



## Stage Actors and Actresses

by Linda Rapp

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Gay and lesbian actors are among the elite of the contemporary theater, but the number of them who are openly gay remains small. Some have delayed coming out publicly, others have been outed posthumously, and rumors swirl about still others who consistently decline comment as to their private lives.

Such reticence is nothing new and it is altogether understandable. In a homophobic social and political climate, there is good reason to fear that the revelation of one's sexual orientation might adversely affect one's career, especially a career that is based to a great extent on public acceptance.

Some legendary stars of the early to mid-twentieth century, such as Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, found it expedient to create and sustain an illusion of heterosexuality by entering into "lavender marriages."

### Attractiveness of the Theater

Theater has historically attracted people whose sexual interests were directed toward members of their own gender. People with same-sex sexual interests may be especially good actors if only because they have experience at developing techniques of pretending heterosexual interest.

Moreover, the interiority and self-examination characteristic of individuals who are "out of sync" with the majority in so significant an area as sexuality may contribute to creativity of all kinds, including acting.

Historically, the tradition of transvestite theater at various periods, including the Elizabethan era in England, may have also attracted individuals who transgressed sexual and gender boundaries.

Until quite recently, acting was not a respectable profession. Thus, it has traditionally been more welcoming of eccentrics of all kinds, including sexual minorities, than has been the larger society. Gay and lesbian actors have found refuge in the theater at times when other professions would have been closed to them.

### Vocabulary

What follows are brief accounts of significant actors and actresses who were probably gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The performers discussed here range from an eighteenth-century star of the Comédie-Française to Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir John Gielgud, often considered the greatest British actors of the twentieth century; and they include such luminaries as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse.



**Top:** Edwin Forrest.  
**Center:** Sarah Bernhardt performing in male attire in *L'Aiglon* in 1910.  
**Above:** A portrait of Sir John Gielgud created by Carl Van Vechten in 1936.  
Image of Edwin Forrest appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.  
Image of Sir John Gielgud courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

It is important to realize that for many of these individuals, particularly those who lived in the nineteenth century and earlier, the vocabulary used today to describe sexual orientations would not have been meaningful.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals could not so identify themselves as such because the terms were not current, and they may not have thought of their sexual desires in term of an orientation at all. But while it may be anachronistic to use our current vocabulary to describe these people, one may nevertheless draw conclusions about their sexualities by examining their lives.

### **Françoise Raucourt**

In eighteenth-century France, Françoise Raucourt was famous for her beauty and acting talent, and notorious for her love affairs with both women and men. Trained by her actor-father for a career on stage, Raucourt had her first starring role with the Comédie-Française at the age of sixteen and immediately became popular with audiences. Various noble men and women, including Queen Marie-Antoinette, were among her admirers and patrons.

Raucourt had her detractors as well. Her lavish lifestyle and series of female lovers made her the target of pamphlets claiming that she presided over *la Secte Androgyne*, purportedly a society of lesbians who hated men and who participated in female orgies. In fact no such group existed.

Raucourt's allegiance to her noble benefactors landed her in prison under the Republic. It was there that she met the love of her life, Henriette Simonnet de Ponty, with whom she spent her remaining years.

### **Charlotte Charke**

Eighteenth-century English actress Charlotte Charke was probably lesbian, perhaps bisexual. On the London stage she played a variety of ambiguously-gendered roles as well as "breeches parts," portraying male characters.

Thrust out of most theatrical work when the Stage Licensing Act of 1739 limited opportunities for the production of plays, Charke took other jobs to support herself and her daughter, the product of a disastrous early marriage. Dressed "in Mens Cloaths" she worked at various typically male occupations.

Under the name of Charles Brown, Charke became a "strolling actor," touring in provincial venues. In her memoirs Charke recounts that when a young heiress became infatuated with "Mr. Brown," Charke had to explain that she was a woman and "not the person she conceived me."

During her years as a strolling actor, Charke lived with another woman known only as Mrs. Brown. The couple apparently did not attempt to marry legally; nevertheless, Charke was running the risk of prosecution merely for impersonating a man. It may be that her status as the daughter--albeit estranged--of the socially prominent Colley Cibber afforded her some immunity.

