

Homosexuality in dead dreams of monochrome men



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In this essay I am going to look at the work *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men (Dead Dreams)* by Lloyd Newson, performed by the Physical Theatre Company DV8. I will focus on the way homosexuality is represented within the piece.

I will then look at the work of the playwright Oscar Wilde (1854 -1900) and the painter Francis Bacon (1909 -1992) in order to examine how homosexuality was represented within their art and make comparisons with *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*. I will try to show how the representation of homosexuality within art at different times reflects the prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality of the time.

I will examine how each artist used their creativity to put forward ideas and messages about their personal experience of homosexuality, and the extent to which this was influenced by the society in which they lived. Although these artists lived in different eras I believe they shared a similar attitude to the pain, suffering and frustration that homosexuals were forced to feel when existing within a society which regarded their natural sexual orientation with prejudice and lack of understanding.

Homosexuality was a criminal offence in the UK until 1967. Before this date homosexuals could be imprisoned gay males had to risk various punishments from society for their behaviour which was not condoned by the establishment.

Because of this many homosexuals experienced conflict: either to not follow their natural sexual desires and live a lie, or follow them and risk exposure as a criminal and perhaps even prison.

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This forced homosexuals into a world of guilt and secrecy which is still resounding within homosexual culture today.

Even though attitudes towards homosexuality can be said to be more liberal today, for many people homosexuals are still strongly associated with unnatural acts and perversion not just on an individual basis but also by institutions such as the Catholic Church.

2 Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men

In 1986, Lloyd Newson formed the Physical Theatre Company 'DV8' and he is the main choreographer of DV8's work. Newson is renowned for exploring and attacking the forbidden in an attempt to challenge society's views of various issues and, in particular, homosexuality. Newson addresses the distance created by mainstream or 'straight' society which pushes homosexuals to the fringes. (Hutera, 83, 2008)

Newson 'has placed his sexualized politics into the body of his works.'
(Reynolds, 2009, online)

Interestingly, before Newson made his way into the art world with DV8, he trained as a therapist. Perhaps in his therapeutic work he was able to identify with the struggles of the other minorities who experienced prejudice that he would have encountered: people who experienced great personal problems or behavioural addiction problems which may have made them feel like outsiders.

Newson is obviously a highly political person who does not shy away from pushing the boundaries to achieve his artistic and political objectives.
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“ DV8 Physical Theatre’s work is about taking risks, aesthetically and physically, about breaking down the barriers between dance, theatre and personal politics and, above all, communicating ideas and feelings clearly and unpretentiously. It is determined to be radical yet accessible, and to take its work to as wide an audience as possible”.

(DV8, 2010, online)

Originally premiered as a stage piece on 5th October 1988, Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men was the first stage piece by DV8 to be reworked and transformed for film (in 1990). My impressions of the piece are based on this film, directed by David Hinton, rather than the stage performance.

Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men is divided into ten different pieces, involving a cast of four male dancers, (including Lloyd Newson himself), conveying the alienation of homosexual males and the deionisation of homosexual thirsts’.

(Hutera, 83, 2008)

The work is said to be inspired by the serial killer Dennis Nielsen, a man sentenced to life imprisonment in 1983 after murdering fifteen male homosexuals. Newson’s decision to use Dennis Nielsen within this piece could be regarded as surprising as Nielsen could be seen to represent the seediest, most violent and sadistic aspects of homosexuality rather than it’s more acceptable face. For me this shows Newson’s honesty in not backing away from difficult issues.

However “ while violence is always imminent in this work, the choreographer and director also focus on the unexpected tenderness of four men who are too desperate to control their needs to suppress their fear,” (Ney, 2001, online)

Through the choices made in terms of movement, camera, music and set in Dead Dreams, the ‘ fear’ suggested is of the sexual desire between the four dancers, who are battling with themselves and those around them. Newson is suggesting that homosexuals feel a need to try and suppress their desire, because of the harsh world they live in.

