it.

WARREN: And I just wanted to tell you . . .

HELEN: What did you want to tell me, Warren?

WARREN: Well . . . I don't quite know yet. But I had to see you.

This conversation is *supposed* to be where Warren confesses his love. In fact, such a confession lies on the tip of his tongue. But he is a mature man who has been married fifty years. He rightfully understands that declarations of love after only two days are either frivolous or suspicious, so he leaves the emotion unstated.

This pattern—what is supposed to happen in a romantic comedy almost happens but doesn't—is repeated throughout the final scenes. For example, the play ends with a dance—following a tradition dating back at least as far as Shakespeare and continuing to more recent times with the big “finales” of Broadway shows and with movies like *Dirty Dancing*. Warren asks Helen to seal their love by entering a dance contest at the community college. The two perform their number, called “The Geritol Drag.”² Such an exhibition of skill is *supposed* to be the characters' chance to shine. For Warren and Helen, it is their chance to prove their worth to the younger generation, as represented by the college-aged contest audience. The protagonists are *supposed* to win, of course. That is what happens in *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, a 1980s romantic comedy for teens which, like *Vim and Vigor*, ends with a dance contest. When present in literature, the final contest and its winning—whether of sport or dance—represent comedy's way of consummating love and rewarding hard work. Significantly, literary representations would have us believe that dance is a place where differences can be forgotten and characters can understand each other. Even if the movements are marked as strange in some way, fictional dancers have the magic ability to win over even the most hardened onstage/onscreen audiences. Consider, for example, the scene in *Thirteen Going on Thirty* where Jennifer Garner's character enlivens a dull party by doing the dance from Michael Jackson's “Thriller.” Convinced that the party is a failure, Garner's character starts dancing like the zombies in Jackson's video. Then, as only happens in plays and movies, the partygoers start joining in: they see Garner dancing; they want to share her quirky spirit; and they all begin to dance. No such coming-together occurs in *Vim and Vigor*; instead, Helen and Warren lose the contest—an occurrence that could only be surprising in literature. But the characters are not discouraged. “Are you surprised?” Warren asks after the winners are

² Anne Basting Davis devotes Chapter Two of her 1998 book, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary Culture*, to an analysis of a Minnesota-based senior citizens' performing troupe called, “The Geritol Frolics.” While I had read Davis's work many years before—I certainly recall her description of the seventy-four year-old Carol Channing in the Broadway revival of *Hello, Dolly!*—I did not consciously draw on the “Geritol Frolics” for “The Geritol Drag.” Instead, the image that sticks out vividly in my mind comes from watching re-runs of *The Lawrence Welk Show*, where Welk's orchestra plays in front of a backdrop emblazoned with the name of the show's sponsor, Geritol. That image certainly established connections for me among the ideas of Geritol, aging, and entertainment—possibly making parallel connections to those made years earlier by the “Frolics.”

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announced. “No,” replies Helen; “but it sure was fun.” The couple knows that they have no realistic chance of impressing the young people; instead, they dance for themselves.

Besides flirting with the lighter tropes of romantic comedy, *Vim and Vigor* also approximates and disrupts the conventions of romantic tragedy. This can most clearly be seen in Warren’s interactions with Norma, Helen’s invalid sister, at the end of the play. Warren, now certain that he has his dead wife’s blessing and fearful that he has lost his chance at love with Helen, hurries to her house. He finds that she is gone. Norma, feeling feverishly amorous, looks for a way to sabotage her sister’s romance. She tells Warren that her sister is dead. Of course, mistaken deaths of the stuff of tragedy; at this point, the plot urges Warren to go to Romeo-and-Juliet extremes. But he doesn’t believe Norma—mainly because Norma is not good at things, whether flirting or lying. Norma lays the groundwork for tragedy, but Warren is too experienced to fall for it.

