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### Introduction to Kinsey Sicks Performance

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[This document is the lecture outline for a pre-show talk to accompany the performance of the Kinsey Sicks at Furman on March 12, 2007. It is important not for the substance of Radel's ideas but for the record it provides of the controversy itself and some of the history of that controversy. It has not been further edited upon handing it over to the Furman Library, perhaps to Radel's chagrin.]

Introduction to Kinsey Sicks Performance  
March 12, 2007  
Furman University  
Nick Radel

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I. Before I begin in earnest, I want to point out to you all some of the many words that have been used to describe the Kinsey Sicks and their sponsors (in particular the student group EROS, Encouraging Respect of Sexualities)—words that have been used in advance of their actual appearance by people who have not seen their show.

A. EROS has been told that it should “take the high road” and “educate Furman students in a manner that does not degrade” and “embarrass the university and its alumni.”

1. EROS has been accused of “helping to waste” student money on “utter trash.”
2. It has been said that EROS's “arguments for diversity” are “feeble”—and this from students who, as far as I know, have propounded no arguments of their own for or against diversity.

B. The Kinsey Sicks themselves have been described as an “overtly political activist group that uses tactics not in line with the values of Furman University.”

1. Their show, it has been said, lacks “educational value.”
2. We have been told by both students and alumni—none who profess to having seen the show—that it is

“sick”

“absurd”

“distasteful”

“trash”

“a gross stereotype of gay men” (a quality I aspire to myself)

“an embarrassment”

“disgraceful”

“degrading”

“cheapening”  
“pornographic”  
“anti-Christian”

C. Furman University and its students, faculty, and administration have collectively been accused of reaching “out for the lowest common denominator” (which presumably means drag queens and/or gay men) “for the sake of diversity.”

II. Maybe it’s a gay thing, and you just won’t get it. But after listening to this hate-filled, high-pitch rhetoric for several weeks, I can’t escape the feeling that someone out there doesn’t like me. Someone doesn’t like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Someone out there thinks that there is something fundamentally wrong with me and the sub-culture that has spawned me—a subculture that has, whether we like it or not, been associated with drag performance at least throughout the twentieth century.

A. Now don’t mistake me. I have listened to all the arguments assuring me that those who have spoken as I pointed out above are not opposed to EROS or GLBT (that is gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered) people.

B. I recognize that my community’s characterization of a show they have not seen and their directives to the student groups involved in bringing it to us does not—at least as they would spin it—indicate their hatred or intolerance, their close-mindedness, or their refusal to imagine that even something as outlandish as the Kinsey Sicks may have something to say to them.

C. But I have learned to recognize the absurdity of those traditional “hate the sin/love the sinner” formulations of righteousness for what they are.

D. And if I feel sullied by them, I don’t think it is justified for anyone here to tell me that my feelings are not valid.

E. Indeed, I would speculate that not only I but every other GLBT person sitting in this audience or anyone who has listened to this acrimony in the Greenville Community feels sullied as well.

D. So, it is to them and for them I wish to speak for a moment.

III. If you will indulge me, I want to say a few things that have not so far—to my knowledge—been said in the great public debate that has emerged in this small small part of the world:

A. Most important, GLBT people are not disgusting, and no one really has the moral right to say or to imply that they or their cultural productions are so.

B. Equally important, the culture that has spawned GLBT people is not disgusting, distasteful, or pornographic (choose your adjective from the list above).

1. Drag—one of the most hotly debated elements of GLBT culture even within our own communities—is often boring, God knows. Many a drink-sodden night have I listened to a bad drag queen lip-synch a boring disco dance tune.

2. But at its best, the endlessly irreverent satire of drag shows is revelatory.

3. Indeed, it has saved many people as they struggle with their sexuality and gender by reminding them (through its characteristic inversion of dominant sexual and gender values) that mainstream dismissals of them are NOT right and certainly not entertaining.

C. For the past thirty five years I have lived my life partly among lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersexed, transsexual and transvestite people, and I have learned more from them about kindness, humility, generosity, caring, and humanity than I have from most people I have known for half a century—certainly more than I have learned from examples at our fine Christian University.

1. In that period, I have been inspired by seeing GLBT people take to the streets in San Francisco to insist that eating a twinkie not be allowed to justify the murder of a human being who happened to be gay.

2. I have seen GLBT people struggle peacefully for the right to be allowed to practice loving in their own way—and let me assure you all that the end result has been positive not simply for GLBT people but for all Americans.

a. anyone who has insisted on practicing a sex life outside the narrow bounds of 1950s conventional morality owes something to them and others from the sixties and seventies.

b. The group I am speaking of—the group who has benefited—includes most of you in this room, your parents, and many of the signers of CSBT's petition against Kinsey Sicks.

