

Edgy + Hysteria

Not Like Sisters, or How Montreal's Edgy Women and Toronto's Hysteria Festivals Got It On Across Space and Time

T. L. Cowan

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Edgy + Hysteria: Not Like Sisters, or How Montreal's *Edgy Women* and Toronto's *Hysteria Festivals* Got It On Across Space and Time

T.L. COWAN

IN CONVERSATION WITH MIRIAM GINESTIER AND MOYNAN KING
CONSULTING EDITOR: DAYNA MCLEOD

Introduction: 3 Clichés¹

The following is a conversation between Miriam Ginestier, Moynan King, and me on the topic of the romance between the *Edgy Women Festival* and *Hysteria: A Festival of Women*. Montreal's *Edgy Women Festival*, organized by Ginestier and produced by Studio 303,² ran in many formations from 1994-2016. Toronto's *Hysteria* was co-founded by King and Kelly Thornton and produced by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre³ and Nightwood Theatre⁴ from 2003-2004 and then directed by King and produced solely by Buddies from 2004-2009. During *Hysteria's* years of existence, the two festivals shared some artists, as well as aesthetic curatorial-social-political sensibilities.

This conversation is, in many ways, a continuation of those we have had in various configurations over the years about queer feminist performance-making and curation, especially about festival and cabaret forms. At first we did not plan for this conversation to become the body of this essay—it was initially meant to be a leaping-off point for a “research” article. However, after months of sitting with the text, it continues to strike me as a form of knowledge transfer that is uniquely conducive to the knowledge it transfers: the shared project of making queer feminist work over the course of these two festivals. But the love affair between *Edgy* and *Hysteria* (*Edgy + Hysteria*)⁵ was more than simply a relationship of convenience, although resource- and artist-sharing did carry on. Both festivals were organized by queer women invested in feminist and queer multi-disciplinarity and the cultivation of feminist and queer performers, performance venues, and audiences. The relatively short relationship—just six years!—was actually the manifestation of a relational network built and sustained within a matrix of queer feminist (lesbian, dyke) temporality and spatiality—characterized by commitments to performance-forward experiments in sociality, gathering-practices, parties, art, and boundary-crossing—that extends well beyond the expansive time-space parameters of these two festivals.

I offer this short introduction in the form of 3 clichés, meant to convey both the aesthetic and political stakes of these festivals and their milieux as well as the at-once serious and irreverent style that characterizes this work and the knowledges it is both based upon and produces.

Cliché 1: Sisters

Even though we don't look very much alike, throughout the years my girlfriends and I have often been asked, especially by taxi drivers, bed and breakfast owners, and random men in bars and on the street, if we are sisters. The question always signals either sexual threat or, in the case of the b & b owners, the threat of being given a room with two single beds in order to neutralize the sexual threat that "two single girls" poses to a respectable establishment. Reader, we push the beds together.

So often when there are multiple things that are women-focused and that seem to share a set of values or theme, they get called "sister festivals," "sister organizations," "sister colleges," and so on. It's fine when we do it to ourselves, claiming kinship that might also be incestuous, but when it's put upon us, well, the act of *sistering* betrays a hope for a woman-to-woman platonic homosociality that poses no threat or disruption to hetero-oriented cultural values and norms. That is not what is going on here. Not like sisters. Like lovers. Like Comrades. Like Peers. The relationship between *Edgy* and *Hysteria*, as King and Ginestier note below, was a love affair, but not a monogamous one. There were other lovers.

Cliché 2: Just a Phase

It's often said that queerness, especially between women, is a passing fancy. That it has a beginning and an end. The following conversation indicates that, indeed, there are many phases in the relationship between *Edgy* and *Hysteria*. I'd like us to reclaim this "phase" in order to think about the multiple and overlapping phases of queer, feminist, dyke, lesbian performance cultures, party cultures, relationship cultures, intellectual cultures. If we think in phases, we can think through the ways that we change our minds, our fashion, our politics. We can think of who we are, separately and in polymorphous and perverse formations, as we age, mature, shift, re-group. The phase, I think, offers us a way to imagine transformation and to look back over these festivals, and forward to the kinds of organizing which extend into, and make, our futures. Hopefully, what we can get with the phase as a structure of feeling and thinking, is a mechanism to imagine transformation and continuity as neither contradictory nor identical. The phase might allow us to keep in mind how earlier periods inform later ones, to think in trajectories, resemblances, influences, and difference. In the context of the conversation that follows, thinking in phases allows us to consider how each festival is marked by phases of production, of grant support or not, of shifting audiences and of shifting dyke-queer-feminist-trans politics and aesthetics. The phase also allows us to think of the ways that the festivals overlap, but that overlap is not their only period or chance of, and for, connection.

