



Crowley, Mart (b. 1935)

by Linda Rapp

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Playwright Mart Crowley saw his first play, *The Boys in the Band*, become a huge off-Broadway hit that was later adapted as a motion picture. Although a groundbreaking representation of gay men, *The Boys in the Band* is now considered somewhat controversial, partly for the attitudes of the characters and partly for its now anachronistic setting in the age before AIDS.

Crowley is a son of the South. Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi on August 21, 1935, he used his familiarity with the culture and his personal experience to inform his writing.

Crowley's childhood was not a happy one. His father, a tavern-keeper, was an alcoholic, and his mother, who was addicted to both drugs and alcohol, eventually had to spend considerable time in mental institutions. For a respite from his miserable home life, the young Crowley frequented the local movie theater.

After graduating from a Catholic boys' high school in Vicksburg, Crowley enrolled at Catholic University in Washington, D. C. When he received his degree in theater in 1957, he went to New York, where he became a production assistant to director Elia Kazan on the film *Splendor in the Grass*, based on the play by William Inge.

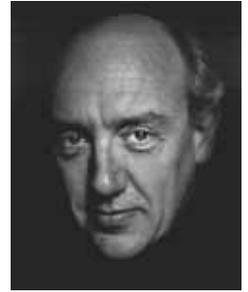
Crowley became friends with the film's star, Natalie Wood, who encouraged him to go to Hollywood to pursue a career in screenwriting.

Crowley succeeded in writing a script that was slated for production, but the project was cancelled at the last moment. Other disappointments followed. Crowley wrote the pilot episode for a television series that was to star Bette Davis, but the show was never produced. Next he got a screenwriting job at Paramount, but was soon fired.

After these setbacks Crowley was house-sitting for a friend when he wrote a play about a group of gay men. A friend brought the work to the attention of producer Richard Barr, who ran the Playwrights' Unit with Edward Albee. They agreed to put it on in a workshop in January 1968, and Crowley burst onto the literary scene with his best-known work, *The Boys in the Band*. It opened off-Broadway in April and ran for over a thousand performances. The play was made into a film directed by William Friedkin in 1970.

The Boys in the Band is a groundbreaking work that uses both humor and melodrama to offer a look at the lives of a group of openly gay men. Queer audiences welcomed it when it appeared, but over the years it became controversial. Objections centered on traits of various characters that critics felt perpetuated negative stereotypes--self-loathing, flamboyance, and promiscuity. Rather than offering an upbeat, positive look at the gay subculture, it presented a depressing snapshot of individuals tormented by internalized homophobia.

Set at a birthday party in New York, *The Boys in the Band* introduced audiences to a number of gay men



A portrait of Mart Crowley by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

with different attitudes and backgrounds. The birthday celebrant is Jewish, one of the guests African-American. Another guest is thoroughly campy and brings a hustler dressed as a cowboy as a birthday gift. The guests also include a couple, one of whom is a divorced father of three. The pair, though committed to each other, are arguing over whether their relationship needs to be exclusive.

At the center of the piece is the host, Michael, the character with whom Crowley most strongly identifies. The cynical and pessimistic Michael has been the focus of many who became detractors of the play in later years. His most famous line, "You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse," has often been quoted to indicate the character's self-loathing, and sometimes to indict Crowley for his negative depiction of the period's gay subculture.

Crowley, however, has strongly defended his play, calling it a period piece--from an era before both Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic. He stated in 1996 that the play's "self-deprecating humor was born out of a low self-esteem, if you will; from a sense of what the times told you about yourself." He said that he understood "the need for positive images" and pointed out that "the lovers in the play, Hank and Larry, make a most positive statement about commitment to each other" at the end of the piece. He also called the "flaming and incendiary" character Emory "very positive" because "he never hides who he is, and that's a very brave thing to do."

Certainly, it is true that even today it is difficult for glbtq people to grow up in America without internalizing the homophobic attitudes of the larger society. That would have been even more true for the characters in Crowley's play, most of whom grew up in the 1950s, a decade in which homosexuals were routinely abused and their self-esteem systematically attacked.

Rather than dismissed for presenting a politically incorrect view of gay men, *The Boys in the Band* should be respected for calling attention to the destructive effects of the pervasive societal homophobia with which gay people in the period before Stonewall had to cope.

Crowley's next play, *Remote Asylum*, was produced in 1970. The comedy received unfavorable notices and quickly closed.

His third play, *A Breeze from the Gulf*, which is based on his memories of growing up in Mississippi, enjoyed a much warmer critical reception but did not find an audience. It had only a six-week run off-Broadway in 1973.

During the 1970s Crowley lived off his money from *The Boys in the Band*. He stated in 1996 that he "was just running around the world, drinking too much" at the time, and so his funds were dwindling by the end of the decade.

In 1979 Crowley's friend Natalie Wood and her husband, Robert Wagner, helped Crowley get a job as head writer for the television show in which they starred, *Hart to Hart*. When the producer abruptly quit, Crowley replaced him and remained in that post until 1983.

Crowley then returned to work as a screenwriter. "I have original movie scripts in the files of every major studio in Hollywood," he declared in 1993. Although he was successful in selling them, none has ever been produced.

Crowley's next stage play, *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, dealt with the theme of sexual abuse of a student by a Catholic priest. Crowley has stated that the story is a fictionalized version of his own experience. The play was first presented at the Olney Theatre in Maryland. It was optioned for a year, but the production was soon abandoned. The play has since been performed in a few regional theaters.

The Boys in the Band was revived in New York in 1996 to mostly favorable reviews and had a respectable

run. By the time of the revival Crowley had already let it be known that he was planning a sequel. It was not until 2002, however, that *The Men from the Boys* premiered in San Francisco.

The setting for the sequel is the same New York City apartment that was the site of the birthday party in *The Boys in the Band*. This time it is the venue for a wake for Larry, who has died of pancreatic cancer. Seven of the nine original characters return, and three younger ones have been added.

While reviewers generally found the play entertaining and pointed to some wickedly witty lines by Crowley, they were somewhat disappointed by the lack of evolution of the characters. Critic Dennis Harvey commented that they "end up defined mostly by the degree to which they've resisted 35 years of social and potential personal change."

While Crowley has never been able to recapture the success and acclaim that he had with his debut play, he deserves honor for having blazed the trail for subsequent gay-themed theater with *The Boys in the Band*.

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