### **Charlotte Cushman**

Preeminent among actresses who played breeches part was American Charlotte Cushman, who enacted over forty male roles during her career in the mid-nineteenth century. Her greatest fame owed to her portrayal of Romeo. Critics in both the United States and Britain praised her passionate performances, one writing that "as a lover, the ardor of her devotion exceeded that of any male actor I have ever seen in the part."

Cushman's sister Susan also took to the stage, and the Misses Cushman starred together as Romeo and Juliet. Charlotte Cushman had already won plaudits in cross-dressed parts, but the sister act gave critics a

way to praise her without seeming to condone unconventional behavior.

One felt that "sisterly affection" led Charlotte Cushman to choose *Romeo and Juliet* as the vehicle for her sibling's London debut. Another pointed to the lack of plays with two female leads as the reason for one sister's having to play a man.

Offstage, Cushman had romantic attachments to a number of women, including Matilda Hays, a novelist and journalist whom Cushman coached to be her new Juliet when Susan Cushman retired. Hays quickly gave up acting, but the couple remained together in what Elizabeth Barrett Browning called "a female marriage."

In 1852 Cushman set up a household of "jolly bachelor" women artists in Rome. It was there that she met sculptor Emma Stebbins, who became her partner for the rest of her life.

### **Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse**

Two of the most famous actresses of the nineteenth century were bisexuals, Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse. Both shocked and titillated the public with their affairs with men, but were more circumspect about their lesbian liaisons.

The most flamboyant and accomplished actress of her time, Sarah Bernhardt was almost as famous for her style as for her acting. She scandalized Paris and the world by wearing pants, having numerous conspicuous love affairs, some with women, and by having a child out of wedlock. She frequently performed male roles, including Shylock and Napoleon.

Acclaimed for her interpretations of Shakespearean roles and the heroines of nineteenth-century French drama, as well as for introducing the new drama of Ibsen and d'Annunzio, Eleonora Duse was one of Bernhardt's chief rivals as the greatest actress of her age. Like Bernhardt, she was also famous for her tempestuous love affairs, primarily with men, but also with women.

Although the great love of Duse's life may have been the playwright and poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, she had several relationships with women, including Lina Poletti, a rebellious young feminist who dressed as a man, and the dancer Isadora Duncan.

### **Male Impersonators**

Male impersonators have never been as numerous on the stage as female impersonators, but a few came into vogue beginning in the 1860s.

One such was Annie Hindle, who took to the stage at age five, singing in shows in Staffordshire, England. Later, appearing in London, she wore a male costume as a humorous touch for one of the songs in her repertoire. When an astute manager suggested that she specialize in such performances, her career was launched.

In 1867, at around the age of twenty, she went to New York, where she enjoyed considerable success in her role as a fashionably-dressed "high-living sport." To make the impression of masculinity more convincing, she began to shave in order to grow a moustache and beard. She received numerous "mash notes" from women in her audiences.

Hindle took her act on tour in the United States. In June, 1886, after a performance in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Hindle married Annie Ryan, her dresser. The actress gave her name as Charles Hindle and wore masculine attire at the ceremony.

Hindle soon left the stage, and the couple moved to a cottage in Jersey City, New Jersey. In retirement

Hindle dressed as a woman.

### **Edwin Forrest**

The handsome and muscular Edwin Forrest was a popular figure on the New York stage in the nineteenth century. In addition to the plays of Shakespeare, his repertoire included works in which he portrayed noble and heroic male characters such as Spartacus in Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* and Damon in John Bannim's *Damon and Pythias*.

Forrest eventually married, but the union ended in a scandalous divorce, with each party accusing the other of infidelity. Forrest was declared guilty of adultery with an actress described as "brawny" and "athletic."

After the divorce, Forrest's closest friend was a Boston merchant, James Oakes. The two spent as much time as possible together and corresponded when they were separated, with Oakes frequently addressing Forrest as "my noble Spartacus" in his letters. Oakes said of the relationship, "our friendship has been more like the devotion of a man to the woman that he loves than the relations usually subsisting between men."

### **Twentieth Century**

Gay men and lesbians were among the most prominent stars on the American stage in the early to mid-twentieth century, but few outside of the theater world knew of their orientation. Although Broadway audiences were generally more sophisticated than the wide spectrum of American filmgoers, stage performers--like their counterparts in Hollywood--found it expedient to present a heterosexual image.