Although homosexuality is treated far more openly within U. K. society than ever before, it is still tinged with danger and fear, perhaps echoing its past and the impact that prohibition and prejudice still have on homosexual culture.

Newson made known that ‘ the production loved to assault middle England prejudices and use shock as a major tactic.” (Brown, 2003, online)

Newson was one of the first artists, not just in dance but across all art, to not feel the need to try and hide or tone down the homosexuality in his work. Newson was not afraid to use real male bodies, show you the real skin on skin contact and let you know that homosexuality is what you were being witness to.

The use of camera in Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men brings the audience face to face with the ‘ gay’ relationships between dancers. Throughout the piece the camera zooms in on close-ups of skin to skin contact. For example

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a duet in the second piece “ blind” shows us a moment where two dancers are stood one in front of the other. The dancer behind reaches around the dancers body in front and lifts his t-shirt (a popular item of clothing among gays) to cover his head. Using his hands he then slowly and lightly explores the surface of his skin around his abdominal and pectoral area.

At the culmination of this, the camera slowly zooms onto the dancer’s stomach and all we can see is this hand to stomach contact. The use of close up by the camera gives us no choice but to be confronted with this idea of intimacy between the dancers, emphasising the importance of this imagery to the piece, and the overall work. Suddenly the hand slaps the stomach and the piece finishes. The slap communicates to me a feeling of ‘ forbidden’, that the touching between the two is wrong.

Whilst we are shown the close up camera shot of the hand to stomach contact, there are short ‘ snaps’ of another dancer who is positioned to the side of the duet. This dancer is crouched tensely over with this body, with his mouth pushed wide open, every limb, and finger to neck is stiff and contracted. The dancer appears anguished and frustrated. The fact that we are unable to hear any ‘ scream’ which you feel he is desperately trying to project, communicates that he may be a symbolic reference to the silent frustration felt by many homosexuals who feel they need to live in denial of their sexuality.

There are many moments in Dead Dreams that contrast what we see on the outside of the dancers with what they are feeling on the inside. Newson has

created moments which make us think there is more to the dancers than what is being portrayed on the surface, that an 'act' is being put on.

For example, in piece four 'I just want to be with you' we have the only moment in the whole work where a dancer speaks. A man (perhaps representing Nielsen) is sat smoking, looking at us through the camera and speaking as though he were trying to 'chat us up' in a bar. The smoke illusion and the steadiness of his voice communicate an impression of calmness.

However, about five metres in the distance behind this man we see another male figure, squashed between two walls. As the dancer speaks the male behind moves in a fidgety manor within his small space, as if trying to find a position that is comfortable. As the conversation builds and the sentences become longer and more personal, the dancer's movements becomes bigger and more frantic, suggesting that perhaps the dancers are actually different sides of the same person.

This scene appears to be metaphoric. Newson may be trying to say that however comfortable gay men appear to be on the outside, there is still a lack of confidence inside.

" DV8 aims to connect the world outside with the world inside - or, if you like, the personal with the political. Even though their focus is on the body in action, they use whatever means they need to achieve that connection - dance, acting, circus, film, whatever. The message matters more than the medium.

(2008, Roy, online)

Silence is used very effectively throughout *Dead Dreams*. The use of silence at moments enables the audience to hear the breathing of the dancers. In *Piece Four* the dancer's breathing speeds up as another dancer walks towards him, getting closer and closer. The breathing increases even more as that dancer then makes body contact with him, hand to his neck. By the intensity of the breathing we can sense a strong feeling of the nervousness and perhaps lack of trust he feels about the situation.

This idea of trust between two dancers is brought up again later in the work, in a more symbolic and obvious way. *Piece six* called "Falling Down" involves a moment when one dancer is dropping himself from a ladder onto another dancer who is supposed to catch and break his fall. The dancer falls testing their trust, three times. First from a height of about two metres, the next as high as four metres, but then on the third drop, he is willing to fall from a height of about ten feet. The dancer beneath walks away, but the dancer drops himself anyway, perhaps suggesting that even those who you have grown used to trusting always have the capacity to let you down again echoing the Nielsen story as he first befriended his victims before killing them.