When this tragic effort fails, the plot turns from mistaken death to mistaken cheating. Norma, still claiming that Helen is dead, urges Warren to sit near her and to put his arm around her. Then she grabs him hard and, against his will, starts kissing him. Of course, that is exactly when Helen returns home. Here again, the plot starts on a direction only to veer off. Helen is *supposed* to see the kiss and misinterpret it, leading to further complications and possibly Othello-like reactions. Instead, Helen remains unconvinced of Warren’s interest in her sister, as can be seen in the following exchange:

NORMA: He made overtures! Overtures of a romantic nature!

HELEN: (Seeking explanation) Warren?

WARREN: (As if to say, “come on now”) Helen.

HELEN: Norma, I’m ashamed of you.

Instead of falling glibly for the tropes/traps of romantic tragedy, Helen is simply unable to believe that Warren could truly love her bedridden, ill-tempered sister. Maybe a young person would fall for such trickery, but Helen is too wise.

These dramaturgical backpedalings are significant because of what they say about age in romantic comedy. On the one hand, they point out that older persons are typically excluded from being romantic participants in romantic comedy. Try though they might, Warren and Helen really do not have a chance at winning a community college dance contest—especially in a society where, as Anne Davis Basting writes, old age is so commonly linked with “loss” or obsolescence (1). In a significant way, letting Warren and Helen win the dance contest would have been to let the dance contest—and to let *youth*—win. To win, Helen and Warren would have had to have become young, disavowing the value of age. Just as the great actor Betty White—in an old episode of the *Golden Girls* and in her recent *Saturday Night Live* appearance—must be replaced by a stunt double in order to wow the crowd with her dance moves, so must

the characters Warren and Helen become something other than themselves if we are truly to believe that they can wow a young audience with their athletic prowess.

It was my hope to avoid making the value of old persons contingent on their similarities with young persons. Such a strategy is too often used. For example, in her assessment of the Minnesota-based senior citizens' performance troupe, "The Geritol Frolics," scholar Anne Davis Basting finds herself disappointed by their 1993 revue entitled "You're As Young As You Feel." The show emphasizes the physical abilities and mental acuity of the participants—in part by having them form kick-lines and do splits. With this emphasis, Basting argues, the revue "set[s] up a comparison between youth and age that risks perpetuating negative associations with old age in favor of a 'youthful' frame of mind" (42). Instead of disrupting how youth and age are conceptualized, Basting goes on to say, the revue "expands youthful middle age until it obscures and even overtakes the boundaries of old age" (55). The problem with such a strategy is that "the show underplays physical and psychological changes in the last stages of life" (55). In other words, the Geritol Frolics of 1993 runs the risk of effacing the uniquenesses of old age experience in favor of clinging to and reinforcing the preeminence of youth.

I hope that *Vim and Vigor* has avoided this pitfall. Though it relies on a standard romantic comedy plot—boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl almost don't make it, boy and girl end up happy ever after—it does so with less naïveté. Just as the description of the standard romantic plot—"boy" and "girl"—presumes youth, so does the plot itself presume youth. Helen and Warren, though, bring experience, maturity, and wisdom. Life is not as simple as believing that your lover could fall for your sister. These characters are not lovesick teens who fall for anything—including love. These are cautious people, who take life with the suspicion of experience and with a grain of salt.

Helen's and Warren's comfort with age can be seen in the number that they perform as their entry in the dance contest. "The Geritol Drag" is a both a mockery of old-age stereotypes and a reveling in the freedom that comes with age. With ridiculous lines like "Heigh ho, Centrum Silver!," the number is a terrible choice for an entry in the competition. In addition, the song's antagonistic tone makes winning highly unlikely. Consider the following lines:

WARREN: It may seem a drag when you're getting older.

HELEN: Features start to sag and your hands get colder. But your tongue will wag as you get bolder –

WARREN: And you tell the young folks what they're doing wrong. At the park, don't swear at all! The Geritol Drag!

HELEN: At the beach, don't bare it all! The Geritol Drag!

