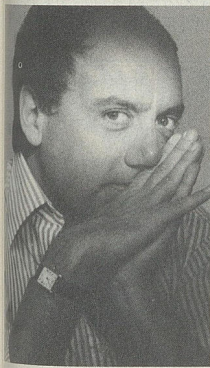


an emotional state

Mart Crowley

On the 25th anniversary of *The Boys in the Band*, DALE REYNOLDS talks to the playwright



MART CROWLEY

WITH THE recent explosion of gay plays in the American and British theatre, it's difficult to remember that the field wasn't always so fecund. Fourteen months before Stone-wall, on April 14th, 1968, Mart Crowley's bittersweet play, *The Boys in the Band*, started the modern movement, at Theatre Four, off-Broadway, New York City. It was the first of three seminal

plays which have dealt successfully and popularly with gays in American society: *Boys*, *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982), and *Angels in America* (1992). These plays have all courageously explored homosexuality in contemporary society.

Well, now *Boys* has reached the ripe old age of 25, a time when adults begin to take serious looks at their lives, careers, loves. And for those of us who were at that very age when we saw it new, it *can* be a minor shock to the system. But to Crowley, who was 31 when it opened, it's just a part of someone else's history.

"I take no credit for doing anything special with my play because I'm not a politically active person. I sort of stumbled into writing it and the play works still because it's *not* agit-prop; propaganda plays don't hold up well. I don't like Depression-era playwright Clifford Odets, for that reason. Those plays run the risk of falling victim to age, even when they change the times that so dates them. I wanted to start from an emotional state because I work that way — that's why I love Tennessee Williams so much. *He* wrote from a totally emotional point of view."

The history of the play is as much of a lark as it is serious. Crowley had left Hollywood in 1967, licking his wounds from the battles of defaulting-films and cancelled television contracts.

"I was terribly depressed when I wrote it — broke and totally at my wits end. But since my training was in the theatre, [The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Class of '57], I went back to school. It's really a miracle that *Boys* got done at all: my screenplays up and down the

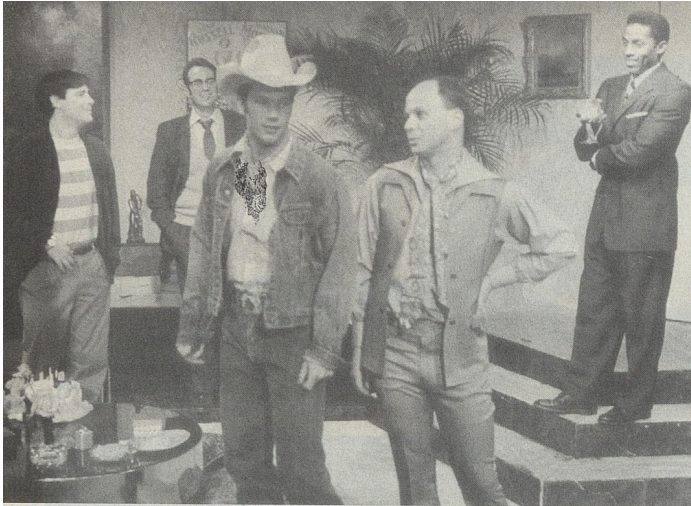


PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

The original off-Broadway cast starred in the film version of Mart Crowley's groundbreaking play *The Boys in the Band*. The cast included, top row, left to right LARRY LUCKINBILL as Hank, KEITH PRENTICE as Larry, KENNETH NELSON as Michael; centre row, LEONARD FREY as Harold, FREDERICK COOMBS as Donald, ROBERT LA TOURNEAUX as the cowboy hustler; bottom row, REUBEN GREENE as Bernard, CLIFF GORMAN as Emory, and PETER WHITE as Alan

ly conventional — all heterosexual stories. I didn't write the play with any politically militant stance or defiance of society in mind. I never thought that way. And when I talked to intelligent, close friends they all dismissed it as 'great therapy, but it'll never be produced'. So of course, I was so relieved — after years of frustration in the Biz, trying to get somewhere and not succeeding — that when it clicked, I thought 'it's about fucking time!'"

And click it did: one-thousand-and-one performances off-Broadway, a year's run in London, and a decent film-version with the original cast, directed by William Friedkin (before his Academy Award for *The French Connection*). But sometimes during the late '70s, the play drifted out of the consciousness of the public when it began to be derided by politically correct guardians of gay culture. For several years, Crowley was selective in allowing public performances until such time as it would come back into style. Such as today. Crowley's play never was 'wrong' in its depictions of gay men; it merely reflected a governing reality of its time and, as such, remains a curiosity. Unfortunately gay people haven't advanced so far as to have left the play totally in a time warp; we ▶



J DAVID KRASSNER as Donald, DAVE HIGGINS as Hank, JOSH CARMICHAEL as the cowboy hustler, JEB STUART as Emory and CAMERON ARNETT as Bernard in the Los Angeles 25th anniversary production of *The Boys in the Band*

all know unhappy, alcoholic, self-hating homosexuals, don't we? Just as we know the heterosexuals, too, who suffer from the same problems.