"Filmed in starkly lit, anguish- and muscle-enhancing black and white, *Dead Dreams* looks like a living George Platt Lynes photograph set in a fevered, prison like bar world, pulsating with wordless sexual narratives, twitchy erotic appetites and well-shorn, hunky men." (From Video Cover). Is this '

prison' supposed to represent another world, 'homosexuality' from which there is no escape?

In Piece Five, 'Drum and Dance' for the first time we see the outside of the prison. A protected barred window, through which a bright light shines through (as if suggesting a happier place) into the dark and eerie box in which the four males seem trapped. A desire to reach for this light is suggested as the three dancers each try individually to get out of the window, a teasing four metres above their heads. They soon think of using each other to help reach up to the window, and start co-operating to the point of climbing up one another's backs to standing on shoulders. (An example of the physical skill demand in DV8's movement material).

Perhaps Newson is suggesting that only if homosexuals work together can they fight prejudice and negativity? How there needs to be a strong sense of unity amongst homosexuals, based on their shared experiences of alienation and rejection.

In the third piece 'The Pedestal' Newson again seems to address the issue of denial. A male dancer is sitting on the shoulder of another male dancer. The dancer carrying the other walks non stop in a circle for about three minutes. Obviously the weight of carrying a whole male's body, particularly on just one shoulder is very demanding, and so he struggles to walk around upright and soon becomes pushed to a crouch. The way the dancer fights for as long as he possibly can, could be taken to suggest the idea of a homosexual in denial. How the weight of going against what is such a natural part of you can be very hard, and will eventually crush (kill?) you.

In an interview with the telegraph, Newson speaks about his beliefs and his position as a homosexual artist. He explains, " I am a politician already. Battling with the politics of dance, and the politics of life. If I can carry on those battles with a loudspeaker- which you can do when you have company that gives public performances - then I will. DV8 is my loudspeaker... The direct line between what we felt and what we showed - we felt angry, we showed anger immediately. And it got to a point when we burned ourselves out." (Brown, 2003, online)

Dead Dreams is a powerful work that draws you into the world of the homosexual and confronts you with your own prejudices. It has an integrity based on what one feels to be the gritty truth about the negative attitudes and insecurities regarding homosexuality which Newson obviously still feel permeate U. K. society today and the dangers that many homosexuals still face because of this.

3 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was a successful poet and playwright who produced most of his work in the late 19th century.

The Victorian society in which Wilde lived stressed the need for family values and a faithful religious way of life. Although everyone knew that homosexuality existed most pretended to not know anything about it and homosexuals were forced to live secret lives.

' Homosexuals came mainly from the upper and middle classes and had both the financial and social life to enable them to engage in homosexual

activities.’ (Hilliard, 1982, online) Many were married and lived double lives and were flamboyantly dressed.

‘ During the 1880s and 90s societies attitudes towards homosexuality changed significantly.’ What before was thought of as ‘ sinful behaviour’, views of homosexuality altered into believing it was nothing but a sickness. (Hilliard, 1982, online)

However the ‘ Labouchère Amendment of the Criminal Law Act’ of 1885 ‘ criminalised all homosexual acts by males in private and public,’ and this legislation eventually led to Oscar Wilde being prosecuted. (Hilliard, 1982, online)

Oscar Wilde was one of the many homosexuals who lived a double life. Wilde appeared to adhere to Victorian values by marrying and having two sons, prior to acknowledging that he was in fact a homosexual. However the pressures of living a lie eventually caught up with Wilde and when he left his wife he returned to Oxford and the company of his friends from the upper classes and began drinking heavily and living a more openly homosexual lifestyle, including a very public affair with a member of the British aristocracy (Lord Alfred Douglas).