Helen and Warren try on the stereotypes of old age—acting as tongue-cluckers who shake their heads at what the "young folks" are doing. But, at the same time, it's this breadth of experience—the feeling of having lived life and seen it all—that gives them their power. Helen claims the old person's privilege to speak her mind—a process

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which, incidentally, she is still learning—and celebrates it. So, in the end, I hope that the plot of *Vim and Vigor* reads as I intend: as a highlighting of the youth prejudice in representation and a subtly proposed solution: a celebration not of youth-in-age, but of what truly makes aging great.

Camp, Unintentional Or Otherwise

In the previous section, I suggest that *Vim and Vigor* can be experienced in multiple ways—as a romantic comedy and as a parody of romantic comedy. While I can make no guarantee as to how any individual audience member will receive the piece, I believe that elements of the performance style—especially those associated with a “camp” sensibility—encourage multi-faceted listening. “Camp” is a sophisticated aesthetic, described in Susan Sontag’s famous 1964 “Notes on ‘Camp.’” Sontag is careful to insist that her notes are “tentative and nimble,” not a systematic definition (276). I will use Sontag’s “Notes” as a starting point to make observations about the performance style of *Vim and Vigor* and then to suggest the significance of camp for this radio play.

In her “Notes,” Sontag suggests that praise for camp includes statements like “It’s too much,’ ‘It’s too fantastic,’ ‘It’s not to be believed’” (283). *Vim and Vigor* is definitely “too much”—in its particular elements and also in its overall design. Its very existence begs questions about the possibility of its existence. For example, why do a dance musical on the radio? And why have all the parts played by the same man? And, if all the parts are played by a man, then why are most of the roles women’s roles? And why is there humming instead of musical instruments? With its very make-up conspiring against it, *Vim and Vigor* is a project set up to fail. Two hallmarks of camp, then, are especially applicable: serious intent and failure—or, as Sontag puts it, “a seriousness that fails” (283). In the case of *Vim and Vigor*, we have—if not out-and-out failure—than at least the often-present risk of failure.

Let us first consider serious intent. Sontag writes that “pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious” (282). She also claims that “probably, intending to be campy is always harmful” (282). Is *Vim and Vigor* pure camp then? After all, its author has considered its camp potential to such a degree as to write about it. Does that not suggest intentionality, running the risks of—to borrow Sontag’s terms again—being “manufactured” or “calculated” (282)? I would argue no. In the first place, *Vim and Vigor* did not necessarily set out to be “too much.” Instead, it was written by an author who thought that “too much” was “okay.” In truth, *Vim and Vigor* came about because I was doing a lot of solo experimentation: I had gotten some new microphones, a new mixing board, and a new recording program; and I needed to test out this technology on my own before bringing in the student actors whom I had cast in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. And another reason for performing all the parts myself is that I am simply not a good enough musician to write music notation easily. If I wanted to teach the songs to a cast of actors, it would have increased my writing time exponentially, having to transfer the melodies in my head into notes that

singers and musicians could read. By playing all the parts myself, I was able to eliminate the “middle-man” and avoid the necessity of having to commit my songs to sheet music. So it is clear that the unusual performance style of *Vim and Vigor* is more a product of necessity than it is a reasoned decision to be campy.

However, the story of *Vim and Vigor*'s inception points to something campy in the author's soul, if not in his intent. Most artists, faced with the obstacles faced by me, would have chosen a project more suited to their abilities/limitations. I, however, prefer a challenge—and I usually end up with something on the border of the serious and the ridiculous.³ Rather than calling my work “campy,” my colleagues have affectionately termed it “sloppy.” I strive for something opposite to “slickness.” At one of the universities with which I was previously associated, there was a professor who prided himself on staging productions that he termed “slick theatre.” He had a stock speech that he used to explain his aesthetic: “People criticize ‘slick theatre.’ But I say there's nothing wrong with ‘slick theatre.’ I strive for it. Because ‘slick’ means it's good.” In my view, “slick” simply means taking no risk. Yes, this professor's productions approached professional quality. But *so what?* I prefer theatre that bites off more than it can chew. Such theatre will be sloppy. And such theatre will be campy, without intent.

