

Boys in the Band Bitchy, Biting, Hilarious!

by JAY ROSS

"I have to get off the merry-go-round before I'm killed by centrifugal force." Thus Michael, the host of the birthday party in *The Boys in the Band*, explains his nonalcoholic drinks before the party. Liquor brings out his hostilities, and he wouldn't want that to happen.

Michael expounds on his emasculating family life and shows that he knows his problem. But other than that slight temporary gesture, he is unable to help himself. His self-loathing is so great that he must bring everyone else

down with him.

This may sound like an unlikely setting for the wildest comedy in town, but that's just what this play (now at the Huntington Hartford) is—screamingly funny—and biting to the point of cannibalism.

Michael and his friends are an assortment of homosexuals who wear their neuroses on their sleeves. Alan, Michael's straight, former roommate, intrudes on the scene. After a short futile attempt by the others to "butch it up," Michael, who has had a crush on Alan, sets out to prove that Alan and the whole world are gay—the "Christ, was I drunk last night!" syndrome, as he puts it.

Playwright Mart Crowley has assembled as typical a bunch of cocktail-partyites as possible. I know them all—in fact, many of each and combinations of them.

Dennis Cooney is a bit slow getting into the character of Michael, as if he were afraid the audience might believe him. But once the action begins, he swings as if born to the colors.

Richard Roat's Alan, the Supersquare, is too brittle to be credible. His facade would have to turn off anyone but another robot.

Brian Taggart is nice as the nice guy, Donald, who has his problems, too. He can't bring himself to stay overnight or for a weekend with a lover but must leave after sex. This earned him the nickname of Freeway Flyer. At least he's trying to work it out with his analyst.

Hank and Larry are lovers. Konrad Matthaer is a bit overly stodgy as Hank, who has given up his wife and children for Larry. (Alan expresses disgust at this. When someone else reminds him that many men leave their wives for other women, Alan cries, "That's normal!")

Hank's possessiveness clashes with Larry's promiscuity. Peter Rattray is natural as Larry, who is not above jealousy himself. When Hank returns from another room with Alan, Larry bitchily asks, "Is it bigger than a breadstick?"

Guy Edwards is weak as Bernard, a Negro at home among whites. He isn't up to the histrionics toward the end of the play.

One perfect long-stemmed American Beauty pansy goes to Cliff Gorman for his brilliant portrayal of Emory. Emory is the epitome of queens—fast talking,

dishing, flamboyant, screaming to cover his feelings of inferiority and as a defiance of the society that made him that way. At the same time, he's hard-working, tender, and solicitous because he needs someone to care for, having given up the hope of anyone caring for him. It takes great talent to be so perfect in a part as to seem typecast. Cliff Gorman is great.

The other superb performance in this play is Michael Lipton's stunning portrayal of Harold, the birthday guest of honor. His entrance was greeted by screams from the audience and his exit with a frantic ovation. He shows a masterful control of body and emotion in a juicy role that could easily turn into a grotesque burlesque. He holds the audience in his hands with his artistry.

Harold is the only one who can hold his own against Michael's machinations, for in his own words, "I'm a 32-year-old, pock-marked, pot-smoking, Jewish queer."

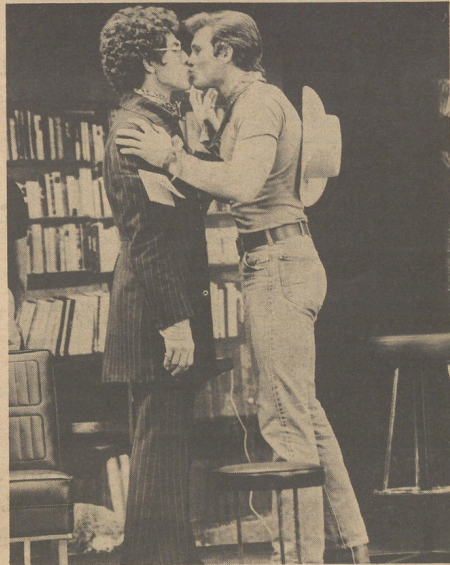
Rounding out the cast in the smallest, but certainly not the least noticeable part, is Roger Herron as Cowboy—beautiful of face, magnificent of physique, and nonexistent of intellect. In short, the ideal hustler.

