A Sadly Overlooked Lesbian Gem: Hope Thompson's *Green*

by Sky Gilbert

I can't remember when I first met Hope Thompson. When I went to see her first play, *Green* (2004), I had known Hope as a film-maker and had acted in one of her movies—*It Happened in the Stacks* (1997). For that movie, Hope asked me to play a conservative male librarian. I complained to Hope that I found it unpleasant to look purposely unattractive. She replied in her calm and centred way "I think you look very attractive." Hope is lesbian and I am gay. Often we have to explain the ways of our different cultures to each other. We enjoy doing it.

As you can see, this is not going to be a distanced appraisal of film-maker and playwright Hope Thompson's work. Hope is my hero. I worship her as an artist about as much as I could worship anyone. Little did I know, when I first saw *Green* at Buddies' Rhubarb! Festival, that I would fall so deeply in love with Hope's plays, and even end up directing one of them. (I directed *Tyrolia* in the Fringe festival in 2008.) So—if you're looking for objectivity about Hope Thompson, you've come to the wrong essay.

Hope is an enormously talented playwright: one of the best lesbian playwrights in Canada. But because of the quirky style and radical politics of her plays, her work may never reach a mainstream audience. Her plays are incredibly smart, funny, and subtle. Their striking humanity reveals a sensibility that is deeply sympathetic to the imperfections of the human condition. A good comedy makes us feel that as frightening and frustrating as human diversity may be, difference is ultimately a good thing. We learn to accept what is odd, frustrating, even evil, in human nature, and we can carry on.

When I saw *Green* I was working on my PhD, deeply immersed in reading canonic gay and lesbian writers. It struck me that Hope's play was an entertaining, crash course in queer theory. As I watched *Green* unfold, I was astonished at how appropriate and modern

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Hope's conceptions of sexuality were, and how well she was able to integrate notions of anti-essentialism, power, and the performance of gender into her characters and their relationships—all without preaching.

There are six characters in *Green*: three men and three women. Margaret and Mitchell are a husband and wife. They are typical of Hope's married characters as there is something in their marriage that is unsatisfactory. Harry is Mitchell's friend, and he seems to be an unmarried version of Mitchell. Redtree, on the other hand, is simply odd: he is described as "obsessed with the security of his environment" and he spends much time inspecting the premises to make certain they are well protected. The men are ordinary typical heterosexual males, in the sense that they are masculine, good-natured, kind, occasionally dense, self-centred, and sexist. They are an awful lot like your Dad.

The three female characters are, on the other hand, not typical women. Margaret is not only a housewife; she is a poet as well. When the curtain rises, Margaret is reciting a poem. It quickly becomes clear that she is not only frustrated but oddly naïve. She remarks that because she is pregnant she needs an outlet for her "creative juices" (3). This is an odd turn of phrase for a pregnant woman to utilize when describing herself. We don't usually think of pregnant women as being particularly creative, except in the area of giving birth to new life (which admittedly is quite creative indeed). And any juices they have flowing would naturally be associated also with the creation of the baby. Margaret effuses about how happily married she is, but it rings hollow.

As the play opens the men are gossiping about the arrival of a guest, Green. Green is one of Hope's femme fatales, borrowed from film noir. Indeed, there is no time specified for the play—past, present, or future. The characters seem to exist in a quaint, charming, antique world that might be described as "old movieland." The setting seems clearly to be an English mansion, where Sherlock Holmes might solve a mystery, or where Wendy Hiller finds herself roaming in Powell and Pressburger's 1945 cult classic *I Know Where I'm Going*. It's gothic, there are windows from which the characters can view people approaching. All have drinks and are chatting amiably, but with undertones of menace. The atmosphere prepares us for a classic formula: six people "being rude in a room" but with a gothic twist.

The character Green might be a femme fatale, but Hope has too much affection for her. Classic American sexy film noir broads look, act, and talk like Green. The difference is that they are associated with evil. Certainly the male characters talk about Green as if she is bad news. Harry says of her "words like addictive and captivating spring to mind but they hardly do her justice … she is the teacher of sirens if you will" (5). Mitchell is even more poetic, perhaps because the extremity of his frustrating sexual experience with Green: "Bloody Madame de balls bleu! Une nuit! … seulement une nuit! Tabernacle!" (5). The men in the play are melodramatic in their paradoxically worshipful denunciation of her. But Hope's description of Green is without rancour, she describes her as "unusually confident about her prowess and [she] feeds on her conquests as if they were her very life blood. She loves her friends, but for her, sex comes first" (2).