Shortly after he was arrested, tried and sentenced to two years had labour for his homosexuality. (Moonstruck, online)

Through his work Wilde was able to secretly convey his views, by creating a somewhat ‘ coded language’ which laid as a discreet undertone to his work. When you were aware of the secret messages Wilde had put into his work

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(which had reference to homosexuality), messages that lay deeper beneath the rich colour and beauty, the public would be witness to a whole different play. (Coren, 94, 1997)

Homosexual undertones in Wilde's writings, particularly in his novel, were used against him and helped send him to jail.

His play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' Wilde directly addresses the theme of dual identities. The play's two main characters are seen to be engaged in "bunburying", which in the play is seen to refer to having one identity in London and another in the country. This was shown in the play as allowing them to escape Victorian social mores. This was taken by many to be a metaphor for the double life many homosexuals were living at the time.

(SOURCE: MENDELSON, DANIEL; THE TWO OSCAR WILDES, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, VOLUME 49, NUMBER 15 · 10 OCTOBER 2002).

Some commentators have suggested that 'bunburying' was a slang term for homosexual sex and that 'earnest' was often used as a code word for homosexual as in 'is he earnest?'

During his trials, Wilde's own homosexual undertones in his writings, particularly in his "I Wilde was also explicit in his only novel, Dorian Gray where the male writer says of his first meeting with the lead character: 'for the first time. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself.'

This description of one man falling in love with another was felt to be shocking at the time of the book's publication.

Oscar Wilde was forced to hide his homosexuality behind layers of inference and disguise. He was terrified of revealing his homosexuality because he knew that he would be alienated and ostracised from the society. (Rader, online)

Oscar Wilde was a prime example of how the negative attitudes towards homosexuality lead to secrecy and denial and that this can ultimately prove to be personally disastrous for the individual concerned.

4 Francis Bacon

Born in Ireland in 1910, living until 1992, Francis Bacon “ was voted the most important living artist in the world. His influence and popularity amongst society cannot be denied as during the early twentieth century he existed as the ‘ highest selling living painter’.” Bacon was a painter of figures, (mainly portraits studies), often using an easel and canvas to create a roughly textured surface of oil paints.

Working only from photographs, Bacon would transfer the figure he sees in this stimulus, to a figure painted on canvas. Francis Bacon was an artist who never tried to flatter the sitters he painted, but rather reflected his take on human existence. (Peppiatt 233, 2009), (Fifield, online)

There is a clear theme that runs through all of Bacons works, the theme of distortion, the breaking up of the human body. For example in Bacons ‘

Portrait of Michel Leiris’ (1976) and ‘ Francis Bacon Self Portrait’ (1978).
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Francis Bacon's homosexuality was no secret in his career. The death of "Bacon at the age of 82 in 1992 stands as a significant moment, a turning point, in our understanding not only of the concept of queer, but of how artists felt able to operate if they were to be both true to themselves yet find a measure of acceptance in a society by and large hostile to homosexual expression." (1996, Cooper, online)

Francis Bacon considered himself to be a 'queer' homosexual and did not want to be known as a 'gay', as he did not like the word. "In the old fashioned sense when queer was a term of abuse, a recognition and disapproval by society of divergent sexual tastes." There is that suggests Bacon was moved by the ideas and theories of gay liberation, 'but rather that the movement brought an unwelcome intrusion in what he regarded as his private life. At the time of the Stonewall riots in 1969, he was nearly 60 and his lifestyle was resolutely pre-liberationist in style and attitude. To change this would have involved great effort on his part. 'Going public,' would not have seemed the thing to do at a time when his international reputation was well established.' (1996, Cooper, online)

It is obvious that Francis Bacon addresses homosexuality in his work, with paintings such as 'Study for Nude' (1951) which involves male naked bodies intimately entwined, but he never spoke directly about it, and in particular would never speak of his personal relations that he wanted to remain completely private in attempt to not influence or detract from him being seen as an artist.