3. In my thirty five years as part of GLBT communities, I have watched people nurse AIDS patients to better health and/or a gentler death while the great churches of the world (and here I refer you particularly to the Southern Baptist Convention) were still debating whether or not AIDS patients even deserved compassion.

4. I have seen GLBT people take the lead in education about safer sex and, consequently, help lower the number of new infections significantly—at a time when the recently sainted Ronald Regan and the Centers for Disease Control dithered about the causes of the disease and its prevention.

5. And I have seen them pick themselves up after public gay bashings—after the likes of Anita Bryant, Fred Phelps, Bob Jones, AIDS, the “Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell” Policy, the Defense of Marriage Act, the Regans and the Bushes—I have seen them pick themselves up and move on in their lives with integrity and joy—as they will do after the vile attacks launched against them almost once a year at Furman University.

D. If I had a child (and don’t get me wrong, I don’t want one of the ingrateful little bastards), but if I had a child, I would much prefer that he or she be GLBT than the other option—though I would love him or her either way.

E. Some people spend their time praying to God to make them straight. I thank him—and always have—for thinking better in my case!

F. This is just something I had to get off my chest, and I hope you won’t take it wrong. I assure you that some of my best friends are straight people. My mother (I think) is a straight woman. Ted Haggard, is (at least this week) a heterosexual, and I thank God for it.

G. But throughout the debate about the Kinsey Sicks that has raged at Furman and in Greenville, no one, I believe, has said just this publicly: Gay People and Drag Shows are not a problem. But the people who speak about them as if they were a problem do irreparable harm to all of us—but most especially GLBT people.

H. And liberal supporters who fail or refuse to articulate these positive notions about GLBT people conspire with their detractors.

IV. These are my convictions, and I felt the need to share them before saying anything else. But I realize that what you want is a proper introduction, and so now I will—with great reluctance—move beyond that favorite of American pastimes--the testimonial. I will give over that necessary act of the congenial Protestant, witnessing, and try to say something that will help those of you who have never seen or understood a drag show how to do so

A. I turn then to the intellectual part of my introduction, which I have been strictly enjoined to by the CLP committee (under pressure from CSBT), lest we actually do what detractors of Kinsey Sicks seem to fear most: enjoy the show!!!

V. To begin, I want to start with the most fantastic proposition to arise out of the debate over Kinsey Sicks. Some Furman students (not just the intellectually challenged over at CSBT) have actually said things like this:

A. In reference to the panel discussion led by the Kinsey Sicks that will take place after the show, one student wrote: "I think the panel is the only thing that could even possibly be good for the Furman community. If [that was all] they did . . . instead of singing about sex to the tune of Christian songs, then I might be ok with it."

B. CSBT said the following: Some student signers of the petition against the Kinsey Sicks "are unable to believe that a thought-provoking lecture would be rejected [for funding by FUSAB] while a crude drag show would be held up as a paragon of education."

C. Why, we might ask, do these students (along, I might add, with the CLP committee) imagine that entertainment is the opposite of learning? Why do they not imagine that ART, the theatre, literature, whatever, does not have to juxtapose learning to entertainment but may merge the two and that students might "get it" without being lectured to?

1. The notion that art both educates and entertains is one of the most fundamental propositions in all of Western Art, and I think that those people who do not understand it should post haste to a few classes on literature, theory, or aesthetics.

D. Indeed, the educated among you will remember that the highly influential Roman poet and critic Horace said famously that the purpose of art was both to entertain and to teach.

1. And his words have echoed throughout the West.

2. Because of him universities throughout the United States regularly host both "intellectual speakers" or "lecturers" as well as "artists" and "entertainers." Educated imaginations learn to engage them both--simultaneously.

E. Rather than imagine that we can only learn about GLBT people or diversity from a panel discussion or some more studious intellectual fabrication, we might deduce from Horace that there is something peculiar to the form in which a theatrical entertainment (for example) comes to us that cannot be substituted for by a mere "lecture" or thought-provoking "panel discussion."

2. Your mission tonight—should you chose to accept it—is to try to ascertain what it is that we might learn from **seeing** the Kinsey Sicks' artful use of female travesty that we would not appreciate simply from hearing a lecture about GLBT people or their ideas.

3. I can't, of course, second guess what this will be for I haven't seen the show and I haven't the prescience of those whose convictions assure them without seeing it that they already know what they will learn—that is, nothing.

a. But interesting and significant art expands our knowledge and awareness even as it entertains, and you will want to judge the Kinsey Sicks on how effectively its performance uses the strategies of entertainment to create new ideas.

