



Yeomans, Lee Calvin "Cal" (1938-2001)

by Robert A. Schanke

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An award-winning trailblazer in post-Stonewall gay theater, Cal Yeomans had critically-acclaimed plays produced on both coasts and in Chicago in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, he explored sex and sexuality so directly that it made his work difficult to produce even in the gay community.

Yeomans burst the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in legitimate theater. As he explained to Dick Hasbany, "I'd like to demystify sex into freedom. I think we should have the freedom of pornography if we need it for artistic purposes. Why not?"

Yeomans was born in the small, conservative town of Crystal River, Florida, on June 13, 1938. His father was a wealthy landowner as well as a key figure in Florida's fishing industry and state legislature. His mother was a school teacher and business woman who believed she could not bear children--until she unexpectedly became pregnant with Cal at the age of 43.

In his youth, Yeomans was a loner. He felt he did not belong, and called himself a "horrible misfit." Following his graduation in 1956 from Crystal River High School, where he had been active in the dramatics club, he attended Mars Hill College in North Carolina but transferred after one summer to Florida State University.

Although majoring in business, he enrolled in several theater classes at Florida State, was stage manager for the university opera program, served on stage crews, appeared in several plays, and starred as Robert Browning in *The Barrets of Wimpole Street* at the Tallahassee Little Theatre.

After three years of designing sets and acting in summer stock in Michigan, North Carolina, and the Catskills, Yeomans moved to New York, where he studied acting under William Hickey at the HB Studio and enrolled in a fashion course at the Parsons School of Design.

In 1963 he joined the company of the Pocket Theatre in Atlanta, and a few years later, along with Fred Chappell, created the Atlanta School of Acting and Workshop Theatre.

Chappell directed two of Yeomans's plays with the students of the Atlanta School of Acting: *In a Garden of Cucumbers*, which is about two lonely and horny old transvestite performers who suddenly find a thousand National Guard soldiers camping out overnight in the city park across from their home; and *The American Dreamland Dancehall*, an audience participation script tracing the history of the United States from the 1930s to the late 1960s in a series of scenes in Miss Liberty's dancehall.

Yeomans taught acting at the school, directed students in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent*, and starred in *The Immoralist* (adapted by Ruth & Augustus Goetz from André



Top: Cal Yeomans in 1975.

Above: A scene from Yeomans's play *Richmond Jim*. Images courtesy Cal Yeomans Collections, George Smathers Libraries Special Collections, University of Florida.

Gide's novel about repressed homosexuality and self-discovery). During those years in Atlanta, he also modeled for the Fashion Institute of America, designed display windows for Rich's Department Stores, and taught fashion design at Massey College.

In 1971, he moved back to New York to work at Ellen Stewart's Café La MaMa, where he assisted Andrei Serban on *Medea*, worked part-time in the box office, and directed Paul Foster's *From Rags to Riches to Rags*.

Soon after that production, Yeomans suffered a series of nervous breakdowns. Diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, he was institutionalized for several months at Bellevue Hospital in New York and, later, at Anclote Manor mental hospital in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Playwriting became Yeoman's therapy. His first major success was *Richmond Jim*. It premiered in San Francisco at the newly formed Theatre Rhinoceros and was selected as the Best Gay Play of the Year (1979). It received the Cable Car Award for Outstanding Achievement in Drama when it was revived in 1980. It was also produced in Portland, Oregon, and was chosen to play at the First National Gay Arts Festival in New York City.

Jim, the title character of the play, is ritually transformed from an innocent country boy into a menacing leather man. The climax comes when his host for the night slides a silver ring around Jim's cock, urges him to don leather chaps and vest, offers him handcuffs and bull whip, kneels before him, and pleads, "The rest is up to you." Robert Chesley, who went on to write *Jerker* and *Night Sweats*, called it "the first genuinely gay play" whose "context and subject matter are a world known only to city gay men."

In 1981, Yeoman's *Sunsets: A Beach Trilogy* was produced by both the Stonewall Repertory Theater in New York and the 544 Natoma Performance Gallery in San Francisco. The New York production was selected to play at the Third National Gay Arts Festival in Chicago in 1982.

All three plays of the trilogy are set outside a public toilet on a deserted beach in Florida and reveal lonely men searching for love. In the first, an ex-drag queen offers "mercy sex" to all comers--"to perform fellatio on the masses." In the second, a woman's sexual needs are not satisfied by her husband. In fact, he brings her to the men's room to service men while he gets off by watching. The final act illustrates an affair between John, an intellectual gay man, and Dan, a married working-class man who is fearful of his homosexuality. As it ends, the two are wrestling nude on the sand until John begs, "Now fuck me." James M. Saslow called the trilogy "intriguing, fresh and a welcome change of focus from the predominant urban (and urbane) subjects of gay theater."

Yeomans had more plays produced (*Poiret in Exile*, *Somebody's Angel Child*), but he felt betrayed when directors and actors sometimes changed them because they were too pornographic. He completed numerous other scripts (*Malibu Canyon*, *Swamp Play*, *A Conversation for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor*, *One Two Boy Man*, *Wet Paint*, *Stool Play*, *Prologue and Seven Dialogues*, *Tony and Jim*, *The Reverend*, *Hibiscus*, *Autumn Dialogue*, *Eleventh Street Lady*, and *Rest in Peace, Queen, or Berma Returns to the Stage*), but since he was independently wealthy, he had no economic need to have them produced.

Instead, after the mid-1980s he turned his attention to poetry and photography, usually of male nudes. In collections he titled *The Daddy Poems*, *10 Poems for Luna Park*, and *Bootless Cries: Cock Poems for a Rainy Day*, his poems, like his plays, are often pornographic. Nevertheless, several were published in *Amethyst* magazine in 1987.

When *Christopher Street* published ten of his photographs, they proclaimed that his plays had "helped establish gay theater in New York City and San Francisco during the last decade." Yeomans added, however,

"My pictures say it better than my words ever did."

During the last twenty years of his life, Yeomans lived much of the time in and around Gainesville, Florida, where he often attended meetings of the University of Florida's gay and lesbian organization.

In 1996, after he learned that he had contracted AIDS, Yeomans donated forty acres of land for a nature park in Citrus County, Florida. He also made arrangements to endow, upon his death, several funds at the University of Florida: the Lee C. Yeomans Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences Fellowship Fund in honor of his father, the Vada Allen Yeomans Fellowship Fund in memory of his mother, and the Calvin Yeomans Special Collections Enrichment Fund for the university library.

When he died of heart failure on October 31, 2001, he willed \$1,000 to each of his several friends and over a half million dollars to the University of Florida to establish the Vada Allen Yeomans Term Professorship.

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Robert A. Schanke is Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Central College, Iowa. Among his books are *Ibsen in America: A Century of Change*, *Shattered Applause: The Lives of Eva Le Gallienne*, *"That Furious Lesbian": The Story of Mercedes de Acosta*, *Women in Turmoil: Six Plays by Mercedes de Acosta*, and *Angels in the American Theater: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy*. He coedited *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, and *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*.