The label 'gay' was seen by many like Bacon, as a term just as abusive as 'Nigger'. There were many liberations around during the later part of his life and represented a shift in homosexual lifestyle and its public persona. Bacon did not want to change his image and face the consequences of this from the public towards his work.

Bacon produced most of his best work in the period after the Second World War, with his 'breakthrough' piece *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* being painted in 1944. The immediate post war period was when society was very much about returning to family life and this can be seen through British and American films of the time. At this time it was very risky to divulge your homosexuality to others not only because it was illegal but also because it was not accepted. This would have led to feelings of isolation for many homosexuals.

Even though society was becoming more tolerant of homosexuality, there was still great reluctance by homosexuals to trust others and discuss their sexuality, even with their families. At that time, men in this situation often referred to their doctors for help, and this occasionally led to medication or even psychiatric referrals to change their behaviour.

Bacon's subject matter was often autobiographical, reflecting the 'intimate and often anguished relationships' he experienced.

Despite Bacon's use of distortion in his works, it is clear to see that the great predominant sex of his figures were male, and naked. When these naked figures in his works are involved in very close bodily contact, with entwined

limbs where they are almost painted as one body, it is hard to not see

Bacon's work as greatly personal and specifically relatable to his sexuality.

Yet by the late sixties Bacon had completed some of his queerest paintings.

The relatively straightforward image 'Study from the Human Body' (1949),

of a naked man behind a transparent curtain is sensuous and enticing,

offering a glimpse of some quiet, personal moment.

An interesting choice that Bacon makes when displaying his final art pieces,

is he demands that a glass cover be placed on top of his work, and with all

aspects of art, everything is done for a reason. Is Bacon's aim to create a

reflection of the onlooker into the paintings too? Are we meant to look at

ourselves and think of how we see ourselves in the painting?

Bacon was probably the greatest British painter of the 20th century, and

although he did not like to talk about his homosexuality directly, there is no

doubt that his work brought homosexuality into the daylight and it was

because of artists such as Bacon and others that the Sexual Offences Act

1967 Act which decriminalised homosexuality was passed.

5 Comparisons and Contrasts

Dead Dreams of Monochrome men is shot in black and white, with dim

lighting, creating a set of eeriness and little distraction. Francis Bacon's works

have the same effect, from his use of mainly black and white and 'other

deep shades' in his work, for example 'Three Studies for Figures at the base

of a Crucifixion' (1944).

Bacon's figurative and portrait paintings lack strong backgrounds, and thereby bring the main focus of his works, the figures, through as the strongest and most powerful detail. For instance in Bacon's famous 'Self-Portrait' (1971) he uses just a plain black painted background. In effect the mixture of blue, red and white tones that he has used to create the face, really emphasise and draw you in to these unusual skin colours.

Similarly to pieces in Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men, as an audience we cannot help but be put in the position of being face to face with the 'shockingly suggestive gay' relations. These artists are not afraid to use the naked body in their work, and feel no need to try to cover up or tone down the intensity of their work in doing so, just because of the shocked, some maybe disgusted, reaction we may have.

Although Bacon uses the naked body, through vague outlines of the figures, the use of distance and blending, the naked figures in his works are created in a way that they do not 'hit' you as much as Newson's figures. For example in 'Two figures' (1953), which involves two male figures lying on a bed embraced, Bacon has used vertical brushstrokes that blend the black background in with the figures heads and body. You can be pretty sure that these two figures are male, however by Bacon's technique here there is a possibility that he could argue that they are not, and that it is just your interpretation.

I wonder does Bacon want the society to see homosexuals firstly as 'human being' and their sexuality second. Whereas Newson aims for society to understand that human beings cannot be separated by their sexuality?

