Space, Stigma, and Sexuality in Annie Baker's The Flick

Emma Stens

Halfway through Annie Baker's 2013 stage drama, *The Flick*, two of its protagonists, Rose and Avery, have a sexual encounter that shines a spotlight on both characters' complicated relationships with sex and sexuality. Avery is uncomfortably reminded of his lack of attraction to women, and Rose berates herself for her promiscuity and her reckless sex drive concerning both men and women. However, when Rose asks Avery if he considers her to be a stereotype of "what I am" (Baker 100), she never specifies what exactly she is referring to, and certain words are left unsaid. Avery, too, never voices his own identity. Both Rose and Avery hover around potential identities without actually assigning themselves one, while simultaneously fulfilling certain stereotypes about the identities they seem to fear.
The two characters' unwillingness to label themselves sexually can be attributed to the stigma and shame attached to their respective identities, particularly the negative stereotypes that have developed around these labels. In this essay I will confront the outside forces that could account for their respective behaviours and the ways in which the text itself is a manifestation of these behaviours. Baker uses space—physical space, pauses

and gaps in dialogue—to reflect the ways in which both Rose and Avery struggle with both their conformity to sexual stereotypes and their attempts to distance themselves from said stereotypes.

Rose knows the ways that her behaviour aligns with several bisexual stereotypes, and therefore avoids describing herself this way as often as possible. When Rose asks Avery, "Do you think I'm a stereotype?" (Baker 100), Avery prompts her to clarify her question, not quite understanding what she is alluding to. All Avery receives in response, however, is "Of like—whatever" (Baker 100). On its own, the statement is withholding and distant; when paired with the knowledge provided about Rose over the course of the play, however, the audience should have little trouble inferring what stereotypes she is concerned with. After Rose casually mentions an ex-boyfriend, she reveals to a confused Avery—who had been under the impression that she was a lesbian—that she has "been with girls a couple times" (Baker 87). Later, Rose confesses that she "can't stay attracted to anyone for longer than four months" (Baker 94) and finds monogamy impossible. In Paula C. Rust's article "Monogamy and Polyamory: Relationship Issues for Bisexuals," she investigates the prevalent "stereotypes of bisexuals and promiscuous and nonmonogamous" people (477), and how this stereotype arises out of the belief that a bisexual person will "alternate male and female lovers in an effort to

satisfy both sides of her desire" (476). Rose, in a way, falls victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hyper-aware of how her sexual experiences embody certain stereotypes, she tries to distance herself from any sort of label; this hyper-awareness, however, results in a fixation that leaves her unable to move past the stereotypes. Rose ends up completely embodying certain negative bisexual stereotypes regardless of whether or not she chooses to align her sexuality with that word at all. She distances herself from her identity in one aspect, while completely inhabiting it in others.

Rose's difficulty with asserting her sexual identity in her own space becomes increasingly complicated when her discomfort is deepened by the behaviour of the play's sole heterosexual male character. Before Avery even has a chance to properly introduce himself to Rose, Sam (the only presumed heterosexual character onstage) incorrectly informs Avery "she's a lesbian" (Baker 27). Rose knows that others have called her a lesbian; Avery admits to her that "someone told me that you were gay" and she is forced to clarify otherwise (Baker 87). The way she does so is so ambiguous and casual, prefaced with an "I mean, whatever" that her manner seems to suggests a sort of tiredness in having to explain herself again, an indication that the question exhausts or disinterests her (Baker 87). Sam's choice to label Rose as a lesbian without her consent can be attributed to a number

of reasons. His behaviour could be an attempt to either get Avery to back off, or to discourage himself from pursuing Rose or allowing his romantic feelings towards her to develop further. Due to his later attempt to pursue a relationship with her, however, the more likely reason is that he is fetishizing Rose's relations with women. When Sam mislabels Rose, another bisexual stereotype emerges, one that Paula Rust says views bisexuality as "a phase or a temporary form of sexuality adopted by people who are coming out as lesbian or gay or returning to heterosexuality" (Rust 476). Sam's behaviour demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding regarding Rose's sexuality. He buys into the stereotype of the bisexual identity being something temporary and transitional—perhaps in hopes that she will 'return' to heterosexuality, and by extension to him. In a later confrontation between the two, Sam cuts Rose off before she has a chance to finish explaining herself, thereby verbally occupying the space that *should* belong to her (Baker 148). His actions continually deny Rose the space to label herself and be comfortable in her identity; as a result, the atmosphere she finds herself in is stifling.