4. To take just one example, you might think about how performing in drag makes us aware of how the truth value of a statement pertains to the gender of a speaker.

a. Doesn't drag performance ask us, inherently, to question whether or not an idea or a feeling is dependent upon the sex of the person expressing it?

b. Perhaps, no amount of lecturing can provide for us the particular apprehension of this idea that comes from seeing it performed.

c. And you may wish to consider how and if this same revealing of the contingency of truth applies to political or social statements that do not have to do with gender or sexuality.

5. What happens to truth itself when the artifice of a performance calls the authenticity of the speaker's voice into question? That's a point you really can't learn in a lecture. You can only learn it by going to the theatre!

a. To the extent that Kinsey Sicks satirizes some of our most cherished values, you might think about how seriously we are to take them when their statements come from the mouth of a speaker who is not what "she" seems transparently to be to us.

b. how is a man in drag making a political statement any different from any number of public figures we could point to who speak in travesty? That is, public figures who speak while wearing a public face or costume that doesn't match the reality beneath the mask?

6. Although it may not seem to be the case, drag performance throughout its history has exploited this kind of discrepancy to make us think more complexly about the ideas with which we live. If you don't believe me, read some of Shakespeare's transvestite comedies—*Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*.

7. Far from being simply “distasteful” or “disgusting,” drag has a complex pedigree in the performance traditions of our culture. And as an entertainment, it may also teach.

F. In the genuine university we are in the process of becoming, we will want to expose ourselves not simply to “ideas” discussed dryly in a semi-objective manner. But we will wish to confront them as they are performed creatively—as they express individuals who are not ourselves and who may not, in fact, be themselves.

VI. Regardless, however, of Horace, who shapes our larger apprehension of the arts in the West, I also want to suggest that there is something particular to GLBT culture to be found in a drag show—something that cannot be talked about but must be experienced IF you are to have a richer engagement with that culture and the world it belongs to.

A. Drag—drag performances—frequently trade on a mode of aesthetics that has been largely associated with GLBT culture: the aesthetics of what has often been called “camp.”

1. This word is frequently used or misused in talk about popular culture today, but few of the people who use the word acknowledge or understand its relationship to GLBT culture and history.

2. The existence of camp and its link to GLBT cultural production is a hotly debated issue. To simplify these complexities, let me just say that whenever you imply that a large and heterogeneous group of people have one or a dominant aesthetic mode, you are in some trouble.

a. Obviously, not all GLBT people see the world in the aesthetic terms of camp and some non-GLBT people do.

b. And clearly, the intellectual roots of camp may and probably do owe a great deal to other minority movements in the United States and other parts of the West.

3. Another problem is that the idea of “camp” is impossible to define. Sometimes I think it really is a gay thing.

a. To begin, though, I might say that Camp has something to do with how one perceives the seriousness of what the majority takes to be the truth.

b. So, whatever truth value one attempts to attach to a statement can be immediately called into question by another campy conversationalist who refuses to accede to the high seriousness



with which you are speaking or the importance of what you are saying.

c. That kind of making truth contingent or dialectical is the essence of camp.

d. "One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough" (Sontag 288).

e. Camp statements almost always appear in rhetorical quotations marks to indicate the contingency of their truths. (Sontag...)

3. In trying to give you some other parameters for understanding camp, I rely not primarily on the most recent scholarly or academic sources but on the best essay written about it by one of our great American essayists, Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp," published first in 1964..

a. Perhaps you noticed that I have just said to you that I am going to elevate the pleasures of art (good writing) over the precision of the academy in relying on Sontag's memorable comments on camp over those of more rigid theorists.

b. If you noticed, you will begin to understand something about how camp prefers the artful effect over the studied truth.

c. Sontag reminds us, "Style is everything." (288).

4. To be sure, however, I choose Susan Sontag over others because she argues that camp does exist as part of a homosexual if not a GLBT sensibility, and she gives it a very high status in the world of art and ideas in the twentieth century.

a. Somewhat campily herself, Sontag says that there are three great creative sensibilities in the twentieth century:

1. the "moralistic" vision of high culture

2. the sensibility of "extreme states of feeling represented in much contemporary 'avant-garde' art"

3. and Camp, associated with homosexuality, which "refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling" (287).

b. Imagine that. Unlike the wits who signed the CSBT petition and found a campy drag show only to be “disgusting,” Sontag might place it as a small example of one of the most signal aesthetic movements of the twentieth century.

c. I rely on Sontag because I take it as a precept that we must NEVER ignore a thinker who helps us write out of persistence the dull literalizing of moralizing aesthetics!