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In Dead Dreams, Newson's choice of props have been used effectively in terms of representing or having symbolic meaning by being put into a very plain and simple background. The same effect exists in some of Bacon's pieces. Because of his plain backgrounds which exist as a running style through his paintings, when he involves an object it stands out as significant, and it can only be being used for a good reason. In Bacon's "Study for Crouching Nude", an outline of what appears to be a glass-like box which stands around the figure is painted. Is this glass meant to create an enclosed space the figure is stuck in? Meant to separate us from the figure?

Matched by how the figure is hunched over in front of us and positioned in a crouch, the figure almost become animalistic, monkey-like. DV8 use the same idea of an enclosed setting around their male dancers - a prison which they try to escape from. It could be said that the DV8 figures push the boundaries of humanity by such challenging and original movement. Are Newson and Bacon suggesting that sex is, at its most basic level, an animal act?

Maybe they believe gays that suppress their feelings about their sexuality can turn into animals? Newsom could also be suggesting a link to the reaction of society towards the Dennis Nielsen case, as many people described him as an animal.

Bacon often aimed to portray the human body as meat. An example of this is in his painting 'George Dyer in a mirror' created in 1963, where the reflection in a mirror which is painted next to Dyer's face reflects a further distortion which looks like slabs of meat. Perhaps Bacon was suggesting that

if you see the human body as a slab of meat you do not see it as having any feelings and this is further suggested by the violence that runs through the image, which is enhanced by Bacon's use of harsh brushstrokes.

I do not believe that Bacon was as interested in challenging or expressing his views on homosexuality as much as Newson, as he was never an activist. And perhaps because of his associations with ' queer' or camp effeminate homosexuals, he did not feel the need to strive for an acknowledgement that would eventually lead to move fundamental changes in society, (such as the civil ceremonies and legal right).

His association with the art establishment would also have provided him with many influential friends and he may not have felt he was in a minority or an outsider.

However I do believe that they both were interested in making reference to the suffering and effects homosexuals experienced by the discrimination they receive, and strove to communicate their experiences honestly in their art.

6 Conclusions

It is no surprise that both Lloyd Newson's, Francis Bacon's and to some extent Oscar Wilde's homosexual referenced work received objections from many members in society.

For example, Margaret Thatcher, Tory Prime Minister, described Francis

Bacon as " that artist who paints those horrible pictures." A well known

philistine - Thatcher's artistic interests seem to be limited to collecting pretty
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ceramic figurines – the remark could be read as referring to both Bacon's often violent style of painting and to his usual subject of the interaction between two men, which in Bacon's view was neither affectionate nor relaxed but turbulent and traumatic.' (1996, Cooper, online)

Protests of the openness and public support of acknowledging homosexuality inside and outside of the arts have always occurred. DV8 are one of many to be the creators of art which has provoked these objectors.

“ The Sunday Mirror gave DV8 a massive leg-up. “ Gay sex orgy on TV” shrieked the headline for their story on the screening of Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men, prompting a flood of complaints to the TV network, angry questions in parliament by Tory MPs – and a huge surge in DV8's viewing figures.”

(2008, Roy, online)

This still exists today, only last year ago one of the dance works shown at the production of ' In the Spirit of Diagelev' at Sadler's Wells, bought protestors both inside and outside the dance theatre, over its explicitness about sex, homosexuality and the involvement further with the Catholic Church.

Conservative elements within society seemed to worry that if sexuality could be questioned then what else could? What could homosexuality lead to? Would control even break down?

Although Newson has been more willing to discuss how life and work than Bacon or Wilde, they all shared a need to express their ideas without being restrained by society's reactions to their work. This took considerable
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bravery – the bravery to create art which was so ‘out there’ for its day meant risk. And without artists taking risks everything will stagnate.

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I believe that the fact all three of these artist were homosexual are of great importance to their work. I believe if they were not, these works would most likely never of been made, as I am sure it was their experiences as homosexuals, and the ‘hitting of nerves’ by a harsh society, that encouraged their art.

Art always has and I believe will always be a substance of the artist’s feelings, as what is so beautiful about art, is its ability to be an expressional form.