Cliché 3: My Ex-Girlfriend is My Best Friend

While certainly this is not the case for many queer women, the cliché is that it's a very lesbian thing to do, to stay close with your exes. While I have no interest in proving this to be true or false, I am interested in the cliché, *ipso facto*. That is, taking it as something that exists as a truism, even if it is not true, what are the implications of a socio-cultural punch line about overlying, many-textured, long-extending relations of dyke lives and the ethics of attachment and continuity?

I come to this question after months of thinking about the conversation printed below, between Moynan King and Miriam Ginestier, which took place several months before I am writing this introduction. It was through this conversation that we came to collectively understand how to talk about the relationship between *Edgy* and *Hysteria* as a relationship that was more enduring even than its six calendar years, although that was how long *Hysteria* existed, and it was over the course of these years that the festivals officially collaborated and *got it on*. The history of this relationship is actually much longer, extending through various other manifestations and relations, through long-standing shows that shared aesthetic and political commitments and projects including Ginestier's other Montreal productions and collaborations in queer feminist cabaret and event curation including *Le Boudoir* (1996-2006) and *Meow Mix* (1997-2012/2017) in Montreal, and King's previous Toronto productions and collaborations such as *Cheap Queers* (1994-2010), *Strange Sisters* (intermittently between 1994 and 2009), and *Anne Made Me Gay* (2008).⁶ Furthermore, both Ginestier and King continue to produce work and be in relation to each other and facilitate other cross-relations. Ginestier initiated *Cabaret Tollé*, an activist cabaret (2012-ongoing), and *Queer Performance Camp* (2016-ongoing), a series of workshops in which participating artists “explore, create, perform and network in a queer-dominant environment” (“Queer Performance Camp”). King continues to curate with cabarets like *Explain Yourself: Practice Queer Theory* (2012-ongoing) and *Queer/Play* (2017), and has extended her curatorial energies to the page, editing the *Queer Performance: Women and Trans Artists* issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* (2012) and *Queer/Play: An Anthology of Queer Women's Performance and Plays* (2017). While they change formation, the relationships remain.

The longevity and ongoingness of these careers are marked in both instances by intense collaboration in the creation of cabarets and festivals, as well as other performance forms that centre queer and feminist relations, and what Diana Taylor has called “acts of transfer” (1). In the case of *Edgy + Hysteria*, the festival and cabaret are both forms characterized by variety, by relationality across difference. While not interchangeable, it is worth noting what the festival and the cabaret share: both forms are energized by contiguity, by “improvisatory *rubbings against*—of performances, of bodies in a small [or large] room” or program (Cowan), by sharing time-space; they exist as assemblages. They are also structured as durational forms through which artists, audiences, volunteers, and organizers endure, stay with it, keep going. They are characterized by a hoped-for horizontalized distribution of fame, fans, and fortune, prioritizing connection over division. As artistic genres, performance structures, and platforms of and experiments in relationality, the festival and the cabaret—especially those organized around minoritized, forgotten, neglected, abandoned but nonetheless *existing* cultures—have been and continue to be central to the resilience and perpetual reshaping of

buddies
IN BAD TIMES THEATRE
studio
303

hysteria
@ edgy women
commissaire: moynan king

samedi le 18 mars
portes à 20h (spectacle à 20h30)
à la Sala Rossa 4848 boul St-Laurent Montreal, QC

Hysteria @ Edgy Women 2006. "A New Classic! Modern Specula For Modern Living" by Naomi Robbins. This image was part of a visual art exhibition at Hysteria Festival 2005.

queer feminist socialities, aesthetics, and erotic life back and forth between Montreal and Toronto on Via Rail, and other tracks and times real and imagined.

I frame this conversation with these three clichés in order to foreground the ways that *Edgy* and *Hysteria* worked to blow open the limits of the symbolical, gestural, corporeal, relational, and conversational order of queer feminist expressive culture through the co-production of performance, social, and sexual cultures. Both *Edgy* and *Hysteria* were resolutely multi-disciplinary—and undisciplined—not only in the ways they brought together theatre, performance art, visual art, cabaret, dance, and other artistic forms with queer feminist nightlife, but also in the ways that they pick up on the work of earlier and ongoing festivals, events, and political and cultural transformation of queer feminist scenes. The phase here is not discrete but accretive. These festival-relationships do not end so much as are added to, changing and lasting across distance and time.

October 19, 2017

**Belgo Building, 372 Rue Ste Catherine, Montreal. Hallway
outside Studio 303**

Part I—Origin Stories & Entanglements

MOYNAN KING: For years now, Miriam and I have articulated our working partnership as a love affair. These festivals were large public events motivated by very personal desires. Working on them was, and talking about them is, highly emotional.

Let's start by stepping back a bit to discuss why and how each of the festivals was started and what they meant to us.