Like Rose, Avery is ill at ease with his own identity, but unlike Rose, he does not divulge many details at all about his own sexuality—but what he withholds from the characters and the audience is just as telling as what he does reveal. In "Emotional

Distress Among LGBT Youth: The Influence Of Perceived Discrimination Based On Sexual Orientation", Joanna Almeida found that "girls were significantly more likely than boys to report a minority sexual orientation" (1001). Rose blatantly discusses her sexual endeavours and is hardly taken seriously by her heterosexual peers; Avery keeps quiet on specific matters. What he does talk about includes his ongoing history of depression, wherein Avery decides to tell Rose about the "one-year anniversary of the day [he] tried to kill [him]self" (Baker 96). Then, as he attempts to explain his experience with mental illness to Rose, Avery's thoughts unintentionally drift to memories of his "one friend, at Clark, this guy from Bangladesh" who transferred away and left Avery lonely, and presumably, more depressed (Baker 100). David J. Allen and Terry Oleson's article "Shame and Internalized Homophobia in Gay Men" reveals that gay men often experience an increased amount of "psychological distress: demoralization, guilt, suicide" in comparison to their heterosexual peers, as a result of the shame they have associated with their own sexuality (35). Avery has a history of depression and suicidal tendencies, and mourns the loss of his one male friend. The combination of what Avery is willing to share and what he seems too ashamed to divulge potentially speaks volumes, especially in juxtaposition to Rose, her experiences, and her navigation of the space onstage. In the same conversation, Rose asks Avery two blunt

questions: “What do you think about when you, like, fantasize?” and “Do you ever think about / guys?” (Baker 93). The forward slash in the latter question is a textual indication for Avery to cut Rose off, which he does by interjecting with “I really don’t want to answer these questions” (Baker 93). Though this response is a non-answer, it is also a denial of a certain discussion he can already see coming. As a result of the breach of privacy on Rose’s part, Avery must turn the situation on its head and invade her space—the space she has in which to speak her lines—and cut her off before she comes any closer to matters Avery is unwilling to discuss. Lastly, the higher rate of depression and psychological distress among the LGBT community unfortunately contributes to the stereotype of a depressed, gay individual who is doomed to loneliness and unhappiness. When Avery laments that everyone he knows is “always faking it” and “acting out like some stereotype of like… of like… exactly… who you’d think they’d be,” he includes himself in this society of ‘fakers’ and stereotypes (Baker 100). The stereotype of the sad gay individual lingers in the back of his mind; like Rose, Avery is another self-fulfilling prophecy. Whereas Rose is willing to ask others to consider whether or not she fulfills any stereotypes, Avery alternatively refuses to allow any sort of similar conversation about himself into his own space.

The way Baker presents the dialogue in the text, with all its specificities and staging, reflects the ways

in which her characters navigate both their personal issues and their inter-personal relationships. The frequency of pauses, interruptions made by other characters, and overlapping dialogue mimic the uneven, non-linear journeys that the characters embark on. Rose's confession of being "fucked up too" with regards to her relationship with sex features some sort of pause, hesitation, or filler word after nearly every one of her lines (Baker 94). Avery awkwardly provides no more than intermittent "…Huh"s and "Whoa"s, and Rose takes a "long pause" in order to work up the courage to admit that when she fantasizes, she thinks "about *myself*," which is arguably the most unusual and unconventional confession of the entire scene (Baker 94-95). The pause that occurs right before Avery reveals his past suicide attempt is described as a "much more comfortable silence" than any of the pauses that occurred earlier; Avery grows comfortable in the space, and finally finds himself willing to disclose personal information (Baker 96). However, the reveal does not prove a particularly fruitful one for Avery and the bond between him and Rose remains shaky, as her primary responses to this incredibly difficult and private revelation are "Oh my god" and "I just like don't get it. I don't get suicide," demonstrating a remarkable lack of empathy on her part (Baker 96-97). The brief exchange of dialogue between the two of them that directly follows is now marked by no less than six pauses, which provide

an uneasy, awkward element to the conversation as opposed to a safe, secure feeling. The two return to ambiguities and filler words, with Avery providing a brief "yeah" to all of Rose's questions and Rose expressing her physical discomfort with the silence by going "uch" (Baker 100-101). As the characters make progress in understanding one another, the direction in the text adjusts to reflect this growth; when the characters regress, the text becomes increasingly halting and choppy.

