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Creating the Outsider's Political Identity: Nathan Lane's Dionysus

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In his preface to *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, which is about the institutionalized censorship in the early twentieth-century United Kingdom, George Bernard Shaw wrote, “It is no more possible for me to do my work honestly as a playwright without giving pain than it is for a dentist. The nation’s morals are like its teeth: the more decayed they are the more it hurts to touch them” (Shaw 1970–74, vol. 3, p. 751). These words were repeated, not quite verbatim,<sup>1</sup> by a fictionalized George Bernard Shaw in the 2004 Broadway musical *The Frogs*. *The Frogs* was, according to the playbill, “written in 405 B.C. by Aristophanes, freely adapted by Burt Shevelove, even more freely adapted by Nathan Lane,” with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. In Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Dionysus travels to the Underworld to fetch Euripides at first to bring skill back to the tragic stage (Ar. *Ran.* 71); as the play progresses, the god’s mission shifts to the salvation of Athens itself (1419–21). In the musical, Shaw takes the place of Euripides and represents for Dionysus the best hope for “the survival of mankind” right from the beginning of the play (Act I, p. 3). In both the ancient and contemporary versions, while in the Underworld, Dionysus judges a contest between his favorite and a revered poet of yesteryear. In Aristophanes, Aeschylus takes the role of nostalgic greatness; in the musical, the part goes to

William Shakespeare. In both versions, Dionysus chooses to bring back the older playwright. The musical's Dionysus says he prefers Shakespeare to the witty but prosaic Shaw because Shakespeare is a "poet" who can "touch people's hearts as well as their minds" (Act II, pp. 55–56). Dionysus selects poetry's pleasure over the dentist's drill.<sup>2</sup> His decision raises the question whether the musical is aiming at pleasure or the moral rectification Shaw extols, for the play like its ancient predecessor, while trying to be pleasing, comments forcefully on the decadent moral and political condition of its contemporary world. This paper, after some necessary background material, broaches the question of *The Frogs*' construction of its moral compass by interrogating one particular aspect of the 2004 production, namely the construction of Dionysus's sexuality, as Dionysus was performed by Nathan Lane, and its relationship to Lane's and Sondheim's articulation of their politics. I argue that Lane's and Sondheim's 2004 revisions of *The Frogs* make Dionysus into a purportedly inoffensive, heterosexual god in order that the more painful anti-war political message might get a better hearing.

*The Frogs* began its twentieth-century life in November 1941 as a short play with choruses, staged at the Payne Whitney Gymnasium pool at Yale University by Yale Dramat, with the Yale swim team playing the aquatic frogs. The play is often attributed to Shevelove, who was the director of Yale Dramat at the time; a contemporary notice in the *New York Times*, however, names Shevelove as the director but gives writing credit to one John Ward Leggett, Yale Class of 1942.<sup>3</sup> The play used Aristophanes' framework as a critique of the mid-twentieth-century theatrical scene, and already contained the substitution of Shakespeare and Shaw for Aeschylus and Euripides. In 1974, Shevelove decided to produce the play in an expanded version, again at the Payne Whitney Gymnasium, which at the time he called "the nearest thing

we have in America to a Greek amphitheater” (Gardner 1974). He asked Sondheim, with whom he had collaborated on the Plautus-inspired *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, to write songs for the production. Even at the height of the Watergate and Vietnam crises, it remained a largely apolitical piece promoting a vague notion of fixing the things that had gone bad and taking over from those who had grown complacent.

On May 22, 2000, in celebration of Sondheim’s seventieth birthday (which had been on March 22, 2000), the Music Division of the Library of Congress organized a concert performance of *The Frogs* in Washington, D.C. It starred Nathan Lane as Dionysus, Davis Gaines as Shakespeare and Brian Stokes Mitchell in all the other roles. The concert resulted in a recording of the score, its first professional recording.<sup>4</sup> By Lane’s own account, he had known the work since 1977, when he had discovered a copy of the published script in a New York bookshop (Lane 2004, 5). After the concert presentation and after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Lane saw a resonance between the musical and the state of the country.<sup>5</sup> A play about the seemingly endless Peloponnesian War presented Lane with an opportunity to critique President George W. Bush’s endless “war on terror.” And so Lane convinced director-choreographer Susan Stroman to undertake a professional production in New York, with an expanded, more pointedly political book by himself. Because the 1974 production had contained music almost exclusively for the chorus, Lane and Stroman persuaded Sondheim to write several character songs for the new production. The revised version of *The Frogs* ran for a limited engagement at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, from July 22 to October 10, 2004, and produced an original cast recording.<sup>6</sup>

