



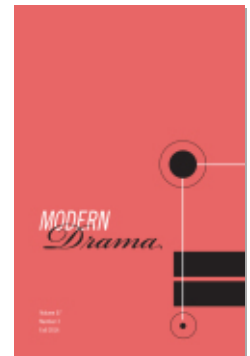
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Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure by Sara Warner (review)

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Modern Drama, Volume 57, Number 2, Summer 2014, pp. 287-289 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: [10.1353/mdr.2014.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2014.0025)



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encounter – to refrain from labelling artistic works until they have spoken to us on their own terms.



Sara Warner. *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. 296. \$55 (Hb); \$29.95 (Pb).

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“Lesbians and feminists are not typically associated with gaiety,” Sara Warner plainly states in her introduction to *Acts of Gaiety* (9). Yet by writing an affective history of ignored, erased, misunderstood performances of lesbian feminism that derive their power from fun and frivolity, Warner proves that humour has always been an important mode of lesbian feminist engagement. Warner’s vivid descriptions, close readings, and astute analyses of performances, culled from five decades of activism, constitute a vital archive of lesbian feminist work and show that pleasure can provide just as powerful a political critique as anger or stridency.

In her introduction, Warner provides a brief overview of LGBT history to show that, from early uses of the word “gay” to the recent commercialization of gay pride, the impulse toward an anarchic kind of gaiety has always been thwarted by the normalizing pull of assimilation. She hopes that, through the “reanimat[ion of] gaiety as a political value for progressive social activism” (xii–iii), we might combat what she terms “homoliberalism” – “a conservative program of social assimilation” that offers acceptance to “certain normative-leaning, straight-acting homosexuals” at the expense of non-normative subjects without altering existing power structures (xi). She also sees gaiety as an antidote to queer theory’s “privileging of negative affects” in the recent work of scholars such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Jack Halberstam (xiii). Instead of emphasizing a traumatic past, Warner writes a history of humour, calling for an embrace of laughter and joy; through these positive affects, she sees the possibility of a better future.

Although the entire book is an act of historiography, two of the five chapters are more explicitly so, working to correct historical misperceptions of lesbian feminist icons. Warner’s most compelling historiographical intervention comes in chapter one, in which, through careful archival research, she sets the record straight on the controversial Valerie Solanas and her body of work. Warner legitimizes Solanas as an important lesbian feminist artist, misunderstood and maligned in her own time, by disputing both popular misconceptions about her life (largely perpetuated by the 1996 film *I Shot Andy Warhol*) and correcting recent scholarly misinterpretations of

her work (such as those by Martin Puchner and James Harding). Warner provides a compelling close reading of Solanas's 1965 play *Up Your Ass*, arguing that it is a smart comedy of manners, with a strong anti-capitalist critique. She cites the character of Bonggi Perez, Solanas's hustling butch protagonist, as "unapologetically queer" (38), an early example of female masculinity, and demonstrates that this pre-Stonewall "landmark feminist play" (62) provides a model for work by later groups like Split Britches and Spiderwoman.

In chapter three, Warner reconsiders lesbian *Village Voice* critic Jill Johnston's personal performativity and her advocacy of lesbian separatism, through the lens of "joker citizenship" (107). Warner sees Johnston's public behaviour – for example, at the Lavender Menace zap, in 1970, and at a roundtable discussion of women's liberation, in New York City, in 1971 – as encouraging society's outsiders to "creat[e] a public spectacle of their private shame in order to expose the operations of power and oppression in society" (107). Analysing Johnston's *Lesbian Nation* (1973), Warner argues that Johnston's concept of a "lesbian nation" is about capturing an emotional state of gaiety rather than creating an actual, physical, women-only location. Warner maintains that Johnston's understanding of lesbian nationalism is not about disengagement from the public sphere or an "evacuation of nationality" (qtd. on 126) – as Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman claim – but about questioning and critiquing society's limited definition of appropriate modes of citizenship.

Even as she encourages readers to find inspiration in the activist strategies of the past, Warner cites examples of recycled tactics that have ended up in the service of homoliberalism and homonationalism, rather than revolution. In chapter two, Warner analyses anti-marriage zaps by lesbian feminist groups such as the Feminists and WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), who staged a performative protest at a bridal fair at Madison Square Garden in 1969, and reads this anti-marriage, lesbian-feminist activism against pro-marriage equality crusading of recent years, specifically the NOH8 campaign and the online video *Prop 8 – The Musical*. Reminding readers that much of the lesbian feminist writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s decried marriage, as an oppressive institution, and called for the eradication of the nuclear family, in favour of communal living, Warner brings into stark relief just how conservative the LGBT agenda has become, how the fight for marriage equality serves to perpetuate homoliberalism, and how the focus on a single assimilationist issue excludes a broader examination of intersectional oppression.

Warner's fourth chapter shows how Diane DiMassa's darkly humorous, early 1990s zine, *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, a powerful "lesbian comedy of terrors" (144), turned into a depoliticized, sentimental comedy of errors, when adapted as a musical at Michigan Womyn's Music

Festival in 2004. “Comedies of terrors,” Warner contends, express the repressed rage of marginalized members of society, providing a productive way for spectators to purge their anger. DiMassa’s zine complicates, rather than endorses, her protagonist’s terrorist behaviour, debating the advantages and shortcomings of a liberal-humanist agenda (advocated by the character Roz) and those of militant feminism (advocated by Hothead). With her problematic adaptation, musician Animal Prufrock misses an opportunity to ask audiences to wrestle with the implications of a fictional lesbian terrorist, in the wake of revelations of prisoner abuse, at the hands of actual lesbians at Abu Ghraib. Instead, Prufrock deemphasizes the violence of the original zine and makes the narrative more about romantic relationships, an act of disengaged denial that Warner argues inadvertently forwards a homonationalist agenda.

In her final chapter, Warner treads more familiar lesbian performance territory but, once again, offers a compelling counter-reading, this time of the Five Lesbian Brothers’ *Oedipus at Palm Springs*, presented at New York Theatre Workshop, in 2005. Many long-time fans of the troupe criticized the piece; Jill Dolan and Hilton Als, for example, thought it pandered to the mainstream, attempting commercial success by sacrificing their old sense of humour and non-realist style. Warner, however, reads the play – through Freud’s notion of tendentious jokes – as distinctly non-normative, arguing that it condemns the bourgeois lesbian worldview it depicts. She makes a convincing case for the production as a darkly humorous critique of homonormativity, an interrogation of the sacrifices that lesbians make to participate in marriage and domesticity and to gain mainstream acceptance.

The book has a personal tone; you can feel Warner’s pleasure in her playful and witty use of language and in her analyses of performances she passionately enjoys. She inserts herself into the narrative when necessary, including, for example, thoughts on her admiration for Valerie Solanas, ruminations on her own choice not to marry, and an explanation of why she included, in the book, a negative critique of a lesbian feminist production she did not like. *Act of Gaiety* is an important archive of lesbian performance, remarkable for its revisions of misunderstood histories and its attempt to reactivate the spirit of lesbian feminism. It is a pleasurable read, with a serious purpose: to explore the possibilities afforded by not taking ourselves so seriously.



Maurya Wickstrom. *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew.* Studies in International Performance. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 224, illustrated. \$90.00 (Hb).