Crowley, 57, balding, bespectacled and pleasant, is more than willing to discuss his only hit — he is a fount of amusing, self-deprecating show business stories, but isn't very big on analysis.

"I think if the play hadn't made a sensation in its opening at the Van Dam theatre in lower Manhattan, it wouldn't have gone anywhere. We were shocked by the numbers of showbiz royalty trying to get in to see it. Nothing could stop them, even the weather; it rained torrentially that week. And they were waiting in the rain — this line of black umbrellas stretching down Van Dam Street, looking like the third act of *Our Town*. We all went 'oh-oh, we're on to something'. It told producer Richard Barr that he should hold on to it and move it uptown. And, mind you, I hadn't been promised anything other than the workshoping."

At the time Crowley wrote *Boys*, the psychological and political ingredients for the gay revolution just around the corner was simmering, redefining itself for Stonewall. But gay characters — or at least positive-image ones — were largely absent from the stage and Crowley wanted to see himself and his crowd reflected up there.

"I had always thought I'd be the new Williams or Inge, so I put in some closeted references to their's and Edward Albee's plays. I mirrored *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the Hank/Larry conflicts — their snarly moments. And there's a line about the Cowboy 'looking like he's out of an Inge play'. Actually, I had originally thought of setting *Boys* in a gay bar, but I changed my mind when I went to a friend's birthday party, so I switched it. I'd hoped to call it *The Birthday Party*, but couldn't for obvious reasons and, ironically, it was when I saw the film version of the Harold Pinter play that I was convinced I should take Friedkin as director for the film version of *Boys*."

And where *did* that euphonic title come from?

"It was a catchword in the '40s Big Band era: 'Let's hear a big hand for the boys in the band.' The line is also in *A Star is Born*. James Mason says to Judy Garland, 'It's three o'clock in the morning at the Downbeat Club and you're singing for yourself and for the boys in the band'."

(Shades of the dreaded stereotype: a Garland allusion!)

"Amusingly, rock bands stopped using the phrase after the play came out. People don't know that reference today. But it was always a *double entendre* in my intentions: The Guys in the Group; the Kids in the Minority — it's all very old-fashioned. A slightly outlaw quality; a band as in a band of thieves. I think it's a fortuitous title, myself. Titles are important, and while it could have been a success without it, it has a resonance."

When the film rights were being negotiated, Crowley was adamant about the original actors being hired for the movie: "the play had been a huge hit and we had lots of film offers, including some from the bigger studios who wanted stars. Even Warren Beatty was interested in the rights."

CBS, the huge American national network, eventually was chosen to film it as they were trying to get a feature film arm off the ground, Cinema Center Films,

and they were the only ones who'd let Crowley produce it with the original cast; it meant less money but more autonomy for the playwright/producer. CCF shot it in Manhattan in a studio at 7th Avenue at the 26th Street for £2M and it opened in 1970 to good reviews. His feelings about the result?

"After winning so many battles, I didn't really care if the critics liked it or not. Their complaints about it being a photographed play and too sentimental were wrong — I just didn't care; it all rolled off of me."

Ultimately, and to no surprise for the era, it didn't play in the hinterlands; they never saw it in his native Vicksburg, Mississippi. But the bigger American cities booked it and it played London, Paris and Rome (where it was re-titled *Buon Compleanno Per Il Suo Amico Harold*). It has since shown a profit.

On the London opening night, at Wyndham's Theatre, his good friend Natalie Wood went as Crowley's date. After the curtain, they, along with the film director Billy Wilder and his wife; screenwriter I.A.L. Diamond and his date, actress Tuesday Weld; went out for dinner.

"Wilder told me 'it will be a success in Germany because not only is there a great subculture of gay life in Germany, there is a total gay-slang language which will translate well.' He was right; we've had lots of productions in Germany, in many *verlag's*, or translations. And as Spanish

slang changes from country to country, those translations are different from each other. It's played three times in Japan in three different versions; there is no prejudice against blacks in Japan, so Bernard is made into a Korean over there. I try to make them keep to the original intent: not to go wild with free adaptations of it. While I was living in Paris, I saw an advert for a production in Brussels, so I dashed over (only an hour by train) to see it. I bought a ticket, went in. The lights went down, and a near-nude ballet starts (the guys were only wearing posing straps); they danced about, God only knows how long. One of the characters started shaking the other; Donald in waking Michael from a nightmare, and then Donald remembers the rest of the play: it was painful; horrible. I left at intermission, went back to Paris, called my agent to complain and they shut it down."