The politically charged nature of Lane's and Sondheim's revisions are evident in the opening moments of the musical. In Act I Scene 1, in lines added by Lane, Dionysus tells Xanthias his reasons for traveling to Hades: "The Peloponnesian War still rages on, Xanthias. A war we may not be able to win. A war we shouldn't even be in. People are frightened and running out of hope. A great artist could be our salvation." Xanthias challenges: "What about our leaders?" and Dionysus responds: "Have you listened to our leaders? Words seem to fail them. Even the simplest words" (Act I, pp. 3–4). The lines, with their oblique reference to President Bush's frequent neologisms (e.g., "misunderestimate") and mispronunciations (e.g., "nuc-you-ler" for "nuclear"), are typical of Lane's approach to contemporary politics. He, unlike Aristophanes, never directly engages with contemporary political questions. He, unlike Aristophanes, never names Bush or the Iraq War. From beginning to end, he uses the Athenian framework as a very loose allegory for contemporary America without ever explicitly linking the vehicle and tenor of his allegory. The closest he comes to breaking the allegorical code is a line given to Charon as he describes the frogs who inhabit the River Styx: "Of course there are a lot of different species of frogs that can be pretty dangerous." He names the Gastric-Brooding Frog and the Passive-Aggressive Jurassic Tasmanian Frog, among others, and then Charon warns Dionysus of "the Big Bully Bush Frog that makes pre-emptive strikes and then forgets why it was attacked in the first place" (Act I, pp. 40–41). Dionysus responds merely by suggesting that it's time for Charon to take a nap. Again, it would take a very naïve spectator to miss the reference to the so-called Bush Doctrine on pre-emptive military actions and Bush's neglect of the 9/11 perpetrators in favor of attacking Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Yet, again, Lane leaves the criticism wholly within the world of *The Frogs*. Even in the parabasis, where Aristophanes is

usually most virulent and critical, Lane wrote the following conversation. Dionysus: “Our leaders won’t tell us the truth—not the whole truth—just half truths and big fat lies told to supposedly protect us.” Pluto: “Forgive me, but I think the truth is terribly overrated.” Dionysus: “Not if you’re the one being lied to. And if we start to question things—merely question—we’re accused of being disloyal” (Act II, p. 32). Who is speaking here? Who is the “us”? Is Dionysus the representative of discontented Athenian citizens or is Lane, writing and playing Dionysus, the representative of discontented American citizens? Rather than break the fourth wall—a spatially impossible act at this moment of the performance, since the Chorus was ringing the stage and singing the highly ironic “It’s Only a Play,” with Dionysus and Pluto upstage center—Lane again turns to his oblique technique for making political criticisms.

The musical comes close to putting aside its oblique mode in its finale, in which it attempts to inspire its audience to political action.<sup>7</sup> In the 1974 version, the play ends as Dionysus and Shakespeare board Charon’s boat to return to earth. In 2004, they reach earth and, in front of a closed curtain, Dionysus invites Shakespeare to “say something.” Shakespeare hardly gets out Edgar’s closing lines from *King Lear* (V.iii.325–26) than Dionysus takes over to ponder, “what have we learned?” He reprises the musical’s opening song, “Instructions to the Audience,” with lyrics newly penned by Sondheim for the 2004 production: “Don’t shovel what’s uncomfortable / Underneath the rug. / Speak up! Get Sore! / Do something more than just deplore.” The curtain opens and the full company joins Dionysus to implore the audience, “Don’t sit and brood, please. / Learn to be rude, please” (Act II, pp. 63–65). Lane’s and Sondheim’s *Frogs*, however, isn’t as uncomfortable or rude as it would like to be. (And its politeness is not just in the word “please,” which is cleverly used in the opening number as a rhyme for

“Aristophanes.”) If political action consists of rudeness, the musical presents a bad model for effecting change. The oblique nature of the play’s political critiques make them easier for the audience to laugh at—and to laugh off.

One particular aspect of the 2004 production that was far from uncomfortable or rude and that, I argue, worked against the play’s political message, was the character of Dionysus himself. Nathan Lane is a highly likeable actor, a Broadway clown and improviser in the tradition of Bert Lahr or Zero Mostel, an actor who not so much plays a role but delightfully plays himself playing a role.<sup>8</sup> One could hardly argue against the idea that he was an ideal conduit for the play’s politics, whether they had been written by himself or by someone else. The task required some finesse, some sugar to make the medicine go down, and the wise-cracking Lane was well-positioned to provide it. Yet the production went beyond coating its political poison with humor; it made its hero into a strange caricature of the brush-clearing, denim-wearing, hyper-masculine president it so fervently deplored. Instead of constructing a cowboyish masculinity, though, Nathan Lane’s Dionysus was hyper-heterosexual.