MIRIAM GINESTIER: *Edgy* was born in 1994 when dancer, choreographer, and *Performance Mix*-producer Karen Bernard came from New York to Studio 303 with a couple of other New York-based artists, and asked to be part of a shared program. We thought, "Cool! Why not?" and my colleague, Paul Caskey, invited two local female artists to round out the show and called it *Women from the Edge*, inspired by Karen's unusual, quirky dead-pan aesthetic. It was fun and we wanted to repeat it, but the following year, Paul said "Why am I the one programming an event called *Women from the Edge*, why don't you do it?" I didn't like the title, so I changed it to *Edgy Women*, and took hold of it. It was a small event—one of many shared programs at [Studio] 303—but it was the beginning of a place where my personal, social, and political lives intersected with my professional life.

MK: So, very early on your desire to produce a performance event that represented you personally, socially, and politically was embedded in this festival. It's interesting that this personal commitment emerged here with Karen Bernard's *Women from the Edge* becoming Miriam Ginestier's *Edgy Women*. How did that happen?

MG: It took so many shapes and forms over the years. At first it was a one-night event, then two nights. We had an art gallery in the [Studio 303] office and soon a parallel exhibit was integrated. A few years in [2005], there was an all-woman art band from Switzerland on tour, Les Reines Prochaines, and we needed a bigger venue to accommodate them so we rented the Sala Rossa⁷, and *Edgy* expanded to four nights in three locations. Studio 303 was a place artists would gravitate to and we'd try and fit them in somehow, catering to the needs of performers who caught our interest. *Edgy* wasn't very rigorously curated at the beginning, nor was it explicitly feminist. I didn't associate that word with it for a while.

MK: The way *Hysteria* started was that Buddies in Bad Times Theatre wanted to improve their overall representation of women at the company. I was hired to "bring the women back to Buddies." I was intrigued by this prospect, especially if it meant actually increasing access to the resources of the theatre for women. Buddies was in conversation with Nightwood Theatre at that time as well.⁸ So when I started at the beginning of 2003, the idea of a festival had already been conceived by the two companies.

After I was hired I met with Kelly Thornton, Nightwood Theatre's Artistic Director, and we started planning the first festival. This was in March of 2003 and the first festival took place in November of 2003! In that short time we conceptualized a multi-disciplinary festival, put out a call for submissions, got over four hundred submissions, and programmed the first festival. I think my biggest contribution to the original festival had to do with insisting that it be multi-disciplinary. The festival, for me, had to match the expansive range of genres that queer and feminist artists were working in at the time.

In the middle of the second festival [2004] Nightwood dropped out. It wasn't like we had a break-up fight or anything, it was just that the festival was too far outside of the Nightwood mandate. So, yes, to extend the relationship metaphor, we did break up, but just because we wanted different things. Kelly was running Nightwood and *Hysteria* was a huge job. I had the energy, I had the passion, and I had the support of Buddies so I just kept it going as the sole director.

MG: *Edgy* wasn't a festival to begin with. It was an event. It went from one to two then four nights, with concurrent art exhibits, and then when festival funding became available through Inter-arts at the Canada Council [2006], boom! It became a festival: 10 days, two weeks, three weeks!

MK: When did you say, "It's a festival!"?

MG: Artists and audiences were calling it a festival long before we did. It became a real festival as of 2006. It was three weeks long and funded by the Canada Council. It really exploded because of this funding, which unfortunately only lasted a few years.

T.L. COWAN: Which is 12 years after it started.

Part II—The Market

TLC: What makes feminist queer work sustainable and what makes it unsustainable? How/ Does the institutional status of 303 and Buddies impact the longevity of those festivals in relationship to your labour as cultural workers at these institutions?

MK: If you compare *Hysteria* and *Edgy*, they are like two very different coming out stories. *Hysteria* came out all guns a-blazing: *Here we are, we're a festival, it's 10 days long, and it all takes place inside Buddies*. And it took over the whole building. *Hysteria* appeared just like that (and disappeared just like that). So in terms of process, it feels to me that your process with *Edgy* was a slow burn rather than full on guns a-blazing.

MG: Absolutely! The two-night format was really sustainable and we kept that for a decade. Once it became a festival, and was completely project funded, the format would adapt to whatever funding we'd have in a given year, ranging from zero to \$20,000. We'd compensate with partnerships and stuff, but it wasn't really sustainable. Because of eligibility criteria and changing programs, we only had Canada Council festival funding for two years, but it set us on an exciting, though exhausting, course.

MK: The 400 submissions that we got from the first call for the inaugural *Hysteria* symbolized the real problem of women's representation perfectly, which was not the scarcity of work by women, but the scarcity of venues calling for and programming that work. *Hysteria* created an important moment when a mid-size theatre was explicitly inviting this work.