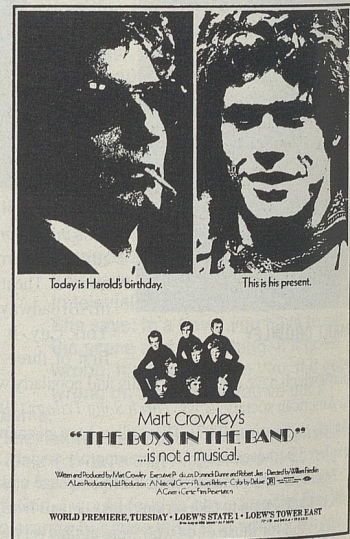
Although he never had a blanket prohibition on any American productions in the 1980's, he did refuse to let some individuals produce it.

"I didn't want titillation; I didn't want it to be misinterpreted as a skin-game. It seemed wrong and I wanted no hint of exploitation.

In the film, Friedkin shot some alternative footage of Hank and Larry in the bedroom, kissing, but we decided against putting it into the finished film. I figured, let them shut the door, and we'll use our imaginations. This gay life on film was all too new, and I didn't want it to go too far. You didn't see a gay play on every corner at that time and I didn't want to cheapen the film."

As to the late Frederick Coombs' ass shot as he gets into the shower, well, "Frederick's skin is tasteful".

Hollywood, of all places, produced a superb 25th anniversary production at the Small Fountain Theatre in Hollywood. Crowley was an honoured guest at the opening and at a subsequent panel discussion about the play. And what does *The*



The famous poster for the film version of *The Boys in the Band*, which was banned by all the leading daily newspapers in San Francisco, Chicago and Boston as well as the New York *Daily News* and the Los Angeles *Times*

ays in the Band mean to him today?

"I'm not ashamed to say I don't have any feelings about it. Maybe it was a subconscious act of writing, but I didn't have anything to do with it — it's like somebody else wrote the play. I remember struggling with the writing process. It was like being in a dream: fun, scary, cathartic, therapeutic."

The playwright has not stopped his upward career in show-business. But it's been as a television producer for the last 20 years, not as a successful playwright. He had two other plays produced in the early '70s in major regional theatres in America, and another one which never got off the ground. And as they all ended up being popular or critical failures, he gave up playwrighting for a while. Today, he has a new play, *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, about a confrontation between a priest in his fifties and a former student who is now in his forties, someone the priest had sexually molested when they were younger. It's based on Crowley's having been sexually abused by a priest.

"It was very hard to get to and through it, but I'm glad I wrote it — it's been both a release and a relief. I had to write *For Reasons* because it was disturbing me."

It's to be produced this autumn at the Oleny Theatre/Maryland, a regional theatre just across the Patomac River from Washington, D.C.

Crowley began his television producing career when Robert Wagner, then married to Natalie Wood, chose him to helm his successful TV show, *Hart to Hart*, which ran in America from 1979-84. He has also written some of those four-hour mini-series, such as the current adaptation of British novelist Barbara Taylor Bradford's *Remember*.