Even besides the fact that Lane’s real-life self often pokes through his character’s identity, Dionysus was a role into which he poured much of himself. It was his desire to try his hand at writing, to attempt to affect the world through art, to articulate the resonance he saw between Aristophanes’ *Frogs* and post-9/11 America that led him to approach first Stroman and then Sondheim and to re-write Shevelove’s lighthearted play.<sup>9</sup> It is clear from the script and it was clear from the production that Dionysus, especially in the lines added to the parabasis and finale, was intended to be a strong representative of the authorial viewpoint. And so it is important to take into account Nathan Lane’s own public persona when considering the

construction of Dionysus's identity. This includes the fact that he is himself an openly gay man. He came out publicly in *The Advocate* in 1999, after the murder of Matthew Shepard (Vilanch 1999). In one interview, when asked whether he had always been a Sondheim fan, he quipped, "Are you kidding? I'm a homosexual—it comes with the starter kit" (Green 2004). He has taken on several gay roles, even before coming out publicly, most notably in the plays of Terrence McNally, such as *The Lisbon Traviata* and *Love! Valor! Compassion!* His most famous film character has been the flamboyantly gay transvestite Albert in *The Birdcage*. He had a title turn in the very short-lived sitcom "Charlie Lawrence" in 2003, in which he played a gay actor who is elected to Congress. His identity as a gay man is well enough known that Mel Brooks played off it in the opening scene of *The Producers*, in which Lane played Max Bialystock.<sup>10</sup> This is by no means to say that Lane specializes in gay roles. Both on stage (e.g., Nathan Detroit in *Guys and Dolls* and Pseudolous in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) and on screen (e.g., the lead character in his other short-lived sitcom "Encore! Encore!"), Lane has very successfully played heterosexual, even womanizing men.

Still, especially given the traditional sexual ambivalence of Dionysus in Athenian tragedy and comedy, it was surprising to hear the conversation of Xanthias and Dionysus as they crossed the River Styx (after Charon began his prescribed nap) (Act I, p. 42):

Dionysus: There are particular times since my wife died when I feel—so terribly  
alone.

Xanthias: I didn't know you were married.

Dionysus: It was many years ago. Her name was Ariadne. Have you ever been in  
love, Xanthias?

Xanthias: Yeah, once. But there was someone else. She was having an affair with  
a centaur. You know, half man – half horse? I couldn't compete with that.

Dionysus's marriage to Ariadne is mentioned neither in Aristophanes' original comedy nor in Shevelove's 1974 version. In ancient myths, as is well known, Ariadne is the daughter of Minos. She helps Theseus navigate the Labyrinth and slay the Minotaur. Theseus takes her to the Aegean island of Dia (to be identified with Naxos, perhaps). Ancient writers offer differing versions of the relationship between Ariadne and Dionysus. Homer (*Od.* 11.321–25) has her slain by Artemis on Dia “by the evidence of Dionysus;” whatever that specifically means, it at least shows that Homer knew of a story in which Dionysus had a hand in Ariadne's death. Hesiod (*Th.* 947–49) marries Dionysus and Ariadne to one another and has Zeus grant her immortality. Euripides seems to combine narrative threads when he has his Phaedra call her sister both “wretched” and “the wife of Dionysus” (Eur. *Hipp.* 339). Later authors even claim a son of Ariadne and Dionysus.<sup>11</sup> From this jumble of relatively minor myths, Lane constructed a heterosexual marriage and thus made Dionysus into a nostalgic widower.<sup>12</sup> As if to delineate the marriage as exceedingly normal, he contrasts it with Xanthias's perverse sexual history as the erotic rival of a centaur.

After Xanthias's line about the centaur, the slave invites Dionysus to tell him more about his “wife.” Dionysus begins a song, new in 2004, titled simply “Ariadne.” Anyone who knows the work of Stephen Sondheim knows that he rarely writes straightforward love songs. If there is a love song, it is usually full of dissonance and irony. Although no one would mistake “Ariadne” for a the melodic “People Will Say We're in Love” (from *Oklahoma!*) or “All I Ask of You” (from *Phantom of the Opera*), it is a surprisingly beautiful love song, lilting and tender, even



serene and touching when the song reaches Ariadne's death.<sup>13</sup> And, traditional love song that it is, the singer dotes on his lover's beauty: "She was young, she was wild / Ariadne / She was shy, like a child, / had this funny dimple when she smiled, / lips as soft as petals, / hair the color of the sun, / breasts—"— at which point Xanthias interrupts with "I get it" (Act I, p. 42). It is not only her beauty but her sexiness that Dionysus recalls longingly. Xanthias's interruption of this brief erotic moment calls attention to it, so that Dionysus's recollection of his wife's breasts functions to highlight his own heterosexuality.