In the 1920s the gay communities of New York's Greenwich Village and Upper West Side were a source of some fascination to the public. Drag balls attracted fashionable straight couples, who found them entertaining. Still, the prevailing social and political climate remained homophobic. Gay businesses were the targets of police raids, and their patrons subject to arrest.

The Wales Padlock Law gave police the power to shut down a theater presenting a play that they determined to be obscene. In addition, groups such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice, religious leaders, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, and various politicians inveighed against theatrical depictions of homosexuality.

### **"Cleaning Up" Broadway in the Late 1920s**

With the support of New York governor Al Smith, in the late 1920s the district attorney and police department of New York City undertook a crackdown on "salacious plays." Among the censored plays was *The Captive*, an English-language version of Édouard Bourdet's *La Prisonnière*, a lesbian love drama.

On the morning of February 9, 1927, when the play had already been running for three months, newspapers announced the intended raid of the Empire Theater, and indeed that night *The Captive* came to a halt in the middle of the second act when policemen swarmed over the stage. The police eventually allowed the performance to be completed, then arrested the cast after the final curtain.

The action was praised in conservative newspapers such as *The Daily Mirror*, published by Hearst, and by such groups as the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Watch and Ward Society. Few voices were raised publicly in opposition. Actors' Equity "washed its hands of the situation" and did nothing to support those involved in the production.

The cast and director of *The Captive* were not prosecuted. With an injunction restraining the police from further raids, the play ran for five more days before producers decided to close it for fear that negative

public reaction might harm their companies.

### **Mae West and the Campaign of Censorship**

*The Captive* case drew less attention than the controversy over two plays by Mae West, *Sex* and *The Drag*.

West made her Broadway debut in *Sex*, playing a "cliché whore-with-a-heart-of-gold." The play had been in performance for nearly a year when it was raided on the same night as *The Captive*. West and various others connected with the play were eventually convicted and served ten days in jail for "maintaining a public nuisance."

While *Sex* was running on Broadway, West had *The Drag* in production out of town. The play, which featured openly gay characters, was controversial from the start, and New York police and the district attorney threatened to close it immediately if West attempted to bring it to Broadway.

*The Drag* is centered on a drug-addicted gay man, David, in love with another gay man, Rolly, who has married at the insistence of his family. David has sought a medical "cure" for his homosexuality, but without success.

In the final act, Rolly, with his wife out of town, hosts a rollicking drag ball. At the end of the play, David shoots Rolly, declaring "I killed him, because I love him."

Kaier Curtin points out that West's attitude toward gay men was ambivalent. She seemed to find flamboyant, effeminate gays amusing but disliked masculine gay men. In her later years, West claimed that *The Drag* "glorified the homosexual" and was evidence of her positive views, but at the time she wrote it, she considered homosexuality "a great problem" similar to "a contagious social cancer."

*The Drag* never made it to Broadway, and other gay- and lesbian-themed plays were closed. Sholom Asch's tale of lesbian love, *God of Vengeance*, which had long been a staple of Yiddish theater in its original version, *Gott fun Nekoma*, was another victim of the campaign of censorship.

This climate kept gay and lesbian characters largely absent from the stage since theater managers were reluctant to risk financial losses--much less prosecution and possible imprisonment. It also kept gay and lesbian actors mostly closeted.

### **Eva Le Gallienne**

British-born Eva Le Gallienne came to the United States at the outbreak of World War I to pursue her acting career. By the age of nineteen, she had become the lover of Russian actress Alla Nazimova. Le Gallienne began moving in lesbian circles.

She and fellow lesbian actresses Tallulah Bankhead, Estelle Wynwood, and Blyth Daly became known as "The Four Horsemen of the Algonquin" at the hotel's famous Round Table. When she moved to Hollywood shortly thereafter, she lived at Nazimova's "Garden of Alla" estate, a haven for lesbians in the film industry.

Like many of Le Gallienne's relationships, the one with Nazimova would not prove enduring. Returning to New York, Le Gallienne found professional success on stage and personal happiness with costume designer Mercedes de Acosta, whose other affairs would include ones with Nazimova, Katharine Cornell, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo.