Green promotional still (Lisa Anne Ross as Margaret).
Photo by Simone Jones

This matter of fact description of a femme fatale is fundamental to the radicalism of Hope's sexual politics. What is remarkable about the play is that in the short course of it Green proceeds to seduce Margaret—introducing her to lesbianism, and then to seduce Harry—who has been in love with her for many years. The play is revolutionary because the omnisexual Green views intercourse as it is described by Deleuze and Guattari in *L'Anti-Oedipe*—sex is for her, about the body, about the act, about plugging into, out of, or around, another human. Not only does Thompson not judge her femme fatale but Green is deservedly the leading, title character. We laugh with her (never at her); she is extremely witty. What's radical about Hope's conception is that this is not what women do in films and plays. Women are often portrayed as fascinating but confusing objects of lust—dark, tempting, frightening, and evil. Hope's Green appropriates the appealing aspects of a sexual stereotype—she is hard, feminine, sexy, witty, and dangerous. But Green is also, in

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A watercolour painting of the inspiration for the character, Green. *By Hope Thompson*

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Kitty Connerly, the third female character, is described in the stage directions as "a 45 year old, outdoorsy woman who is looking for a second chance at life" (2). This is an extremely funny euphemism: in fact she is an escaped convict. Although Green is hard edged, she is feminine while Kitty, on the other hand, is a stone butch lesbian, which is probably what frightens Margaret and ultimately seduces her. Kitty's first entrance is very dramatic. After the lights accidentally go out she is revealed subduing one of the male characters in a hammerlock hold. She says: "Don't anybody move or he's dead meat." About which Green archly and appropriately observes: "Meat is 'dead,' is it not?" (19).

Green is a modern feminist lesbian play. But that is quite different than an old-fashioned feminist play, or an old fashioned feminist lesbian play. An old-fashioned feminist play is one in which women bond for a common cause—the rights of women—in a world filled with malevolent men. In such plays, the women unite as friends to fight the patriarchy, and their relationships are uncomplicated by desire for each other or co-objectification. In an old-fashioned lesbian play women bond in romantic ways to create lesbian worlds that challenge heterosexual sexism. In both cases sex is located somewhere outside the play and associated with maleness and patriarchy. In a modern feminist lesbian play, on the other hand, sex is an important aspect of the way women relate to each other; it does not lie outside the play. Sex is not created by men but is instead, as Foucault sees it, an ungendered power play that is eternally problematic, but not likely to disappear soon. In a play like Hope Thompson's *Green* the men do not own sexuality; in fact it is the women who are sexual and the men who are not.

The key moment in the play, and indeed the turning point, is when Kitty Connerly and Redtree decide to change clothes. Redtree, who yearns for security, is attracted to the notion of prison, and Connerly, who is a stone butch lesbian, is all too comfortable in the clothing of a man. The moment exemplifies Butlerian performativity, as well as the Foucauldian critique of the clinical labelling of perversions. Redtree needs only to don a woman's clothes and give himself up to the police to be accepted as a female prisoner. Kitty proceeds to fall in love with Margaret soon after she dresses as a man, confirming her masculine role as seducer of an innocent. Redtree's need to be confined and Connerly's need to be masculine are treated as healthy realizations of their essential natures, not as manifestations of unhealthy perversion. Redtree's institutional cross-dressing leads to a realization for the naïve Margaret:

> It must be wonderful to be him … He's made himself happy, hasn't he? (sighs) That's what I thought marriage would do for me: make me happy—just like they say in the magazines. A normal married life. That's all I ever wanted. Someone who loves me for who I am …. not because I'm … I'm … (blows her nose) … an heiress to untold millions … (23)

This inadvertent confession manages to catch Kitty's ear, and in the next moment Kitty and Margaret turn and stare at each other. Margaret ends up leaving her husband for Kitty, but it is completely unclear whether or not she has just traded one person who covets her money for another. The difference with Kitty is that Margaret actually seems attracted to her. For Thompson, lesbian sexuality is not the same as heterosexuality, but significantly, neither is lesbian sex cleansed of the power struggles that so often torture the participants in heterosexual romance.