Dionysus's heterosexuality, though, is established earlier in the play, so that the introduction of Ariadne serves to reinforce what we already know. In Act I, Scene 2, Dionysus visits Heracles. Heracles was played by Burke Moses, the original muscle-bound buffoon Gaston in the Broadway production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Wearing only a loincloth on his chiseled body, Heracles fulfills a different function than he did in the Aristophanic original. In Aristophanes, Dionysus begins the play already wearing Heracles' lion skin. He visits Heracles only to ask for directions. In the musical, both in the 1974 and 2004 versions, Heracles devises the conceit of dressing Dionysus. The scene functions as a transformation of Dionysus—and Lane—into the heterosexual god who will save the world. The script (this is in Shevelove's original) quickly marks Heracles as heterosexual. When Dionysus asks Heracles whether he experiences burning desires, the object of desire Dionysus conjures up is not pea soup (as in Aristophanes [*Ran.* 62–63], who played off Heracles' reputation as a glutton); instead, he asks if he has ever desired a beautiful woman. Dionysus knows he can make Heracles understand by appealing to his heterosexual desires. Shevelove's and Lane's scripts are worth comparing here,

for their differences are slight but significant. Shevelove writes in 1974 (Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim 1985, 150):

Herakles: Who is she?

Dionysos: She? She is not a woman.

Herakles: A boy.

Dionysos: Not a boy, a man.

Herakles: Well, that happens.

Dionysos: I am obsessed by Bernard Shaw, a dramatist.

Herakles: I hope it works out. From what I hear, all you need is one hit.

Lane revised the scene, so that it reads in 2004 (Act I, pp. 14–15):

Herakles: Who is she?

Dionysos: She? She is not a woman.

Herakles: A boy?

Dionysos: No, no, no, not a boy, a man.

Herakles: Well, that happens. This is ancient Greece.

Dionysos: You misunderstand. I am obsessed by George Bernard Shaw.

Herakles: The one who wrote the plays?

Shevelove played with the possibility of Dionysus's homosexuality, but did not take pains to dismiss it. Lane does. He has Dionysus protest too much ("No, no, no") that he does not long for a boy. Heracles' new line, "This is ancient Greece," taps into the popular imagination that homosexuality was normal and accepted in (an apparently monolithic) ancient Greece, that temporally and spatially distant culture which is so different from "us," who apparently do not

consider such behavior normal. Finally, Lane has Dionysus explicitly dismiss Heracles' entire interpretive context with his "You misunderstand," changing the subject from sexuality to theater. Dionysus wants to keep as far from implications of homosexuality as he can.

Heracles is not wholly convinced. After Heracles learns of Dionysus's mission to Hades, he looks over his flowing robe and leafy crown and tells him, "Brother, Hades is one badass town. You wouldn't last ten minutes in that get up. You gotta dress for success" (Act I, p. 18). He begins the song, written new for 2004, "Dress Big," in which Heracles dresses Dionysus with the lionskin and club. Dionysus assures him that he does not need a new outfit, since he also has his "get up" "in gold, blue and magenta," but Heracles still criticizes him as behaving "too fussy" and even "too Fosse" (Act I, pp. 21–22), drawing on the popular association of musical theater with homosexuality. The transformation is completed toward the end of the song when Heracles invites Dionysus to walk across the stage, "a little less graceful" (Act I, p. 23). The dramatic moment has a complex ancestry. Heracles' line is already in Shevelove's 1974 version (Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim 1985, 153), but it's a moment that passes very quickly, within three lines and not embedded in a song. In the 2004 production, the moment is expanded in song that continues with Heracles singing, "You don't walk, you stride. / You don't amble, you don't sidle. / You remind them you're an idol." It also appears to be a moment of complex intertextuality, for the lesson is strongly reminiscent of Lane's performance in the film *The Birdcage* (1996), when Armand (played by Robin Williams) tries to teach Albert (Lane) to walk like John Wayne, so that Albert can fool strangers into believing he is heterosexual.

