



Moisés Kaufman.
Courtesy Tectonic
Theater Project.

Kaufman, Moisés (b. ca 1964)

by Linda Rapp ; Claude J. Summers

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Award-winning writer and director Moisés Kaufman first received international acclaim for his *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. He subsequently wrote the deeply affecting play *The Laramie Project* about reaction to the brutal murder of gay university student Matthew Shepard, and directed Doug Wright's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama about East German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, *I Am My Own Wife*.

Moisés Kaufman's parents survived the Holocaust in Rumania and, following World War II, immigrated to Venezuela, where Kaufman was born around 1964. Growing up in Caracas, Kaufman was acutely aware of being an outsider as a member of a small Jewish community in an overwhelmingly Catholic country.

Kaufman's Orthodox Jewish parents sent him to the yeshiva, a school that provided both religious and academic instruction. Although Kaufman would eventually cease to practice Orthodox Judaism, he valued its lessons on Talmudic scholarship, especially "tak[ing] a sentence from the Bible and analys[ing] it twenty different ways." He would later apply the principle of considering situations from various perspectives in his theater work. Indeed, the recognition that every dramatic experience may be viewed in multiple ways is one of Kaufman's signature traits as a writer and director.

Already feeling like an outsider because he was part of a minority religious group, Kaufman had a further sense of marginalization because he realized at an early age that he was gay. Coming out would have brought disapproval from the Orthodox Jewish community, while in the wider Venezuelan society, where a culture of machismo and homophobia prevailed, to be openly gay would have been dangerous.

Kaufman entered college in Caracas planning to major in business but soon found himself drawn to the theater department instead. He joined Thespis, an experimental theater company, and acted for five years in plays from Molière to Ionesco as well as in contemporary pieces chosen by the group's artistic director, Fernando Ivosky.

As a result of his experience with Thespis, Kaufman decided that he wanted to pursue a career in directing rather than acting. He also realized that he "couldn't be gay in Venezuela" since "it was too much of a macho Catholic country." He moved to the United States in 1987 and enrolled at New York University, where he studied in the Experimental Theatre Wing.

It was there that he met the love of his life, Jeffrey LaHoste. Both were enrolled in a workshop on political theater. On the first day of class the professor declared that there was "not enough love" in New York City and instructed the students to embrace the person next to them. Kaufman and LaHoste complied, and both felt an attraction. It took a few more weeks for them to acknowledge it, but happily they did and have become not only partners for life but also artistic collaborators.

The Tectonic Theater Project

In 1991, Kaufman used his contacts in the Experimental Theatre Wing to found the Tectonic Theater Project, of which he is artistic director and LaHoste managing director. One of the goals of the Tectonic Theater Project is to move beyond entrenched traditions to explore new theatrical vocabularies and fuller uses of the stage. Though experimental, Kaufman's stagecraft tends to be simple and straightforward, often employing direct address to the audience, juxtaposing contradictory viewpoints, and having actors assume multiple roles. Valuing a highly collaborative approach, the Project often undertakes productions that involve a great deal of research and that examine historical and political issues with the goal of contributing to public discourse about significant topics and events.

One of the Tectonic Theater Project's first productions was *Women in Beckett*, a compilation of four short plays, which was presented off Broadway in 1991. Most of the eight actresses who constituted the cast were over the age of sixty-five, an affirmation of Kaufman's belief in the value of diversity and respect for all people.

With the Tectonic Theater Project, Kaufman went on to direct many well-received plays. These include *In the Winter of Cities*, based on poems by Tennessee Williams, *Marlowe's Eye* by Naomi Iizuka, and Franz Xavier Kroetz's *The Nest*, which won an Obie award.

Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde

The play that brought Kaufman to greater public attention, however, was his *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. He spent two years crafting the piece from trial transcripts, the memoirs of Wilde and of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, newspaper accounts, letters, and other sources. The result is a drama that offers the spectator a variety of perspectives, while never losing sight of the injustice suffered by Wilde. After successful productions in San Francisco and Los Angeles, *Gross Indecency* opened off Broadway in 1997.

Audiences and critics alike responded enthusiastically to the play. Its run was extended, and the show was honored with the Lucille Lortel Award for best play and the Outer Critics Choice Award for best off-Broadway play. For *Gross Indecency*, Kaufman also received a GLAAD Media Award and a Lambda Book Award.

Gross Indecency approached the Wilde scandal as what Kaufman refers to as a "historical watershed" moment, one of those events around which the ideologies and values of an entire culture coalesce. In the play, the late Victorian period is sharply etched through the views of a variety of characters who speak not only of homosexuality, but also of a host of broader issues of class, art, religion, morality, and politics. Hence the play not only retells the gripping (though familiar) story of Wilde's tragic fall, but also places on trial a society that made the poet and playwright a scapegoat for its own sexual and moral insecurities and hypocrisies.

The Laramie Project

Kaufman next went to work on *The Laramie Project*, an exploration of another watershed moment, the homophobic murder of college student Matthew Shepard in October 1998. As a theater artist he wanted to contribute to the public dialogue that the murder instigated, and he chose to do so by focusing on the viewpoints of the people of Laramie, Wyoming.

Because of the success of *Gross Indecency*, which ran for almost two years in New York and was subsequently produced in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Toronto, and London, the Tectonic Theater Project had funds to undertake research trips to Wyoming. In addition, the company received forty thousand dollars from the Rockefeller Institute to develop the play.