While they were together, Le Gallienne and de Acosta often traveled to Europe, where they found the social environment somewhat less homophobic. They visited the salon of Natalie Clifford Barney, described by Axel Madsen as "a sapphic oasis."

Onstage Le Gallienne occasionally played masculine roles, including the title character in Edmond Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, about the Emperor Napoleon's son.

Like many other gay men and lesbians in the theater and film industries, Le Gallienne became the target of accusations of communism in the period after World War II. Her career suffered as a result, but she persevered. Late in life she received an Emmy award and was also nominated for both an Oscar and a Tony, the latter at the age of eighty-two.

In her memoirs Le Gallienne mentioned her various lovers--but only as professional colleagues. Public silence was the refuge of many, although insiders in the theater and film communities often knew the truth.

### **Tallulah Bankhead and Patsy Kelly**

Tallulah Bankhead left her native Alabama at the age of fifteen after winning a beauty contest with an acting contract as the prize. By the age of sixteen she had appeared on Broadway and had also had an affair with another young actress, Hope Williams.

Although Bankhead may be remembered now mostly for her extravagant personality and as a camp figure or over-the-top diva, she was also a talented and accomplished actress. Perhaps her most brilliant performances were in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and Noël Coward's *Private Lives*.

Bankhead associated with other lesbian actresses of both stage and screen. While in Hollywood, she was sometimes a guest at Nazimova's Garden of Alla. Her lesbian partners included Katharine Cornell, Laurette Taylor (also a lover of Nazimova and director Dorothy Arzner), Sybil Thorndyke, and Beatrice Lillie (who also had affairs with Le Gallienne, Cornell, and Judith Anderson).

Although she was not publicly out in the early years, Bankhead was famous for quips alluding to her lesbianism.

In her thirties, Bankhead married actor John Emery, apparently to please her father, whom she adored. She divorced a few years later, after her father's death.

Bankhead's companion in later life was comedienne Patsy Kelly, one of the first actresses to acknowledge publicly that she was a lesbian.

### **Lavender Marriages**

Despite the pleasure Tallulah Bankhead took in shocking conventional people, most actors of the early to mid-twentieth century were keenly aware of the potential consequences of failing to conform--or at least to appear to conform--to the societal norm of heterosexuality. "Lavender marriages" provided cover for a number of gay and lesbian actors, including the team of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

### **Lunt and Fontanne**

Lunt and Fontanne, both classically trained, aspired to stardom in serious, sophisticated theater. They first acted together in 1924 in Ferenc Molnár's *The Guardsman*.

The two appeared in plays with controversial sexual roles. Fontanne had the lead in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928), and the couple worked together in Noël Coward's *Point Valaine* (1934) and Jean Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38* (1938).

Lunt and Fontanne starred with Coward in the playwright's *Design for Living* (1933), a play about a love triangle. Critics--as well, apparently, as the censors--saw the two men simply as friends despite references to the physical character of their love.

In the early years of their joint career, Lunt and Fontanne socialized in gay circles. Theater trade publications hinted at their sexual orientation, but no public scandal ensued.

Around 1940, in the wake of increasing homophobia, Lunt and Fontanne began to bolster their image as a conventional--indeed, ideal--couple. They chose less controversial roles--in part because fewer were available as they moved into middle age--and also granted interviews to magazines with a domestic slant such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Coronet*. The articles cast the Lunts as homebodies, most content when engaged in simple household activities on their farm in Wisconsin.

They maintained the myth to the end. The inscription on their tombstone refers to their fifty-five-year marriage and describes them as "inseparable both on and off the stage."

### **Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic**

Like Lunt and Fontanne, Katharine Cornell--"The First Lady of the American Theater"--used a lavender marriage to create the kind of persona that the contemporary public demanded of its stars. Cornell wed gay director Guthrie McClintic in 1921, just as her career was beginning to blossom.

The marriage lasted forty years, and in the course of it, the pair established themselves as a successful professional team, working together on some two dozen plays.

Cornell's greatest success came in Rudolf Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. After playing a series of roles as sensual, sinister, or wanton women that had caused critics to compare her allure to that of film star Greta Garbo, Cornell opted to portray the romantic and definitely heterosexual poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In appearances on Broadway and on tour, she played the role over a thousand times.