*The Birdcage* is itself based upon the 1973 play *La Cage aux Folles* by Jean Poiret, which was also the basis for a film of the same title, directed by Édouard Molinaro in 1978, and

the basis for the musical *La Cage aux Folles*, by Harvey Fierstein with music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, which opened on Broadway in 1983. All the versions of *La Cage* (including *The Birdcage*) contain the scene in which the less flamboyant gay man (named Georges in the Poiret play and the musical, Renato in the film and Armand in *The Birdcage*) attempts to teach his partner (Albin in every version until *The Birdcage*) how to walk like John Wayne.<sup>14</sup> Although the westerns hero is not mentioned by name in *The Frogs*, it struck this audience member at least as deliberately evocative, at minimum, of both *The Birdcage* and the Herman–Fierstein musical *La Cage aux Folles*, the former because of the presence of Lane himself, the latter because it contains a song, called “Masculinity,” built around the very same joke.<sup>15</sup> “Masculinity” is a strange creature. Orchestrated with a lot of Broadway brass, it resembles a Sousa-like march. In the penultimate line of each verse, the music retards as Georges sings of something Albin needs to dispense with (his pinky popping up when he drinks tea, the nylons under his boots, the pantyhose under his chaps), and returns to tempo for a triumphantly sung, “You can climb back up the mountain once again!”<sup>16</sup> The music is in no way John Wayne-esque. On the one hand, its inappropriateness perhaps reminds that audience that the ambulatory lesson is being conducted for a gay man by a gay man, and is doomed to fail. On the other hand, despite the fact that the musical centers on a same-sex couple and was the first in Broadway history to feature gay lead characters, this scene and indeed the entire musical are crafted to be very comfortable for all but the most homophobic audience members. Both leads<sup>17</sup> in the original cast were well-known heterosexual men, and both paid tribute to their wives in the playbill. The only even remotely sexual activity onstage was heterosexual, primarily between Georges’s son and his fiancée; Georges and Albin never so much as kissed. As one critic puts it, “The show became just another

warm-hearted, conventional Jerry Herman musical, only this time, as if recognizing that Dolly and Mame and the other caricature broads had been drag queens all along, the big lady on the staircase was a guy in a frock” (Steyn 1999, 201). In the end, *La Cage* sits as a landmark gay musical that looked and sounded very gay even as it tried not to. Like Albin himself, the musical tried to act like John Wayne, but could not pull it off. Albert in *The Birdcage*, played by Nathan Lane, suffers the same failure as *La Cage*’s Albin, for he cannot walk like the Duke. In both works, Albin / Albert reverts to transvestism, finding it easier to convince strangers that he is a woman than a straight man.

When it came to expanding Shevelove’s joke that Dionysus should walk “a little less graceful,” Lane and Sondheim needed the transformation to be successful. They took advantage of their own plot, with Heracles providing the lessons instead of the effete man’s gay lover, to reconceive the situation of *La Cage*’s “Masculinity” as “Dress Big”.<sup>18</sup> After an opening brass fanfare that could have led to a Sousa march, the orchestration turns to spare use of low-voiced woodwinds, with some piano, an arrangement that allows Heracles’ basso to dominate the song. The vocal line hits the downbeat of almost every single measure very forcefully, driving the song forward, but also (to pick up the ambulatory metaphor) cramming the song full of stomping footsteps rather than the nimble tread of a marching band. The effect is aided by lyrics comprised almost wholly of one-syllable words. (E.g., “You flaunt a few furs, / You drape a few skins, / You hang a few pelts.”) They stand in strong contrast to the more complex rhythms in the song “The Frogs” that soon follows, where we learn that the world is really for the frogs, “Not for fancy pants humanitarians, / not for chatty platitudinarians” (Act I, p. 49).

In sum, “Dress Big” uses scenes in *The Birdcage* and *La Cage aux Folles* as intertexts, the former through the person of Nathan Lane himself, the latter through the inclusion of a song that has the same dramatic function as “Masculinity,” even as both scenes are themselves based on a single original in Poiret’s play. The intertextuality serves to show how the *Frogs* scene succeeds in the dramatic function they all share. In all three scenes, a more or less recognizably normatively masculine man tries to teach a decidedly effeminate man how to be not only more masculine but also—importantly—identifiable as a heterosexual. In *La Cage aux Folles* and *The Birdcage*, the lesson fails and the effeminate man becomes even more flamboyant. In *The Frogs*, Sondheim’s song is more musically and lyrically appropriate for the dramatic situation than Herman’s song, and so it is more successful in transforming the *Birdcage*’s actor into the masculine man he needs to be to convince the denizens of Hades that he is Heracles. And, with the intertextual allusions that equate normative masculinity and heterosexuality, the scene also relieves Dionysus of any suggestion that he is erotically obsessed with another man and casts him as securely heterosexual. Lest we fear that Dionysus’s heterosexuality is merely a façade provided by the lionskin, Lane tells us in the next scenes that Dionysus was married to the beautiful and busty Ariadne.