One of the goals was to create a sort of market for Buddies (and other theatre companies) to pick shows for their mainstage. And from the very first festival, it worked! Shows went right from *Hysteria* to the mainstage at Buddies and other places. For example, in the first year, David Oiye, the Artistic Director of Buddies, came to *Hysteria* and went right backstage after seeing the Scandelles' *Under the Mink*, and said to Alex Tigchelaar [one of the founders of the Scandelles], "Let's talk about

Image from *Hysteria Festival* 2004. "Popstar/Étoile POP: the Sad One" by Nathalie Claude.
Photographer: Miriam Ginestier.



Nathalie Claude from Montreal, Edgy Women

MIRIAM GINESTIER

EDGY WOMEN

curated by Miriam Ginestier (Studio 303)
8pm | included in \$15 daypass

Studio 303's co-AD, Miriam Ginestier, has assembled some of her favourite Montreal grrls (notable Edgy alumni Nathalie Claude, Dayna McLeod, Alexis O'Hara & Lamathilde) to take on the road. Created in 1994, Edgy Women is Studio 303's annual showing of short, highly physical and innovative works by women, often characterized by a trans-disciplinary approach and politicized content.

doing a mainstage show next year.” This effect continued right to the last year of the festival with Nathalie Claude’s *Le Salon Automate*. Nathalie didn’t do that show at *Hysteria* first, but through her appearances at *Hysteria* her work became very much a part of the identity of Buddies and led to her getting a mainstage production.

There were only five installments of *Hysteria* as opposed to the...

MG: ...twenty-three versions of *Edgy*. They were all so different! The beginning was different and the end was different. After the 20th anniversary Art/Sport/Gender edition, I found it hard to envision *Edgy*’s future, and Studio 303 lost its Canadian Heritage funding. But I just couldn’t let it go. For the next three years, we did a compressed version called *Edgy Redux* and it became much smaller in scale again. As the 23rd year approached in 2017 my colleague Andrea Rideout had taken over the curation, and she said, “Let’s give *Edgy* a proper funeral.” *Edgy: The End* included an obituary (honouring the 500+ artists involved), a memorial service (where I selected video archives to screen and offered live commentary during Montreal’s *Nuit Blanche*®), and a funereal cabaret-wake where the co-hosts Nathalie Claude and Dayna McLeod took the audience through the five stages of grief. It was an amazing finale. On a personal level for me, *Edgy* was no longer sustainable. I felt like it was over, I had dried up, I couldn’t give any more.

MK: You felt that as a curator?

MG: Endings are never about just one thing. Of course the lost funding made things extremely difficult. But after the high of the 20th anniversary “Edgy Sport” edition which took place in a boxing club and on a skating rink, mixing artists with wrestlers and body-builders, I just didn’t know where to go next, like I couldn’t possibly top it. A major factor was that I was heavily grieving my mother who died a year earlier. I needed more space in my life: *Edgy* was every March, and eight weekends a year I would host *Meow Mix*. It was the beginning of a confluence of endings. Also, my discomfort about having “women” in the title and not being sure how I felt about it added to my needing to let it go.

MK: Language has changed so rapidly. In 2003 when *Hysteria: A Festival of Women* launched we didn’t really give a second thought to that naming, or to “women” as a category.

TLC: So, “women” was there in the title, but with the understanding of that word and category as something that was always changing and expansive and meant some men too. It was women-centred, maybe?

MG: Yes!

Part III—Hooking Up & Safe Space

TLC: So, how did *Edgy* and *Hysteria* hook up?

MK: It was like when you go off to university and the only other lesbian becomes your lover! There was this attraction that had to do with realizing that you had a peer. I was attracted to the kind of programming Miriam was doing. I didn't identify it as a model for *Hysteria*; it wasn't on my radar until after I had started *Hysteria*. And then I realized how much we had, and have, in common.

MG: It was so magical to find such complicity! There were other festivals that cropped up around the same period and I'd get really excited and then I'd look at the programming and realize that it was all straight-up plays by women. Or women stand-up comics or spoken word. That just wasn't what I was into.

MK: We were both multi-disciplinary.

MG: Or undisciplined! And I was actively seeking weirdness, stuff that's subversive, or a bit controversial, that might upset some people. There were queer festivals going on in other places and other events that were run by dykes and I imagined an affinity because of that, but when I saw the programming I realized, no, we're on different planets, we're doing completely different things.

MK: There just wasn't the spark.

MG: There just wasn't the spark.

TLC: There is one that might have had a similar aesthetic. It only happened for a few years: Mirha-Soleil Ross's *Counting Past 2*, which was the trans arts festival that happened in Toronto. At first she started it as a film festival and then thought oh, that is not enough, so then she added cabaret throughout the programming. But that was in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In retrospect, and as a researcher of these things, I feel like these three festivals were doing something similarly, within a similar though not exactly the same time frame and kind of bridging, or really making multi-disciplinarity the methodological framework, and involving cabaret as a major element in those to get the comedians in the same room with the performance artists and whomever else. And it was also very much about creating communities and showcasing work that existed. That is something that Mirha-Soleil has talked about, to stop film festivals from saying there aren't any trans artists.¹⁰ So she presented four days of trans artists.