Margaret's speech is also a supremely "camp" moment. The play is an example of lesbian camp in a classic Susan Sontag sense of the word. Margaret is naïve enough to fall in love with an escaped lesbian convict and think that her life will be like a women's magazine romance. We can sympathize with this. But we also laugh because of the magazines that Kitty reads, *True Crime*, *Facts not Fiction*, and *Accident: Question*

Green cast backstage (clockwise from top left: Bruce Beaton (Redtree), Gray Powell (Mitchell), David Oiye (Director), Hope Thompson (Playwright), Lisa Anne Ross (Margaret), Erika Hennebury (Kitty Connerly), Terrence Bryant (Harry), and Moynan King (Green) in repose.
Photo courtesy of Hope Thompson

Mark, which are, as she describes them, "typically back of the rack stuff" (23). She also says "I sure as hell haven't read a bride magazine" (24). Hope is conscious of her own obsession with old films, and is paying homage to her favourites. This is the way Green's entrance is described: "After a moment, a woman, (Green) walks in wearing high heels and a trench coat belted at the waist (similar to the heroine's entrance in the movie 'Laura')" (13).

But the "camp" aspect of the play is not only in referencing these old films, or in the parodying of them. Sontag's definition of camp requires that true camp art involve deep affection, even love, for the source—not just parody. It is clear that Hope loves the melodramatic style in which her characters speak, and she is very adept at crafting it. There is a tradition of film noir in lesbian fiction; part of this has to do with the attraction of a masculine world for women who are exploring their own masculinity. Hope Thompson allows her female characters to revel in both masculinity and femininity, but most of all, to revel in a melodramatic syntax: "I need my … my freedom! I need to be free of you and our diseased union. I shall write a poem about it one day. One day … when it doesn't hurt so much" (22). This kind of dialogue is fun for actors to act and audiences to listen to. We wish life was this simple. We know it is not, and we feel sympathy for characters like Margaret, who, like all of us, are trapped in our own delusions. But oddly we sometimes enjoy it as much as Redtree seems to enjoy "confinement."

Hope's style is classic camp, but it is her obsession with language—not her political content or camp style—that makes her work part of a queer theatrical tradition. Like Oscar Wilde, Noel Coward, and Edward Albee, her plays are as much about language as they are about content. As in the work of these playwrights, Hope's characters argue not only about their feelings, but oddly, about words. Green says "I need room to roam—to do what I want, when I want … with (slyly, slowly) whoever I want." Margaret corrects her "It's whomever." Green covers with "Whatever! I've lived in America too long" (17). The obsession with grammatical correctness is somewhat out of place in a film noir play. But it is not out of place in plays by closeted queer playwrights like Wilde, Coward, and Albee. Later Redtree says "Miss Connerly, do you have …." And Kitty replies "… a sentence to finish?" (22). Kitty's witty rejoinder is a double entendre, in fact a pun for indeed she has a prison sentence to finish. But she also, like Green and Margaret earlier, is making a metaliterary comment on the style of melodramatic discourse, where sentences are often left unfinished, i.e., "What the …."

Thompson's obsession with language reminds us of an antique literary technique used by closeted queer authors to hide what might have been discovered to be a gay subtext to their work, or indeed simply to hide their own sexuality. The queer writer dazzles us with his verbal dexterity; he knows that if he is not the most popular boy in class, he can certainly be class clown, and the laughter will draw our attention away from his guarded secret difference. I, too, have written drag comedies that were received more as charming entertainment than as recognizable ideological ejaculations. Sometimes we queer writers are so busy singing for our own supper that we can be more dazzling than is good for us: at least if we wish to be accepted by the literary establishment as serious artists.

Don't let Hope's resplendent forest of verbal wit and camp sensibility hide the important ideological trees: she is one of the finest Canadian writers we have today.

I just wonder how long it will take for people to notice.

Works Cited

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Sky Gilbert is a writer, director, and drag queen extraordinaire. He was co-founder and artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (North America's largest gay and lesbian theatre) for 18 years where he produced over 25 of his own plays. He has received two Dora Mavor Moore Awards and the Pauline McGibbon Award for theatre directing, and he was the recipient of The Margo Bindhardt Award (from the Toronto Arts Foundation), The Silver Ticket Award (from the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts), and the ReLit Award (for his fourth novel *An English Gentleman*, 2004). Dr. Gilbert holds a University Research Chair in Creative Writing and Theatre Studies at The School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. His sixth novel *Come Back* will be published by ECW Press in the spring of 2012.