The construction of *The Frogs*’ supporting roles lends credence to the argument that Lane and Sondheim have deliberately cast Dionysus as heterosexual. The role of Xanthias was played on Broadway by Roger Bart, with whom Lane had worked in *The Producers* (also directed by Stroman). Bart took over the role, ten days before the show opened, from former *Saturday Night Live* star Chris Kattan, who was fired by Stroman. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Kattan acknowledged that he was a fish out of water in the world of New York theater (Baum

2004). What is notable for our purposes is that he also talked about how the role of Xanthias developed. When he started rehearsing the part, Kattan said, he wanted to tone down some gay innuendo associated with Xanthias, since he was trying to shed the gay stereotypes he had performed so often on *Saturday Night Live*. He intended to find out whether his replacement, Bart, who was already associated with gay roles in *The Producers* and the film *The Stepford Wives*, would play the character more stereotypically gay. In my experience, Bart's performance did not seem particularly engaged with homosexual stereotypes (unlike his over-the-top performance in *The Producers*). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, as the play was developed, Lane sought to counterbalance his hetero-normative Dionysus with a gay Xanthias.

The secondary actor whose performance was most certainly aiming to perform queerness was Peter Bartlett as Pluto. Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* described his performance as an inappropriate "use of his trademark self-parodying effete persona" (Brantley 2004). He enters down a staircase, à la Jerry Herman madams such as Mame, Dolly or Albin, and notes that the disguised Dionysus looks nothing like Heracles, who is "a tall man. Much taller. . . . Not to mention gorgeous with muscles for days. And beautiful hair. And a dark smoldering sensuality" (Act II, p. 24). Muscleman Heracles clearly made a strong impression the last time he visited, and no amount of John Wayne striding will cause Pluto to forget that body. Pluto is given a song, "Hades," a song newly written for the 2004 production, which celebrates the joys of the afterlife. He describes Hades as a place "where everyone is gay!" Much like Bialystock in *The Producers*, Pluto insists, "No, not that way – No, I mean *gay*." Dionysus and the chorus girls look at him as if they clearly know what type of gay he is. Pluto surrenders, "Oh never mind" (Act II, p. 28). The song itself celebrates Hades as an amoral utopia. It's all "flash" and "flare" with "spectacle

to spare.” Because everyone is already dead and therefore not afraid to die, “there’s nothing we condemn.” Everyone in Hades is on “one long acid trip.” To judge from Bartlett’s flamboyant performance, homosexuality itself should be added to the list of joys that can be celebrated in amoral Hades. Like Heracles’ mention of “ancient Greece,” however, Hades appears as an Other place and therefore, *mutatis mutandis*, only heterosexuality ought to be celebrated on moral Earth.

With Pluto’s queerness and Dionysus’s heterosexuality well-established, then, the two share the central political scene of the play: the parabasis. As we have already seen, the political criticisms in this scene are oblique, with George W. Bush and the Iraq War always remaining behind the thin veil of nameless Athenian leaders and the Peloponnesian War. Still, the construction of identities to this point gives strong prominence to Dionysus’s arguments. The Pluto who states that the truth is overrated is the immoral homosexual who finds happiness only because he lives in an amoral world. How can his arguments be trusted? He also suggests that humans have gotten the leaders they deserve, that Dionysus is admirably idealistic but naïve, and that possibly the god Chaos has returned to earth. His statements come off as weak challenges to Dionysus’s zeal. Dionysus, in contrast, is now the moral god whose mission was called by Heracles not naïve, but “heroic” (Act I, p. 16). He is the trustworthy crusader for truth and justice (and perhaps even the American way). He is everything Pluto is not. He is the world’s heterosexual savior.