MK: Mirha-Soleil Ross was presented at both *Edgy* and *Hysteria*, so there is that overlap too. The systemic marginalization of women and trans performance can make it seem that the work just doesn't exist...

TLC: They become common sense knowledges.

MK: Exactly. So in order to understand the aesthetic of and the attraction between *Edgy* and *Hysteria*, I think we need to reflect on some of our other curating. When I did *Hysteria*, for example, I had curated 5 years of *Strange Sisters* and I had started *Cheap Queers* with Hardworkin' Homosexuals. Both *Strange Sisters* and *Cheap Queers* were about trying to curate things that I could relate to as a queer woman, which was not as a lesbian per se. I have no problem with that term or being called that, but what I was seeing for lesbian performance at the time didn't represent my sexual, social, or political identity.

Strange Sisters was started in the early 1990s by Suzie Richter of *The Nancy Sinatras*, and others, and it was very embedded in Riot Grrrl and experimental performance and music culture. It's interesting to think about how a mythology is built around queer feminist marketability and the ability of those artists to draw audiences and get bums in seats, when the biggest fundraiser Buddies had in the 1990s was this big lezzie event that would take place outside the actual theatre, because Buddies wasn't big enough to contain it. By the time I encountered *Strange Sisters*, it had been taken over by Buddies. I started curating it the year Buddies moved to Alexander Street¹¹ and was big enough to host it. The show sold out, every year. *Strange Sisters* inspired an incredibly sexual environment. *Cheap Queers* [which happened during Pride week in Toronto for over fifteen years] had a similar feel but was always meant to bring all genders together and not to be solely queer-women-focused.

MG: It's amazing because our careers are so parallel. *Le Boudoir* was this very grand Sapphic soirée and also began as a fundraiser for *Divers/cité*. I loved that event so much, but I wanted to produce something less exhausting, and more queer (vs lesbian) so *Meow Mix* became the quick & dirty, less precious party event. It's interesting these parallels and this little dyad or triad that we both have.

In the 90s when I started *Le Boudoir* and later *Meow Mix*, I found the events that were focused on lesbian/dyke artists in Montreal to be very Anglo dominant and language-based. I was working in dance. I wanted a lesbian event that was not spoken word or folk-music centric. I didn't know enough lesbian artists to fill a whole evening, so I asked a lot of straight women to perform, whose work I thought would resonate with those audiences, and appeal to the aesthetic.

MK: Queer.

MG: Yes! Like chocolate on sticks, made in a mold of the artist's vulva. It was a straight woman making them but I was like, "This works!" Or topless women doing experimental dance and "shaving" their faces—that worked too.

TLC: I think one of the things you're doing too is both identifying people who are producing dyke or dyke-centric work and you're demonstrating that there is a dyke market. A dyke audience. For Miriam, unlike Moynan working with Buddies, you weren't necessarily needing to prove this to some institution, but you were taking straight women and saying, "You're going to be performing for 800 lesbians and their friends." And so to do that work, you're

also asking people (performers, venue bookers, and so on) to think about a dyke audience. I think this is all really interesting today, because you've really cultivated that now; you've proven that dyke audiences exist. For example, while *Meow Mix* is really mixed it's still...

MG: ...it's still 80% dyke.

TLC: It's 80% dyke and if people are not dykes there, they need to be super dyke-centric in that moment because the whole thing is geared for dykes and the dyke-adjacent. It's not for gay men and heterosexuals, unless they are really into a dyke aesthetic and vibe. I think that one of the things that you really cultivated over now almost 26 years, is not just a stable of artists but also the audience that keeps coming. I think that this is one of the things that Buddies has perpetually done: to regularly, cyclically, almost ritually, abandon dyke audiences. Or at least they abandon the kind of dyke audiences that are not motivated by earnestness.

MK: There's something I wanted to say about that earnestness. There's a shifting concept of safe space that I think might be worth addressing right now. For me, when I was curating *Cheap Queers* or *Strange Sisters* I wanted to create safe space for radical artists and for alternative voices. I wasn't thinking at all about creating safe space for audiences.

MG: Was it because we were and we are straddling different generations of lesbian feminists as well?

MK: We were still haunted by versions of second wave feminism as a restrictive and adamantly anti-porn ideology. We understood ourselves to be Riot Grrrl. I really identify with that, it's what I call anti-fragile: Yes, we've all been there. Yes, many of us have been sexually assaulted, we're women, it kind of comes with the territory, doesn't it? We wanted to be tough, and sex positive, and strong.