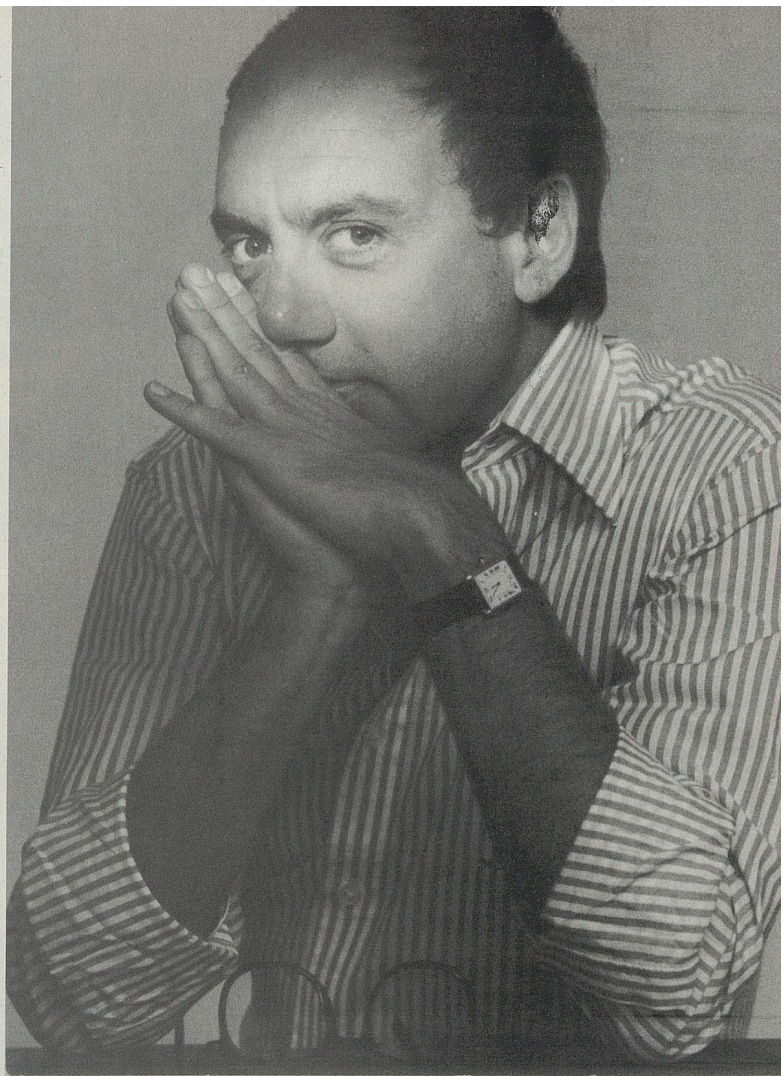
Crowley's play never was 'wrong' in its depictions of gay men; it is merely reflected a governing reality of its time and, as such, remains a curiosity.

"This is the third one of these I've done. I've been working in TV and Hollywood for a long time now. And only a few have I liked, my favourite being *There Must Be A Pony* with Elizabeth Taylor, Wagner, the late Jimmy Coco, and a very cute, young Chad Lowe. Ken Olin was in it, too."

When Crowley went to NY after his College graduation, he started writing his first play. "I had been in love with a straight guy in school, so I did the usual thing of writing a closet gay play; about my life, except that I was the female character — like the other gay writers of the time."

"Tennessee Williams hasn't had very many strong film directors. Richard Brooks, especially, wasn't right for Williams. [He directed *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962).] Elia Kazan was the

definitive Williams director, I think. I met Kazan, while they were shooting Williams' *Baby Doll*. I hung around, making a total pest of myself, but Kazan took a shine to me and said for me to look him up when I was out of school. After college, I got a production assistant's job on a quickie film and I was walking along West 57th in New York and saw Kazan on the street; he stopped to chat with me. He said on his next film he could use me and for me to stay in touch. Meanwhile, I got another job, worked on two other films, including Elizabeth Taylor's *Butterfield 8*. Kazan's office called and, as I was crazed to work with him, I left *Butterfield*. *Splendour as the Grass* was shot on Long Island, that was when I met Bill Inge; I drove him to locations. I was out to myself as a gay man,



MART CROWLEY: 'I'm not a politically active person . . .'

but not professionally; my close chums knew. Natalie Wood and I were extremely close at that time. You know, that whole thing between a sympathetic strong woman and a gay man?" (Natasha Gregson Wagner is his goddaughter.)

He worked on Williams' *The Fugitive Kind* (1959. Based on *Orpheus Descending*) as a go-fer; his job was to get Tennessee Williams to the studio for re-writes. "Oh, he was intoxicated and anxious, every day. I was very shy and terrified of him; could never say anything to him directly, and he never said anything to me. One day I got up the nerve to write him a letter saying 'I'm the boy who picks you up everyday; I'm from Mississippi, and I want to talk to you about playwrighting.' He never said anything to me for days. One night when we were driving home from work he said, 'Are you the boy that wrote that letter?' 'Yes.' 'What you want to talk to me about?' 'Playwrighting. I won't take up much of your time.' 'Do you want to come up and have a drink?' 'Sure! If you aren't too worn out.' 'I'm not tired now — I'll be in 20 minutes.' We went upstairs and his lover, Frank Merlo, was making daiquiris, and five very drunk hours later, I left and no one had put any moves on me. We talked about everything, including that the studio originally wanted Shirley MacLaine to play Alma Weinmiller in Peter Glenville's film version of *Summer and Smoke* (1961); he was so angry. He rightfully insisted on Geraldine Page to play her."

Crowley sees the new gay theatre as highly positive. "We've had our coming out plays and plays about Aids and I think that it would be a real different trend where being homosexual is taken for granted and where *gay* is other issues. That's one of the reasons I love Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. I adore the abstract quality of 'anything goes theatrically'; it's realistic and surreal both — with no rules."