His savior’s status is finalized—and again strongly linked to his heterosexuality—in the contest between Shakespeare and Shaw, which Lane has shortened from Shevelove’s original. Dionysus introduces the contest as a boxing match, complete with a fight bell, with each



playwright in his “corner”, not allowed to bite, hit below the belt, or plagiarize (Act II, pp. 45–46). Dionysus proposes themes, and each man must quote from his works on the given theme. The first theme—Dionysus decides as a well-endowed chorus member offers him a drink—is women. Then, man. Then, the Life Force. Then, love. As the playwrights nearly come to blows, Dionysus hears his name called from above. Ariadne (played by Kathy Voytko) stands on the balcony, appearing for the first time on stage. As if he were in *Romeo and Juliet*, Dionysus scales the scenery to reunite with his dead wife; the stage direction reads that he climbs “in an Errol Flynn manner” (Act II, p. 52). (Actually, the 48-year-old Lane had a body double do the climb). He confesses to Ariadne that he is “unsure” about which playwright to select, and she advises him, “Follow your heart.” But, he says, “If I did, I would stop everything and stay here with you. Seeing you again makes it all seem vain and unimportant” (Act II, p. 52). The uxorious Dionysus is prepared to sacrifice the world to its evil president and his misbegotten war, just to have his beloved woman. Fortunately for the world, Ariadne will not let him. Ever the loving wife who stands behind her man while he takes political action, she urges him to return to the contest, having learned “the pain of loss” from their separation.<sup>19</sup> With that, Dionysus kisses her *very* passionately and descends into Hell for the final round of the contest. The final theme is Death. Shaw recites Joan’s monologue from *St. Joan*; Shakespeare sings “Fear No More” from *Cymbeline* (with Sondheim’s music), and is declared the winner by Dionysus.

Thus, Dionysus leads Will Shakespeare back to earth. Upon their arrival, they greet the audience. And, although Dionysus invites Shakespeare to address us, it is Dionysus who takes up the final instructions to the audience, advising us not to shovel away what’s uncomfortable. But he is a Dionysus—and an actor, Nathan Lane—who, far from the god who was “too fussy” and

“too Fosse” for Heracles’ tastes, has indeed disposed of what might be uncomfortable in his identity. He has snatched a wife from the corners of Greek myth, and demonstrated his desire for her with a passionate onstage kiss. He stands in contrast to a potentially gay slave who moves in a world marked by bestiality and a King of the Underworld whose world is starkly amoral. When he put on Heracles’ lion skin, he also put on Heracles’ hyper-heterosexuality, but the sexual orientation did not depart with the skin. He kept it so that he could find inspiration in his Muse—romantic inspiration to follow his heart. From this identity position, Dionysus and Nathan Lane beg their audience to fight against the president who, as satirist Stephen Colbert famously pointed out, follows his gut. The plea failed. George W. Bush won reelection less than a month after *The Frogs* closed.

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<sup>1</sup> The script reads: “it is no more possible for me to do my work honestly as a playwright without giving pain, sir, than it is for a dentist. My job is to force the public to reconsider their morals. And morals are like teeth, sir, the more decayed, the more it hurts to touch them” (Act II, p. 40). I quote from an unpublished copy of *The Frogs* script, dated July 19, 2004 on the cover sheet and July 20, 2004 on every subsequent page. The script agrees well with my memory of the performance I attended, the evening performance on Saturday, August 7, 2004. (The show’s official opening was July 22, 2004, and so the script presumably reflects the state of the show as

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performed on opening night, although previews had begun on June 22. According to WorldCat, the New York Public Library possesses a typed version of the script dated July 28 with revisions dated August 14, but I have not had access to this version.) Only the 1974 version of the script has ever been published, first as Shevelove and Sondheim 1975, and then in Shevelove, Gelbart and Sondheim 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere (Given 2003), I have shown how the musical (in its 1974 version) equates poetry with Sondheim's music, so that Shakespeare's victory is not only a victory of poetry over prose but also a victory of the musical over both the straight play and older musicals.

<sup>3</sup> Nichols 1941. The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama database (*APGRD Database*, University of Oxford, ed. Amanda Wrigley, <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/database>, accessed 28 December 2009) lists the play as a translation rather than an adaptation. It attributes the translating work to "undergraduates" and the songs to Franklin B. Young. This version, like the 2004 incarnation, has never been published. See Gamel 2007 and Stein 2004 for more detailed reviews of the history of *The Frogs* and the characteristics of each version.

<sup>4</sup> The *Frogs* recording is paired with four songs from Sondheim's television musical, *Evening Primrose*. See Sondheim 2001 in the Works Cited. I owe many thanks to Mr. Sondheim for making available to me copies of several recordings of *The Frogs* before the commercial recording became available; thanks also to Mark Horowitz of the Library of Congress for information on the Library's concert performance.