It's only retrospectively that I've theorized that safe space differently because I really do think I was trying to create safe space. Safe space for artists who feel that they were silenced, artists that didn't have a space.

Getting It On Across Time and Space

MK: Across our separate and completely discrete trajectories as curators, Miriam and I hit the same nerves and came up with very similar solutions for the problems we were sensing around queer feminist representation in performance.

Going over some of the materials in the archives, it's clear that our connection happened as soon as *Hysteria* started. Miriam came to the first festival in November 2003. Now, looking at the archives I notice one name that keeps coming up in your *Edgy Festival* in 2004, and that was Edwige [Jean-Pierre]. Edwige came right out of that call for submissions we put out in the first year. She was not someone I had ever heard of before, she was one of those 400+ women who lobbed their hat into the ring for a shot at being presented in the first festival. Edwige got picked up by *Hysteria* then *Edgy* and then really shuttled back and forth for years.

In 2006 I curated this thing called *The Creator Performer* where Nathalie Claude, whose work I first encountered at an *Edgy Women Festival*, did her first workshop of the *Salon Automaton*, in English, and Edwige developed her first full-length play called *St Bitch*. Edwige and Nathalie are both really good examples of how generative these festivals can be for artists.

TLC: One of the things you were also doing was creating sexual scenes or extending sexual scenes. This is something I want to touch on before we forget in thinking about cultivating queer feminist artists and audiences, bringing them together, and showing that they exist. In relationship to this, I find it important to note that you both had lovers who were in these scenes as performers and audience members—we all did, didn't we?! There was a sexual culture that was central to the aesthetics, the audience energy, and to the commitment both to provocation and safety. You were cultivating audiences of carnal subcultures...

MK: ...in her book *The Better Story*, Dina Georgis writes, “community is by-product of carnal love” (16).

TLC: Yes! Sexual cultures that are also performance cultures, that are also dance party cultures. It seems to me that a commitment to sexual cultures may also have been the thing that brought you together. Maybe you both had a very similar ideal audience that may have created this sense you both have of finding a “peer” when you realized the kind of programming, the kind of spaces you were making. I'm wondering if this affinity we're hovering around has to do with a shared ideal audience and what you wanted that audience to be able to do. It continues to be important that the sexual energy of a performance party was the reason that people were at these shows as well. I want to introduce this question of sex, audience, performance, and also your own attraction to each other and bringing in the fresh meat.

MG: Or taking the fresh meat somewhere else! I did a *Meow Mix* in Quebec City, and it was produced by someone I had a lot of affinity with, but the audience there just wasn't the same audience I had cultivated over the years with *Le Boudoir*, *Meow Mix*, and *Edgy* in Montreal. After that show, I remember shock, and people writing me long emails because they were disturbed about this, or that there was a penis in the show... But when I brought artists to Toronto, Berlin, and Ljubljana, audiences were primed and ready—more like “Ohhh, this is it!” Queer performance is full of coded insider references, some of which don't travel well. You don't realize how Anglo- or North American-specific the references are until you leave your home community. At the *City of Women*¹² festival (in Ljubljana) I found a deep sexy kinship too. I only went with *Edgy* artists once, but if it had been a little closer geographically and the timing had been better lined up, I think we would have had a three-way thing going with *Hysteria* for a few years!

MK: That was the plan, to have a three-way! I met Teja Reba [Creative Director of *City of Women*] just before *Hysteria* ended, but that was absolutely my plan, to get in on this action. I also want to address the fact that *Hysteria* and *Edgy* weren't explicitly queer festivals; they reflected our own identities as artist-curators, but they were not exclusively queer by any means. Feminist yes, queer, not entirely. But we're not just putting together work that we

think should be there: our aesthetic saturates everything with a queer inflection. I wanted to cultivate audiences, but I also wanted to challenge and expand those audiences.

MG: Absolutely. It's funny because when I think of my professional work at 303 programming dance and other things, I have so much trouble identifying who my audience is for grant applications, it's always a bit difficult to describe. But when I think about *Meow Mix* or *Le Boudoir* or *Edgy*, I knew exactly who my audience was, and I could write pages about who they were, how I was thinking about them.

MK: In 2008 I did *Anne Made Me Gay* with Rosemary Rowe, which was a cabaret celebration of the 100th anniversary of *Anne of Green Gables*, who is, incidentally, a queer feminist icon. When I first brought the idea to the producers at Buddies, mostly gay men, and got a lukewarm response, I said, "Look, no offense, but you're not my target audience." Buddies totally got on board with that show and offered it space and a nice chunk of funding in the end. The queer community is actually many communities, but we all intersect, like a Venn diagram.