As Rose and Avery enter one another's physical space, the careful staging that both characters rely on is abandoned, and their modes of closeting oneself no longer hold up. Rose and Avery's sexual encounter, which features the most physical contact in the entire play, is the source of the bulk of the personal information both characters choose to reveal, and the entire encounter is brutally uncomfortable, awkward, even disturbing at times. Their attempt to consummate their relationship—if you could call it that, since they are acquaintances at best—is highly traumatic and embarrassing for the both of them; it is no coincidence, then, that Baker directly follows that moment with their ambiguous, stilted half-confessions of sexual preferences and personal traumas. The entire scene has a looseness that is not found as strongly in any other scenes—for the majority of the play, the dialogue plays out while the characters are cleaning, with the choreographed

mopping and sweeping becoming a predictable routine for both audience and characters. Rose throws Avery, and the carefully organized monotony of their work environment, out of balance, declaring an impromptu "Dance Party!" that leaves Avery feeling awkward and slightly anxious (Baker 81). Rose's dancing is described as "wild and weird and uninhibited" (Baker 81). For a moment, she does not concern herself with other people's opinions, perceptions, or misconceptions of her, and she channels this newfound energy into her attempt to seduce Avery. As with their willingness to divulge information about their sexual histories, however, Rose is far more eager to move the conversation or the act forward than Avery, who sits "frozen" (Baker 90). When Rose finally realizes that "something is clearly off" and she stops what she later fears is an attack on Avery ("I feel like I molested you," she laments), shame permeates the entire situation (Baker 90, 92). Here, in this too-close-for-comfort scene, they are both forced to confront the aspects of their sexuality they tend to distance themselves from. Rose once again acts rashly and promiscuously, and Avery is reminded of the fact that women have never seemed to turn him on. The uncomfortable confessions finally arise as a way for both Rose and Avery to give themselves more breathing room. Perhaps if they finally voice their thoughts, those thoughts will take up less space in their mind. Sharing sorrow typically lessens the burden, but

as demonstrated by all that follows, Rose and Avery appear to have no such luck in this situation.

As the play comes to a close, little to no progress has been made, and both Rose and Avery seem resigned to continue on as they always have. As Avery leaves the theatre for the last time, he remarks, "Do you remember the end of the movie Manhattan?... "You gotta have a little faith in people" and the music swells up?... This is like the opposite of that ending" (Baker 174). Avery continues to distance himself from his own life, by choosing to compare it to a work of fiction rather than explain his feelings and thought processes directly. Furthermore, he imagines placing even more physical space than before between himself and those around him, leaving the theatre for good and imagining a future where he'll be "living in Paris" while Sam stays in Massachusetts, "sweeping up popcorn" (Baker 173). Towards the end of the play, Sam describes Avery's choice of words as "a little gay" and mimics his speech in "a British accent" (Baker 138). Avery bristles and responds with "That's a British accent. Do you mean it sounds British?" in an attempt to move the conversation away from potential revelations about his sexuality, signifying that sexuality is a topic he still is not willing to discuss (Baker 138). Rose, meanwhile, remains at the movie theatre, with Sam, a man whose feelings she does not reciprocate, and her fears of intimacy and monogamy are left unresolved. The only character

who seems at peace with his current position is the only person not implied to be anything other than heterosexual: Sam, who is "still smiling" as he exits the stage at the conclusion of the play (Baker 177).

Both Avery's firmly closeted nature and Rose's discomfort and nebulous relationship with her identity are stripped and laid bare on the stage. In a setting that revolves around consumers observing a performance, in front of real-life consumers observing the actions of the characters onstage, Rose and Avery ironically refuse to embrace the performative aspects of identity—a performance that begins with identifying oneself in the first place. By the end of the play, neither Rose nor Avery have grown any closer to reconciling with their identities or seeking healthier relationships with space and with those around them. The dialogue remains awkward, the pauses overly long, and the identities unaddressed.

Works Cited

Allen, David J. and Terry Oleson. "Shame and Internalized Homophobia in Gay Men". *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1999, pp. 33-43.

Almeida, Joanna, et al. "Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth: The Influence Of Perceived Discrimination Based On Sexual Orientation". *Journal of Youth and Adolesence*, vol. 38, no. 7,

2009, pp. 1001-14.
Baker, Annie. The Flick. New York City: Theatre Communications Group, 2014. Print.
Rust, Paula C. "Monogamy and Polyamory: Relationship Issues for Bisexuals". *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*. Edited by Linda Garnets and Douglas C. Kimmel. New York City: Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 475-96.