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<sup>5</sup> These events are recounted in Lane 2004. Gamel (2007, 220–22) provides excellent critical insight into how Lane transformed Shevelove’s apolitical farce into a political vehicle.

<sup>6</sup> Sondheim 2004. Although collaborators’ contributions are not typically so neatly divided, for convenience’ sake I attribute spoken-word revisions to Lane and musical and lyric revisions to Sondheim.

<sup>7</sup> It only comes close since, even here, when the audience is addressed directly, they are addressed as “citizens of Athens” (Act II, p. 65).

<sup>8</sup> Lane’s willingness to break character was on display in the performance I attended. Early in Act II, when a woman in the balcony began laughing uncontrollably and threatened to make several members of the cast lose their composure, Lane stopped the show, looked up into the balcony and assured the woman (I’m paraphrasing), “I love you! Oh, how I love you!”

<sup>9</sup> The idea that (in Stephen Holden’s words [2001]) “making art is the best defense against our nihilistic impulses” was already an established theme for Sondheim, especially in *Sunday in the Park with George*. We might attribute Lane’s attraction to *The Frogs* not only to Aristophanes’ politics and Shevelove’s wit but also to Sondheim’s worldview.

<sup>10</sup> In the song “The King of Broadway,” after bragging that “my showgirls had the biggest tits” and “my lap was filled with gorgeous ass,” Bialystock sings, “There was a time when I was young and gay – but straight!”

<sup>11</sup> The evidence of the various narrative threads of the Ariadne myth is gathered and interpreted at Gantz 1993, 114–17.

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<sup>12</sup> Lane's own account reads, "As I started researching, I found this Greek myth about Dionysos and his wife, Ariadne, who died when she was very young. It's a very romantic myth—he gives her a crown on their wedding day, and then she dies not long after" (Lane 2004, 6).

<sup>13</sup> Horowitz (2004, 12) describes it as "a haunting barcarolle." Mendelsohn (2004, 52) calls it "an inorganically sentimental intrusion that slows down the show to no apparent point. Or, rather, a point that is only too apparent, which is the modern actor-writer's inevitable sense that Dionysus should be a real, live, sympathetic, warm-blooded character." Mendelsohn rightly criticizes the humanization of Dionysus as distracting from the musical's political program. English (2005, 130–31) also notices the humanization of Dionysus, but her concern is how the characterization works against the spirit of Old Comedy rather than against the musical's political message. The heterosexualization of Dionysus that I am tracing is, I suggest, an important part of the distracting sentiment that Mendelsohn identifies.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Poiret 1979, 109–10; Fierstein and Herman 1987, 72–75.

<sup>15</sup> Gamel (2007, 229–30 n. 56) also notes the similarity to *The Birdcage*, but does not press the issue.

<sup>16</sup> Fierstein and Herman 1987, 72–75, together with track 10 on Herman 1983.

<sup>17</sup> George Hearn as Albin was an established musical theater star with credits ranging from 1776 to Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. He won an Emmy award for the television broadcast of *Sweeney Todd* in 1983. Gene Barry played Georges. Although he had made his Broadway debut in 1942, he was best known for his television work: as the title

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marshal in the western *Bat Masterson*, as a magazine publisher in the more urbane *The Name of the Game*, and as the title detective in *Burke's Law*. Although never a stereotypical tough guy, one might have thought that the former Bat Masterson could at least teach someone to walk like John Wayne.

<sup>18</sup> I do not want to go so far as to say that “Dress Big” is an intentional correction of “Masculinity,” for there is, as far as I can tell, no direct reference to the Herman song in Sondheim’s. The thought is tempting, though, because of the rumored chilly history between the two composers. When Herman won the Tony Award for Best Score for *La Cage aux Folles*, beating out Sondheim for his work in *Sunday in the Park with George*, he stated in his acceptance speech, “This award forever shatters a myth about the musical theater. There’s been a rumor around for a couple of years, that the simple, hummable show tune was no longer welcome on Broadway. Well, it’s alive and well at the Palace [Theater, where *La Cage* was playing]!” (quoted at Zadan 1994, 315). His remark was widely understood as a swipe at Sondheim’s *Sunday*, whose difficult score has often found more praise from critics than popular audiences. It is attractive to hear “Dress Big,” therefore, as an attempt to correct Herman’s inappropriately hummable “Masculinity.”

<sup>19</sup> Ariadne thus, uniquely among the women in the Sondheim corpus, plays the role of a wife with no ambivalence in her relationships. See Hanson 1997 on the profile of the typical women of Sondheim’s musicals.