MG: That reminds me of *Le Boudoir* as well. There's something about when you hear about theatre in "the olden days" where there was this super strong connection and activation of the audience which today we find in cabaret. And it's weird because with *Le Boudoir*, like *Anne Made Me Gay*, we're revisiting history and reinterpreting it, and suggesting that there might be a lot of other things going on, under the surface, as well as on the surface (to some). You and I don't really connect to earnest work, but we really do to this...

MK: Yes, that's what I think of as our queer feminist aesthetic or sensibility. I think there's an element of camp, for sure. There's also an element of disidentification (Muñoz) in a way, like an awareness that sometimes we're reclaiming and reconfiguring our own phobic stereotypes. It's a way of inhabiting history, maybe, or having a history?

MG: And maybe this notion that we've always been there. Maybe we're invisible to most people, but we've always been there and our elders existed.

TLC: So we make work about this history and about our jokes, which rely on that history. Which is also, always, exclusionary. You have to already understand the joke in order to get why it's good. If you're new, you might not get it. That's also something about the appeal to satire, the campy, and the historical that is re-written: the appeal to the phobic. Having that kind of twisted re-enactment *is* the joke. It strikes me that the artists who were mostly on the corridor were the ones who were producing that kind of insider queer work, and even if *Edgy* and *Hysteria* were not explicitly queer, it seems like it was a kind of queer exchange that was as much a part of performers who were also central to *Le Boudoir* and its legacy and *Meow Mix* as well as *Edgy* for all those years. The people *Hysteria* was sending on the Via Rail train bound for *Edgy*, were also largely coming from your years of *Cheap Queers* and *Strange Sisters*, so that this relationship became explicit, and this affinity blossomed over the course of a decade or more of long-distance, missed connection situations that we see through these other queer projects.



Miriam Ginestier (left) and Moynan King (right). Curators dragging chairs into the hallway of the Belgo Building in Montreal for *Edgy + Hysteria* conversation. Photographer: T.L. Cowan.

MK: Right, but remember, these were not exclusively queer festivals, and, for example, Edwige, who was an important shared artist traveling the corridor in those years, does not identify as queer, but definitely as feminist. So it's good to remember that there is a feminist shorthand as well.

But to your point of getting the queer joke, Dawn Whitwell, the Toronto-based queer comedian, says that “the strength of the punch is sometimes in the shortness of the set-up” (qtd. in King, *Queer/Play* 436). Dayna McLeod also talks about this and how different it is performing cabaret for straight audiences, where she has to explain more of the set-up, to performing the same work for queer audiences who are already in on the joke she's about to tell.

I'm also thinking about just how different it is to appear in that audience (as a queer woman in a queer women-centric audience) when you appear there and are recognized as fabulous.

TLC: “Why are you wearing your slip on the outside?”

MK: It's life, life is always a dress-up thing! There's that recognition and that energy and the curatorial question is: how do you create that? We're trying to work through that, and bring that to events like *Hysteria* and *Edgy* and to a large degree, succeeding. It became evident pretty early on that if you were homophobic you were not going to fit in there.

Past Festival Futures Plural

MG: When was the last time you produced an event?

MK: I have the cabaret for the launch of my book *Queer/Play* coming up in December (2017). And in 2012 I started a series called *Explain Yourself*. I started that after I finished my MA at the University of Toronto. The subtitle was *Practice Queer Theory* because I realized when I went back to school and got all enamoured of queer theory and performance theory, that there were all these people writing about queer cultures and I wanted to offer performers, myself included, a chance to reclaim that knowledge and perform it in real time—queer performance is queer theory, if you get what I mean.

TLC: It's interesting when you move from making the work to being a researcher. I think the curatorial impulse gets redirected to something like editorial work, or even just critical work. Editorial work is more explicitly curatorial and collective-oriented, and solo work, is, well, solo. Moynan, you've now done two massive editorial projects that I see as exactly the same kind of energy, with a different kind of output, as producing a festival or a cabaret, but it's trying to remediate that kind of queer cabaret and festival impulse in academic publishing.

MK: The publishing has not replaced the performance curating, rather, it is an extension of it. The book, *Queer/Play*, is a sort of festival of contemporary queer women's performance in print. And like the festivals it addresses issues of representation and seeks to reach a broad audience.

What about you, Miriam?

MG: I was thinking about this with tomorrow night coming up, the 20th anniversary show of *Meow Mix* [part of the cabaret-themed 2017 edition of the *Phenomena Festival*, curated by D. Kimm]. I don't know how I feel about doing a *Meow Mix* five years after the last one. Although it's a one-off event, I didn't want it to be purely nostalgic. I do want to honour the past, but I also want to look forward, so I made sure to include artists new to me. It's also happening in a broader professional context of the *Phenomena Festival* and is a special event versus a regular showcase where you expect and welcome an uneven program. I hope I'm not all weirded-out, I hope it goes well. Otherwise, I'm still producing events at Studio 303, and the one I feel strongest about these days is *Cabaret Tollé* [an activist cabaret]. Because I have an audience for it. It's not specifically queer, but there is always queer content. And *Queer Performance Camp* is my newest project these days. I like to orchestrate conversations or build a sandbox in which a bunch of experiences may happen. *Queer Camp* is very much me trying to create some kind of process, to explore, address, and work through issues that I have trouble pin-pointing, political and aesthetic issues, divisive issues amplified by generation gaps.