If Cornell's moving performances as Browning reinforced her public persona as a devoted wife, her decision to retire from the theater following McClintic's death in 1961 cemented it. The image was, however, far from the truth. Cornell's lovers included Tallulah Bankhead and Beatrice Lillie. After McClintic's death, she shared the remaining years of her life with another woman, Nancy Hamilton.

### **Ivor Novello and Noël Coward**

From the 1920s to the 1950s, the London stage was dominated by two notably versatile gay actors-writers-composers, Ivor Novello and Noël Coward.

As an actor, Novello played a leading man made for romantic melodrama and adventure. He had a memorable stage presence, and his charisma and striking good looks attracted fans of both sexes. Although the press linked him romantically to a number of other actors, especially Gladys Cooper, the real love of his life was fellow actor Robert Andrews, with whom he lived for over thirty years.

Although Noël Coward is now best known as a writer and composer, he was also a master showman, among whose talents was acting. Indeed, he acted in many of his own--often queerly inflected--plays that attack normative heterosexual values.

In many ways, Coward's greatest role was the persona that he created for himself and that he assumed both on and off stage: the sophisticated, slightly world-weary wit who had a talent to amuse.

### **Sir Laurence Olivier**

Sir Laurence Olivier, one of the greatest actors of the twentieth century, was married three times, but may most aptly be described as bisexual. Axel Madsen describes his first marriage, to actress Jill Esmond, as "a sham" and states that Esmond was a member of "the sewing circle," a group of lesbian and bisexual women in theater and cinema. He notes that she was particularly close to producer Cheryl Crawford, one of the cofounders of the Group Theater in New York.

After his divorce from Esmond, Olivier wed Vivien Leigh, but during their marriage, he became the lover of comic actor Danny Kaye, who was also married. According to Donald Spoto, Leigh "constantly upbraided" Olivier about the affair; but it was his third wife, Joan Plowright, who finally demanded that he end the ten-year relationship.

### **Sir John Gielgud**

Olivier's principal rival as the greatest Shakespearean actor of his day was Sir John Gielgud, who realized as a young man that he was gay. In his early twenties he became partners with another young actor, John Perry. The two shared lodgings and traveled together, but Gielgud discreetly avoided calling attention to the relationship, which not only might have harmed his fledgling career but could also have made him subject to prosecution.

It was running afoul of the law that pulled Gielgud from the closet. In 1953, with homophobia running high in Britain, police organized a sting operation in which Gielgud was caught and charged with solicitation. To his great distress, the matter became fodder for the press. There was a flurry of attention, but in later years the incident was rarely mentioned by journalists--and certainly not by Gielgud, who never alluded to it in his memoirs.

Although he spent the last four decades of his life with another man, Martin Hensler, Gielgud remained reluctant to discuss his sexuality or to become actively involved in the gay rights movement.

When gay director Derek Jarman criticized Sir Ian McKellen for accepting a knighthood from the notoriously homophobic Thatcher government in 1991, Gielgud declined to subscribe to a letter from other gay men and lesbians supporting McKellen's decision. Neither did he accede to McKellen's requests to participate in gay rights demonstrations.

### **Sir Ian McKellen**

Although McKellen may now be best known as a film actor, he initially achieved fame as one of the leading Shakespearean actors of his time. It was for his contributions to British theater that he was knighted in 1991.

McKellen, who came out publicly in a 1988 radio interview, was able to turn the flap over his knighthood to advantage, using his status to become an effective spokesman for gay rights.

In addition to meeting with Thatcher's successor as prime minister, John Major, to discuss gay and lesbian issues, McKellen became a founding member of the British lobbying group Stonewall. He has also been a vigorous fund-raiser, using proceeds from international performances of his autobiographical one-man show *A Knight Out* to benefit gay and lesbian groups.

### **Harvey Fierstein**

Harvey Fierstein first came to the fore as a drag performer, but later won acclaim as a playwright as well as actor. He has become an accomplished character actor, familiar by virtue of his gravelly voice and warm

personality.

But for many theater-goers Fierstein remains most memorable for his Tony Award-winning performance in his autobiographical play *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982). With this work, Fierstein said, he became the first "real live, out-of-the-closet queer on Broadway."