The possibility of creating unintentional camp merits more analysis. I can best describe my creative process by the effect that it has on me during creation. When I make a piece like *Vim and Vigor*, I am not concerned with whether or not the audience will find it campy or even funny. Instead, I am concerned with the effect it has on me, which will hopefully be repeated in the audience. This effect can best be described as “tremulous delight.” I take the term from that great writer of excess, Edgar Allan Poe. In his poem, “The Lake: To —,” he describes the beauty “Of a wild lake, with black rock bound, / And the tall pines that towered around” (7). He goes on to recount how the lake changes into something horrible and frightening when nights falls. Having relayed his feelings at the nighttime changes, he steps back and analyzes his emotions: “Yet this terror was not fright, / But a tremulous delight” (8). The feeling Poe describes is integral to camp, as I see it. It is the feeling necessary to appreciate the best in horror, the best in soap opera, the best in musical comedy—to be both within (e.g., terror) and without (delight)—and to be aware of being in both places at the same time. It is a feeling of distress at Mary Tyrone's morphine addiction with the simultaneous thrill at seeing Katharine Hepburn throw herself around like a fiend. The delight is “tremulous”—throbbing, fluttering, slightly ashamed—but delight nonetheless. It is this feeling that caused me to smile ear-to-ear when, directing a production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, I staged that ridiculous dance that Salome does for her uncle, with the look of delicious detachment in her eyes and her arms waving

³ I use “ridiculous” with a sense of indebtedness to Charles Ludlam's contributions. He is well known for having designed theatre that was “too much”—with elevated language, classical style, and campy humor. For more on Ludlam's aesthetic, see Steven Samuels's “Charles Ludlam: A Brief Life.”

strangely like an odd bird. It is, to return to Sontag's language, a consciousness of "artifice" (277). It is to perform an action—whether of horror, lust, or anger—with grave seriousness in the action but also with effusive joy in the performance. It is a feeling difficult to sustain throughout a project. But it is worth creating art just for such fleeting moments of tremulous delight.

Vim and Vigor has a few scenes and one character that are campy through-and-through. One of the campiest scenes occurs after Helen and Warren have felt the first spark of affection. They agree to meet at a pancake house, where they sing a maudlin duet and further strengthen their love. After the song, when they should either be gazing or kissing, Warren accidentally spills his coffee on Helen's lap. Helen, not wanting to let the incident ruin the romance, plays off like the scalding doesn't hurt. However, when she can no longer hide her pain, the following conversation takes place:

HELEN: The truth is it still really hurts.
WARREN: Waiter, can we have some water? Some ice?
HELEN: Ow. And we were having such a nice conversation.
WARREN: Here you go. I'm sorry. You should pour.
HELEN: I like it when you do it.
WARREN: You want me to – ?
HELEN: Yes . . .
SNOOTY WAITER: Is everything okay, ma'am?
HELEN: (Snapping) Yes! He's taking care of it.
WARREN: Is that better?
HELEN: Keep pouring. I'm on fire.
WARREN: (Pause for pouring) Is that better?
HELEN: (Pause) Yes, better.

I enjoy this scene because the innuendo is so thinly veiled, the flirting so embarrassingly obvious and awkward. The too-apparent similarity of the scene to a sexual encounter makes it "too much." The episode culminates with Helen's ridiculous announcement that her loins are "on fire," suggesting that only Warren's liquid can put out the flame. Truly, too much to be taken seriously.

In addition to some scenes, *Vim and Vigor* has one character who is campy through-and-through—Norma. Helen's older sister represents a number of traits not always present in public discourse: she is old, sick, mean, and horny. These traits make Norma an "unruly woman." Film theorist Kathleen Rowe writes that "the figure of the unruly woman—too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious—unsettles social hierarchies" (19). In her book, *The Unruly Woman*, Rowe builds off the work of historian Natalie Zemon Davis to create a list of eight features that mark such women. The features applicable to Norma are as follows:

- Her speech is excessive in quantity, content, or tone.
- She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are considered grotesque.

- Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. (31)

We are first introduced to Norma through Helen's description of her. We learn three things: Norma is sick, older than Helen, and has been married three times. When the dance instructor Ceel hears about Norma's marriages, she calls her "voracious." We also learn from Helen's description that Norma yells a lot and has strict expectations regarding how Helen cares for her. Later, when the audience finally meets Norma, the description is borne out: Norma sits on her couch all day and mocks her sister for thinking of love.

Norma's campiest scene is her attempted seduction of Warren. The scene begins with Norma alone: her legendary "voraciousness" has crept up on her and she finds herself in need of a man. She sings the following song: "I'm man-crazy! I'm crazy for men!" In between the refrains, she tries to seduce men to her home, using the telephone in an attempt to get a pizza boy and a drugstore delivery man. After the failure of these schemes, Warren arrives and she turns her attention to him. In the previous section, I discussed Norma's attempts to make Warren believe that Helen is dead and to use his grief as an excuse to start kissing. Her strong desire is incongruous with her abilities: she cannot carry out the schemes that she proposes. For instance, her lies are bad. Consider her description of Helen's death:

We were talking—see?—and her lips started turning blue. I said, "Helen, are you dying?" And she said, "Norma, sweet, sweet Norma!" And then she fell on the ground and started convulsing. And I said, "Helen! Helen! No!" But she was dead and they threw a black sheet over her and took her away.

This story of a sister's sudden death could be terribly sad if it weren't for Norma's way of telling it: it's too much. No one—neither Warren nor, I believe, an audience—could believe it. This speech is just one of many lines and actions that delight.

Norma is basically a comic character. Her significance lies in her comic camp potential. A conglomeration of marginalized identity traits, Norma is what Rowe would call a "female grotesque." Rowe discusses the "power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that keep women in their place" (3). While Norma is not necessarily a *positive* representation of an older woman, she unquestionably represents three factors that our culture hides—age, sickness, and sexual appetite in women. While Norma is not necessarily a *positive* representation of an older woman, nor is she the *only* representation of an older woman in *Vim and Vigor*: her sister is the true protagonist—a likeable and quietly tenacious lady who initiates almost every action in the play. While Norma is not necessarily a *positive* representation, I think she's funny. And while Norma is not necessarily *positive*, the play seems to like her and lets her off unpunished. She fits Aristotle's definition of a comic character, one for whom comedy arises from "some defect or ugliness, which is not painful or destructive" (9). The significance in Aristotle's description is the lack of pain. Norma experiences no psychological pain. She is never forced down the typical roads of an antagonist—for instance, into a brutal realization that her actions

have hurt others. The worst thing that happens to Norma at the end of the play is that her pet cat temporarily deserts her. And she experiences no additional physical pain. I mean, it's not like she *dies*.

In the previous section, I discussed how *Vim and Vigor* brings up plot-lines as though intending to follow them and then veers away. There is another plot-line that I did not discuss: the plot of the older person. This plot can be simply put: in a play with older people, someone dies. That does not happen in *Vim and Vigor*. Yes, characters are dead before the play begins—Warren's wife, Ceel's husband, Warren's war veteran friends, Helen's family members—but not one character dies in the course of the show. If death were to occur, then the obvious candidate is Norma. After all, she tries to sabotage Helen's and Warren's relationship; so, dramaturgically, she may be seen to deserve punishment. More importantly, her prolonged living gets in the way; so her death would be useful as a means of giving Helen the freedom demanded for plot resolution. And, conveniently, her death is foreshadowed by her ever-present illness. But I didn't think all that was cause enough to kill her. I like her too much.