5. Camp is, SIMULTANEOUSLY, a way of not taking seriously what everyone else sees as a life and death matter AND of taking seriously what no one else does. It is a way of recognizing the equivalence of all things.

a. For Sontag this idea is summed up by one of the first homosexuals in history, Oscar Wilde (of course). Wilde expressed his intention of “living up” to his blue-and-white china (Ctd. 289).

b. The idea is brilliant: the color of the cup and the pleasures associated with eating and drinking from fine china are as important as anything else in the world.

c. If you think Wilde is transparently wrong in making what seems like such a shallow quip, then you obviously don’t remember that when the United States attacked Iraq and tortured prisoners at Abu Gharaib, students and faculty at Furman were busy listening to themselves talk about gay marriage, over and over.

d. One might say they were expressing their intention of “living up” to their own pretty opinions in spite of the atrocities going on around them.

d. Camp reminds us that nothing is quite so important as our own obsessions—and Wilde tells us so—through camp—in a way that makes the truth of that point all the more devastating because so seemingly disarming and untruthful.

5. Above all, while recognizing the immense importance of what one has to say, the camp speaker must not take him or herself too seriously.

a. Think about my comment above concerning Abu Gharaib? It was the opposite of camp—righteous, moralizing, too assured of its purchase on the truth. It belongs to high cultural critique.

b. But contrast what I said to Oscar Wilde’s statement. Clearly Wilde knows that what he is saying is “witty,” not to be taken too

literally. Just as clearly, however, he means it, and the truth is apparent to anyone who will listen.

c. Wilde, after all, was a prophet of the truth of art, and his statement—so seemingly inconsequential—does open up to my righteous critique of Furman’s sexual obsessiveness. His statement is not entirely without point a hundred years later.

d. I might just throw in for good measure: academics are rarely campy. Even when they try to be funny, they take themselves too seriously to be genuine camp.

6. Camp has to do with exaggeration, art, aesthetics and the importance of these ideas in the world. It prefers the over-the-top statement to the literal truth of a thing.

a. “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious” (288).

b. This is precisely the voice that those who call for a public lecture on the issues of homosexuality would write out of existence from tonight’s event.

c. the playfulness of performance and social critique couched as play.

7. Above all, Camp recognizes that what one speaks must be filtered through complex layerings of one’s relationship to the truth. And here, perhaps, you can find its applicability for understanding drag performance and its utility for GLBT culture.

a. throughout its brief history, GLBT culture has had to speak a truth about itself that has been denied, misunderstood, and denigrated by the dominant culture around it.

b. little wonder that it has found a language that expresses simultaneously its own truth about the world while recognizing the ways in which its own truth is being everywhere dismissed or denigrated.

c. even less wonder that drag is an art form closely associated with camp, for drag becomes a way of embodying oneself from a double perspective, a way of taking oneself entirely seriously AS someone other than who one is supposed to be.

d. Drag becomes a way of fostering a particular kind of art and aesthetics (in make up, in the veneration of female screen images), all the while recognizing and revealing that beneath the mask is something that a more literal minded world will see quite another way.

e. Or did I get that reversed? Is the truth the literal minded world recognizes really the mask?

f. This emphasis on double vision is of the essence of camp and of drag, and at its best it can tell us something substantial about how we see the world.

g. Perhaps that will happen tonight, as we watch the Kinsey Sicks.

VII. And may be now you will understand a little more about why we may want to pay attention to drag if we are to understand something about at least some part of GLBT cultures. This is not to say that all GLBT people are connected to drag; but drag is connected to the kinds of cultures that have emerged in relation to GLBT people over the years.

VIII. Perhaps now you will also understand why CSBT's claims that in so vociferously denouncing the Kinsey Sicks it was not opposed GLBT people seem to ring hollow. CSBT hollers down the moon about how disgusting drag is and how little it has to say to Furman or Furman's student body without ever once imagining (nay without ever once attempting to educate themselves about the fact) that drag is at least one of the languages through which GLBT people have spoken now and in the past.

1. And as anyone who knows something about minority politics can tell you: when you disparage the way someone speaks you are disparaging the person.

X. You may not like what you see tonight. You may not agree with what you hear. But I hope you will at least have an opportunity to experience a kind of engagement with one type of discourse that many would see as a unique embodiment of a particular kind of minority experience in the United States: the campiness of drag.

And so, without further ado....I give you the Kinsey Sicks in....