



# Theatrical Aesthetics of Solo Performance and Its Social Functions — Take the Example of Tim Miller's *Glory Box*

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**Abstract:** Queer theory, rising in the 1990s, not only reconstructs the social discourse mechanism related to gender and pathology, but also makes gay community enter the vision of art creators and humanities researchers. This thesis attempts to explore queer writings which has been ignored by the researchers in the theatre by means of the concept of solo performance. This can be properly illustrated by one of Tim Miller's representative works, *Glory Box*, during which the performer combines personal narrative and cultural criticism in order to form new thinking patterns about gay groups in the United States.

**Keywords:** solo performance, Tim Miller, *Glory Box*

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## 1. Introduction

Tim Miller is famous as one of representative figures of American solo performance in the late twentieth century, whose performance, different from the traditional metaphorical expression, is much bolder by means of the performer's body. As a post-traumatic narrative, *Glory Box* is an autobiographical performance that tells the story of Miller's gay journey, which fully demonstrates the diversity and openness of queer performance and the deep interpretation of multiple representations such as race, class and gender in solo performance.

## 2. Solo performance and the identity of queer

With the emergence of AIDS in the late 1970s, the relationship between homosexuality and pathology was further complicated and a resurgence of social homophobia was often treated as a form of perversion or abnormality. And during this period, artists who prefer relatively controversial way were severely forbidden by these national institutions, such as the NEA four. In response, Miller sent the Congress *An Artist's Declaration of Independence* [1]. While criticizing the "McCarthyism" of the Bush administration's cultural censorship, he once again emphasized his responsibility as an artist, and it is in this context that the solo performance has its unique value in his work. Solo performance is "a hybrid form with elements of stand-up comedy, poetry reading, and one-person drama" [2]. It has existed for a long time, even before the emergence of written records, such as tribal shamans, troubadours, and soloists that have created a variety of stylistic elements for the art of storytelling. Later on, because of the Performative Turn in the twentieth century, it can be seen at the art gallery, television, theatre and other places, featured in relatively simple settings, more diversified subjects. Thus, it is due to the volatility and liquidity of this performance that it is always favored by these artists who are not bound by the mainstream cultural norms in terms of aesthetics and politics.

By now, the word "queer" is widely famous for "circulating in everyday speech and typically carrying some sense of inclinations that are linked to sexuality or gender" [3]. As a radical sexual politician, Miller actively participates in Queer organizations such as ACT UP, and constantly fights for equality for gay groups in his solo performances. In real life, Miller and his gay lover are faced with the multiple crises of separation. It is under such social conflicts that the thematic significance of Miller's plays becomes much tenser. Correspondingly, in the play, Miller blurs his gender consciousness unceasingly in his "box" which usually belongs to the maiden girl both in the United States and Australia. But in his opinion, Miller believes that he needs this box to keep all the good things in gay culture, and to prepare for their future queer life.

## 3. Performance aesthetics and political vision

As a matter of fact, this autobiographical work is not only based on the author himself, but also transcends his personal limitations, focusing on the interests of the queer community. Miller uses the metaphorical comparison between the United States and Australia to reflect the lag in human rights of the United States when compared with other countries. In the US, unmarried girls' lockers are called HOPE Chests, while in Australia they are GLORY boxes. In Miller's view, Australian

passports, featuring a kangaroo and an emu on the cover, represent happiness. But the interpretation of "American Eagle", which is an unhappy eagle with strong male characteristics, holding a sharp arrow in one hand to stab the desire of the homosexual heart, and an olive branch in the other paw to soften the image.

In addition, Miller's performance is not only narrated through words, but also interspersed with the body narrative, injecting a new visual vision into the text space. As for Foster, "communicating with the audience through the body" [4] means that the actor tries to invite the audience to participate in his private sphere, aiming at a driving force for social change, that is, "a future that has not yet happened" [5]. If the body in the theater has its particular value, Miller's body is an effective expression of the history of gay struggle in America, as a combination of individual and collective cultural experience, which has been highly recognized by Tony Kushner, a famous contemporary American playwright, who contends that "Read Tim Miller and you think about your body" [6]. This is a sexual minority liberation movement. When Miller takes off his short-sleeved shirt and shorts and slowly walks into the "Glory box" this long-suppressed body desire is actively exposed through stripping, which is not only the affirmation of self-identity, but also the expression of queer community's rights and interests in the current society.

#### 4. Performance reflections and limits of middle class

Paige Phelan criticized Miller's self-centered focus on white bodies and privilege, noting that while other viewers were moved by his performance, she found that "it is very hard to rally behind Miller's political vision" [7]. She sees it as a white, middle-class gay claim that ignores the racial, class and gender differences that underlie queer people. However, Heden [8] argues that this kind of performance is not something solipsistic, egocentric or narcissistic, but a leader who speaks for the collective. Similarly, Sally Baines, in Her book *Subversive Expectations* [9], affirms this form and its necessity. Undoubtedly, Miller's works have a wide range of themes, most of which are closely related to the current social and political environment, especially "the experience of inequality and injustice felt by the millions of gay men and lesbians living in the US, and also beyond" [10]. However, it cannot be denied that as a middle-class white gay man, Miller is more tolerate towards the modern democratic society in the United States. He believes that since the United States has maintained slavery system longer than any western country, it is unlikely to achieve extremely positive political changes in a short time. The map game, which is mentioned in the show, can teach young Americans how to deal with Napoleonic, Eurocentric, the risks of the Cold War and the monopolies of late Capitalism. Tim expressed his approval of such a way of playing, saying that he would never be the victim of commerce or war. It may also be the source of his strength to assert his voice in the face of multiple social blows, a so-called white confidence. At the same time, he automatically ignores the harm done to other ethnic groups or classes of people behind these games and lacks a holistic view of society. But his other play, *My Queer Body*, ends with the description of America's first black lesbian president and the meaningful award, which may imply the possibility of a campaign for queer rights that ignores the deeper complexities of modern society and unites with other marginalized groups in such a country.

To sum up, Miller's solo performance is based on an autobiography of a gay, white, suburban American boy who grew up as a stigmatized gay community and insisted on speaking up for its interests with a rallying call. However, it is the author's personal characteristics that make his perspective relatively limited. In regard to it, Miller tries to make up and advocates the tendency to unite the lesbian women and ethnic minorities to some extent.

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