Near the end of her "Notes," Sontag writes explicitly about the value of camp. She connects it with a feeling of love: "Camp," she writes, "is a *tender* feeling" (292, italics in original). She claims that "camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature" (291). For Sontag, the lover of camp is better than the lover of art or the aesthete: the lover of camp appreciates the parts of human nature that are usually hidden—that are strange, exaggerated, undervalued, ignored, hated—and finds delight in them. This same appreciation of human nature is the place from which spring *Vim and Vigor's* camp elements.⁴

⁴ I would be remiss to leave a discussion of camp without also mentioning its relationship to homosexuality and to drag. As Sontag (290) and others have written, camp is the province of the homosexual—especially the male homosexual. *Vim and Vigor* is a queer production in that gender roles are sometimes subverted and in that casting of all roles with the same man introduces gender-bending or drag. However, I do not want to overstate *Vim and Vigor's* accomplishments. It is a heterosexual love story that operates within a purely heterosexual frame. Same-sex desire is unrepresented. And, as far as drag goes, the performance represents the most innocuous form of drag. Yes, a man plays all the women—and this is certainly strange or *queer*, if you will. But, if drag is a spectrum—with full-out RuPaul-like embodied performance on one side and, on the other side, men telling stories in the locker room where they briefly "put on the voices" of their wives or girlfriends—then *Vim and Vigor* falls on the safer side of the spectrum. As a radio play, *Vim and Vigor* is only vocal drag. Presumably, the audience either forgets about the performer or imagines him, in men's clothes, standing near a microphone. The quick character switches from male to female and back again mean that the drag is always provisional, temporary. Also, I don't imagine that my vocal shifts are skilled enough to fool an audience the whole way through: at times, it must become obvious that one man is playing all the parts. Such occasional realizations give the performance a wisp of a narrator, a constant (male) organizing presence underneath the performance which normalizes the drag and takes away much of the subversive potential. To sum it up, the drag performance and hints at queerness add to the camp, but are not the strongest campy elements.

Conclusion: Toward “Progressiveness”

In several places in this essay, I have used the phrase, “I don’t want to overstate my accomplishments.” I mean that *Vim and Vigor* is by no means revolutionary. It will not set the world on fire. But embedded in my caveat is the word “accomplishments”—a term that needs further analysis. What is *Vim and Vigor* trying to accomplish? What is the point? And what goals can truly be reached when “accomplishments” are not vigorously pursued? To answer these questions, I reflect on what I believe are *Vim and Vigor*’s accomplishments, situating them in the particular context from which the production emerges. But I also explore the larger question of what it means to be “progressive”—for “progressiveness,” I believe, is what *Vim and Vigor* is after.

Elsewhere in this essay, I have suggested that *Vim and Vigor* is constructed in such a way as to invite layered listening. For example, I wrote about how the play adheres to and diverges from romantic comedy plot-lines. I also discussed how the camp performance style invites the audience to enjoy the characters from a standpoint both within the play (empathy, sharing the characters’ emotions) and outside the play (appreciation, delight). Implicit in this argument is the idea that *Vim and Vigor*, while accessible in multiple ways, can also be experienced as precisely what it claims to be—as a dance musical about two senior citizens who fall in love. If I have done my job properly, then an audience can empathize with the struggles faced by Helen and Warren, enjoy their budding romance, and feel satisfaction at the promise of a more meaningful relationship between the two. I hope—even if the camp and parody fail to register—that the love story still exists.

It is important to operate on multiple levels where I am. My university home is in rural Arkansas—smack-dab in the middle of the Bible Belt—surrounded by political conservatives and evangelical Christians. If I want to reach this audience, then I am well-served to use the comfortable romantic comedy plot with its kind characters and gentle, monogamy-affirming love. This plot is not transgressive. But is “transgression” a viable goal? Jill Dolan has written famously about “transgressive” performance. While Dolan has, for instance, written about the power of the representation of sexual acts (“Practicing” 344), I cannot use such radical strategies. On the one hand, if I use transgressive or “outlaw” techniques, then I put in jeopardy my future at my academic institution. More importantly, though, such strategies would not allow me to reach my audience. As artists, we must not be afraid to frame our arguments in ways that our broader audiences respect and that respect our audiences.