MK: What is *Queer Camp*? What happens at it?

MG: *Queer Performance Camp* is for emerging and professional queer artists, with a focus on experimental performance. The first one [2016] was five days, the second [2017] was 10 days. The event involves a series of performance workshops at Studio 303 and live shows at partner venues (MAI¹³ and La Chapelle). Campers have unlimited access to the studio for its duration, so it really becomes a home for artists. There is space and time for spontaneous participant-led activities, open spaces, parties, whatever, it's very open-ended. Last year, we had an intergenerational Long Table discussion around queer touring and next year I plan to open *Camp* with a slumber party in the studio!

TL: I really really love all of this, I think it's important to think about this because we've been thinking about *Edgy* and *Hysteria* as past, even though we know it's not, but this conversation has totally grounded us in the longer trajectory. This conversation makes it so clear that these festivals were (important to be sure) elements of much larger, longer, interconnected trajectories and practices. You were both working and creating work kind of more DIY or offsite, and then produced these festivals that extended beyond but coalesced in the 2000s, and you are now channeling these energies into activist cabaret, intergenerational *Queer Performance Camp*, and the editing and publishing.

It's so clear that when we talk about these festivals we're talking about relationships that run much longer than 2003 to 2009. It's imperative to understand the work of *Edgy* and *Hysteria* from 1993 or 1994 to the present, and really to perceive the ongoingness of it all. I think that this is one of the things that is really peculiar and wonderful about this kind of dyke/queer/feminist collaboration and affinity. The particular people shift, we get a little older and our energies shift, and we are interested in different things. But these practices, and all of us... we're so *enduring*.

Notes

- 1 Thank you to Ilya Parkins for an early reading of this Introduction. Thank you to Dayna McLeod for her massive help in editing and shaping the entire piece, and to Henria Aton for her keen readings at the end of the process.
- 2 Studio 303 is a Montreal-based organization that been presenting and supporting dance and interdisciplinary performance since 1989. (<http://www.studio303.ca/>)
- 3 Buddies in Bad Times Theatre is a Toronto-based theatre company, founded in 1979, which is now "the largest and longest-running queer theatre company in the world" (<http://buddiesinbadtimes.com/about/history/>).
- 4 Nightwood Theatre is Toronto-based theatre, founded in 1979, known as Canada's "foremost feminist theatre" (http://www.nightwoodtheatre.net/index.php/about/our_story).
- 5 Hat tip to Lillian Faderman's *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the 17th Century to the Present*.
- 6 *Cheap Queers* was a collaboration with The Hardworkin' Homosexuals (Keith Cole, Jonathan DaSilva, Tristan Whiston, Georgia Kirkos, Sharon DiGenova and others over the years); *Strange Sisters* was a collaboration with multiple artists and curators over many years; *Anne Made Me Gay* was a collaboration with Rosemary Rowe.

- 7 The Sala Rossa is a key performance venue on Boul. St. Laurent in the Mile End neighbourhood of Montreal. It is where most dyke/queer cabaret (as well as nightly independent music and performance culture) has taken place in Montreal for almost two decades. It is a beloved and complicated space because it is accessible only through several sets of stairs, so events that take place in this venue are difficult or impossible to attend (or perform at) for disabled artists and audience members.
- 8 Buddies and Nightwood have a rich history of co-production. They were part of a group of theatre companies collectively known as The Theatre Centre founded in 1979 and were the original co-producers of the Rhubarb! Festival.
- 9 Nuit Blanche is an all-night arts festival that happens in many cities around the world.
- 10 I am paraphrasing here based on Mirha-Soleil Ross's essay that she shared with me some time ago: "Some Thoughts on the Creation of the First Canadian Transsexual & Transgender Art Festival."
- 11 In 1994 Buddies moved from a small venue on George Street in the east end of Toronto to the newly renovated 12 Alexander Street theatre, which had formerly housed Toronto Workshop Productions.
- 12 The Ljubljana-based *City of Women* festival has been happening annually since 1995. It is "a platform which draws the attention on the disproportionate representation of, and participation of, women in the arts." (<http://www.cityofwomen.org/en/content/festival-cityofwomen-history>)
- 13 Montréal, arts interculturels (MAI) is a venue and multi-disciplinary presenter.

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