Cowboy is presented to Harold as a birthday present from Emory—the perfect gift to elicit the remark, "Just what I've always wanted!" As he's about to leave with Cowboy, Harold asks, "Are you good in bed?" Touchingly, Cowboy answers, "I try to show a little emotion. It makes me feel like less of a whore."

Author Crowley must have tape-recording ears. The dialogue is authentic, with many lines I wish I had thought of first. The only false note in the play comes in the second act, when Michael insists everyone play a game which is intended to degrade them. Michael does not have the authority to force his guests into it. It is a contrived situation.

The setting, a smart modern apartment using blown up photographs, was brilliantly conceived.

Robert Moore's direction kept the pace hopping and the gag lines at a sock-it-to-me speed. Even if the square straights in the audience understood only a third of the dialogue, they obviously felt they'd had their money's worth. The hip and the gay crowd's reaction was, "Too much! Too much!"



HAVE A HAPPY. Harold (Michael Lipton) gets a kiss from his "birthday present," a hustler called Cowboy (Roger Herron), in Mart Crowley's hit play *The Boys in the Band*.

Reflections on 'Boys'

by MEL HOLT

From the moment Mart Crowley's incisively honest play opens, we know that the characters are homosexual, but *Boys in the Band* is more than just an examination of the homosexual milieu. It also tries to treat the characters involved in the play as people. The play forces reality upon us. With its sharp wit and penetrating bitter-sweet sadness, it reveals the problems of those who inhabit the "gay" world of the unloved.

The story revolves around

Michael, who conducts a birthday party for Harold, a caricature of a "sick" queen. The guests arrive and play their individual parts in this realistic group-therapy session, each in turn telling us, in his own way, about his feelings of guilt and self-destructiveness, and how he has been unable to relate to those he loves.

Like so many people we know, Michael lives a life of self-willed failure, existing on multiple levels in relation to his work-a-day world and his world of sex.

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Reflections

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He escapes into fantasy with a plane ticket to anywhere.

The dialog, with rancorous barbs and vicious wit, exhaustively probes the many-faceted homosexual experience, smashing many cliches about gay life. The play achieves an amazing success of dramatic power in the second act as it reveals the intimate lives of its characters, exposing their hidden foibles and secret dreams.

Boys is not very pleasant if you have a hang-up about your homosexuality, but if you don't, it's a cleverly funny play, with

moments of sadness and naughtiness.

Mart Crowley once said, "In my play I never suggest that there were no happy queers, they just didn't happen to be at this party." One may ask then, where are they?

Hank and Larry, who are lovers in the play, speak most relevantly about homosexual relationships. Larry says, "I can't take that let's-be-faithful-and-never-look-at-another-person routine. It just doesn't work. If you want to promise that, fine. Then do it and stick to it. But if you HAVE to promise it—as far as I'm concerned—nothing finishes a re-

lationship faster. You gotta have it! It can't work any other way. And the ones who swear their undying fidelity are lying. Most of them, anyway—ninety percent of them. They cheat on each other constantly and lie through their teeth. I'm sorry, I can't be like that." Hank replies, "THERE IS THAT TEN PERCENT."

These boys grope for some meaning to their existence; they reach desperately for some assurance that they will find love. But all they find is frustration and loneliness. If the homosexual is prone to self-destruction, as some people believe, then doesn't society bear some responsibility by the mere fact that it has humiliated him because of his sexual preference?

What, then, is the answer for a society that refuses to accept the homosexual way of life as valid, yet will come to a play like *Boys in the Band*, laugh themselves silly at the "gay" jokes, then feel indignant when they see a "queer" on the street? One of the characters in the play has a line which is apt, "People refuse to accept that which they do not understand," which says a lot about the society in which we live (or should I say, exist).

The party in *Boys in the Band* is like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* revisited, with its masochistic game (call up the one you really love and tell him so) and its self-flagellation.

Michael says, in the play, "Why do we hate ourselves so much?" This may well be asked, since we receive enough hate from society.

The play ends as most homosexual plays end, with nobody loving anybody, but everybody adrift on a sea of self-doubt, "Like Ole Man River—tired of livin' and scared o' dyin'."



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