### **Simon Callow**

Another highly visible gay presence in the theater is actor-director Simon Callow. From early roles in productions at London's Gay Sweatshop, Callow has risen to international stardom for his wide-ranging work in both theater and film.

A prolific writer as well, Callow has been extremely candid in discussing his sexuality. He is also the author of several biographies. His subjects have included Oscar Wilde and gay actor Charles Laughton.

### **Sir Anthony Sher**

Another actor whose honesty about his homosexuality seems not to have damaged his career is South African-born Anthony Sher, a distinguished Shakespearean actor who has recently been knighted. A member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, he is best known for his Shakespearean roles, especially his fool in *King Lear*, his Richard III, and his Macbeth, but he has also played a wide variety of classic and contemporary roles.

Widely regarded as one of the finest actors on the London stage, Sher has recently appeared in television and film roles. Perhaps his most notable film role is in Nancy Mecklar's *Alive and Kicking* (1997), which features a screenplay by Martin Sherman. Sher plays a gay therapist in love with an HIV-positive dancer.

### **Nathan Lane**

Tony-Award-winning actor Nathan Lane has played a wide variety of roles on stage and also in movies and on television. His repertoire includes a number of gay characters, including several in plays by Terrence McNally. He won Drama Desk awards for his performances in McNally's *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989, directed by John Tillinger) and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994, directed by Joe Mantello).

Long out to family and friends, Lane said that his sexual orientation was "never . . . something [that he] kept a secret," but he refrained from public comment until 1999. He cited the murder of gay university student Matthew Shepard as a motivating force behind his decision, and he expressed the hope that his public acknowledgment that he is gay "might make it easier for someone else."

### **Cherry Jones**

Cherry Jones became the first openly-lesbian Tony-Award winner when she was chosen as Best Actress for her performance in a revival of Ruth and Augustus Goetz's *The Heiress* (1995, directed by Gerald Gutierrez). In her acceptance speech she thanked her longtime partner, architect Mary O'Connor.

Jones had previously won an Obie Award for her starring role in lesbian playwright Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992, directed by Anne Bogart), a work inspired by Vogel's brother, who had died of AIDS complications; and she has received numerous other award nominations for her acting.

Far from being a diva, Jones has an unpretentious lifestyle. She bicycles back and forth between the theater and the Greenwich Village studio that she and O'Connor share. Known as a quick study and an "actor's actor," Jones is respected for her professionalism and devotion to her stagecraft.

Speaking of her ground-breaking role as an award-winning openly-lesbian actress, Jones has said, "it means the world to all of those people in all of those places who can't be out."

### **John Barrowman**

Another acclaimed out actor is John Barrowman, a musical theater star in London's West End and a fixture on British television. Barrowman, who was born in Scotland but spent much of his childhood in Illinois, won acclaim in a revival of Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* in 1989, and has subsequently become known especially for his interpretations of the works of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Stephen Sondheim.

From the beginning of his career, Barrowman been openly gay. As he told *Gay Times* interviewer Rupert Smith in 2004, "There's a received idea that being openly gay in the TV industry will limit your ability to get work, but I decided early on that I wouldn't hide anything. If you lie about yourself, then people are going to work very hard to expose that lie. If you're honest, it's not an issue and you can just get on with your life. . . . As far as the public goes, they see me playing different characters, some straight, some gay. They can make their own assumptions."

Barrowman's popularity, not merely in musical theater, but in a variety of roles on British television as well, seems to confirm his belief that openness is the best policy.

### **Conclusion**

The willingness of successful performers such as Barrowman, Jones, McKellen, Callow, and Lane to be open about their sexuality is hopeful. They provide positive role models for gay and lesbian youth and place a human face on the image of homosexuality.

The openness of these actors is a testament to their courage, but it also says something about the changing climate in Europe and America. These actors--unlike, for example, such talented performers as Split Britches or Charles Busch and Ethyl Eichelberger, who play to largely gay and lesbian audiences--are mainstream performers who must depend on the good will of the general public for their livelihood. They could not afford to be open unless they had good reason to think it was safe.

Their confidence is confirmed by the fact that they have not suffered as a result of their openness. That they continue to enjoy success in their field indicates a new level of acceptance of homosexuality among the general public.

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