I would call this kind of thinking “progressive.” I see this word used by Dolan in some of her more recent writing and find it applicable to my work. Dolan has remarked on a change in her thinking in the 21st century. In a preface to a newly published version of an older essay, she describes her thinking as follows:

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I used *transgressive* a lot in my scholarship in the early 1990s; I have noticed that now, in the early twenty-first century, the word *progressive* fits more easily into my worldview. (“Practicing” 334, italics in original)

She goes on to write:

I find that my own commitments have moved elsewhere . . . away from goading transgressors on to extremes of queer outlaw behavior, and closer, I’m afraid, toward what I [have condemned previously] as “assimilative” strategies. (334)

This self-reflexive tendency is found in Dolan’s other work, too. For example, on the occasion of playwright Wendy Wasserstein’s death, Dolan re-visits and tempers some of her earlier critiques of the popular author. From her later vantage point, Dolan sees that Wasserstein is similar to the feminist performance artists that Dolan has lauded: all seek “to reach as wide an audience as possible with innovative, socially progressive theatre work” (“Feminist Performance” 434).

I believe that *Vim and Vigor* uses its many layers as a way to reach audiences. But that is not enough. Like Dolan, my interest lies with work that I can term “progressive.” But what does that mean? And how do the techniques outlined in this essay contribute to a progressive theatrical work?

To begin with, let me give a tentative definition: the progressive impulse longs for what transgression longs for—change. Like transgression, progressiveness wants change to come about in the most efficient and most total way—and, of course, in a way that makes society better. But the progressive impulse doubts the efficacy of the brutal, the sudden, the shocking, and the abrasive. Possibly, as Dolan writes, the abruptness of transgression is no longer possible “in a world that works so hard to condemn and contain it” (“Practicing” 334). Just as likely, transgression’s power had been previously overestimated. I agree with Dolan when she writes that “I now believe that social change happens by accretion, in slow, attenuated ways that are difficult to measure without a long view of history” (“Practicing” 336). Transgression comes with a pop, bang, or a dropped jaw. Because of its flourishes, it seems to have an effect. But, as Dolan says, true change creeps up more slowly.

What then makes *Vim and Vigor* progressive? I would have to say it comes down to the pedagogical value of encouraging a multi-layered listening experience. I would argue that the camp sensibility, the representation of the typically unrepresented, and the use of parody are all strategies that cause the audience to hear the performance on many levels—and, with these levels, the audience is urged to see all the world as a *mélange* of complexity. This lesson is important for my home audience, as it is for everyone. In an environment ruled by fundamentalism, the tendency is to see truth as monolithic, experience as monolithic. But there is room for diversity, appreciation, and tolerance even within seemingly monolithic Christian fundamentalism. Yes, Jesus was God, but he was also a testy teenager arguing with his mother at the wedding in Cana. As fundamentalists are capable of seeing Jesus in all his complexity, so can they see life in all its complexity—especially if addressed with respect and in terms understood. In *Vim and Vigor*, yes, the character is a woman, but the actor is a man.

Yes, the old lady is mean, but we can still like her. And, yes, it's a romantic comedy, but not unreservedly so.

By encouraging multi-layered listening, *Vim and Vigor* hopefully opens up the gaps in experience that allow room for all the different people on earth. This is important where I live, in Russellville, Arkansas—not only because of a tendency to ignore these gaps—but because my students and my fellow townspeople *live in these gaps*. In the larger narrative of American life, rural Arkansas does not count for much. It is ignored by a monolithic view, as is the diversity of religious feeling here and the various economic backgrounds and experiences. After all, a monolithic worldview can only exclude, exclude, exclude. Camp, on the other hand, is inclusive. As Sontag writes, “The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy” (291). The restrictions of the monolith restrict experience and people, as well as art. Hopefully, *Vim and Vigor*—in a subtle and progressive way—suggests how to *include*. At least, a little.

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