Kaufman, LaHoste, and nine other people from Tectonic went to Laramie in November 1998, less than a

month after the murder, to begin a long process of interviewing citizens of the town.

They soon discovered that Laramie had "no gay center," but they were able to make some contacts. They found a range of attitudes among the gay and lesbian people that they encountered, some of whom favored being out and politically active while others preferred to keep a low profile to avoid trouble.

Kaufman and LaHoste were deeply affected by a visit to the fence where Shepard's assailants left him for dead. LaHoste later recalled that Kaufman was moved to tears and said, "It's so sad that Matthew will never have what you and I have."

After their initial trip to Laramie, ten members of the Tectonic group composed the first draft of the script. They travelled to Wyoming six more times to conduct more interviews over two hundred in all. They also attended the trial of Russell Henderson, one of the men who murdered Shepard.

One of Kaufman's technical challenges was to "create a whole town onstage with only eight people." The play required the members of the small company to play more than sixty roles.

Kaufman's particular artistic challenge was to shape varying points of view into a coherent whole. He has pointed out that he chose to call his theater group Tectonic because the word refers to "the art and science of structure." He explained that "as a gay man, I'm interested in revealing the structure: who tells what story, and how, is important to me." He added that "as a gay person, you're forced to define yourself that's how we learn that identity is a construct." He applied these thoughts to give form to the play, which is structured as a series of juxtaposed monologues. By presenting multiple viewpoints and allowing the audience to assemble them and reach a conclusion, Kaufman is able both to achieve coherence and to preserve the multiplicity of perspective.

Kaufman also adapted and directed the HBO film version of *The Laramie Project*, which was selected as the Opening Night Premiere at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. Featuring a cast that includes Steve Buscemi, Amy Madigan, Christina Ricci, Janeane Garofalo, and Camryn Manheim, the film is structured as a kind of faux documentary. This self-conscious approach creates a work that lacks some of the immediacy of the stage experience, but it compensates for that loss by moving beyond the specific events of the murder of a young man to examine broader questions of intolerance in America at the beginning of a new millennium.

In 2008, ten years after Shepard's murder, members of the Tectonic Theater Project returned to Laramie to conduct follow-up interviews with residents featured in the play. Those interviews were turned into a companion piece, entitled *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. The play debuted as a reading at nearly 150 theatres across the United States and internationally on October 12, 2009, the eleventh anniversary of Shepard's death.

The stage and film versions of *The Laramie Project* have had an enormous impact in keeping alive the memory of Matthew Shepard and the significance of his murder. The stage version has quickly become one of the most frequently produced plays by college and community theaters in the United States.

I Am My Own Wife

Kaufman recently directed Doug Wright's remarkable *I Am My Own Wife*, a complex portrait of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an East Berlin openly gay transvestite and furniture collector who survived persecution by both the Nazi and Communist regimes, as well as the firestorm that erupted when it was revealed that to cope with the latter she worked for the government's spy agency, the Stasi. Kaufman helped to shape the play, which is based on von Mahlsdorf's autobiography and on interviews that Wright conducted with her in 1993 and 1994. It opened to critical acclaim off-Broadway, with Kaufman winning an Obie Award for Best Direction, and then, in December 2003, moved to Broadway.

Featuring a bravura, Tony-winning performance by Jefferson Mays, the Broadway production was honored with both a Tony Award as Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

In directing *I Am My Own Wife*, Kaufman was once again working with a constructed identity in this case a highly unusual, ultimately ambiguous one. Although *I Am My Own Wife* is a one-person play, like Kaufman's own plays it nevertheless presents multiple perspectives on Mahlsdorf's life (all enacted by Mays). Praised for his firmly controlled yet subtle and artful direction, Kaufman brought to the production a deep understanding of the fluidity of character and the complexities of motivation.

(Von Mahlsdorf is also the subject of Rosa von Praunheim's 1992 film, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau*.)

One Arm

Kaufman's latest project is adapting for the stage Tennessee Williams's unproduced screenplay based on his short story *One Arm*. The beautifully written story--about a boxer who lost an arm in an automobile accident and, in despair, turned to hustling, only to murder a client and be sentenced to death traces the transformation of the death row inmate from a cold and detached icon of others' longing into a fully responsive human being. It was originally written in 1945 and published in Williams's daring collection of short stories, *One Arm and Other Stories*, in 1948. Williams wrote the screenplay in 1967, but it was never made into a film, presumably because it was too daring for its time.

Kaufman discovered the screenplay in 1999, when he was directing an evening of short plays by Williams. Characteristically, the discovery led to more research into Williams and the milieu that he represents in the story and the screenplay. Equally characteristically, Kaufman saw in the works by Williams an opportunity to explore a significant moment in the history of homosexuality. As he remarked to theater critic Hedy Weiss, "I was fascinated by this piece because it documents the American underworld in the 1930s and '40s and captures a very specific period in American culture that Williams knew about first hand."

Produced in a collaboration between Kaufman's Tectonic Theater Project, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and About Face Theatre Company, the stage version of *One Arm* premiered in Chicago in December 2004, where it will have a limited run before opening in New York.

Conclusion

In a very brief time, Moisés Kaufman has emerged as an important voice in American theater. His interest in exploring watershed moments in glbtq culture has not only helped illuminate gay history, but it has also contributed to public discourse about significant issues and ideas.

Kaufman was honored with the 1997 Joe A. Calloway Award for excellence in the craft of direction and choreography by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation. He also received a Guggenheim fellowship in playwriting in 2002.

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