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GAY SEX SELLS

Following rave reviews and a record-breaking run at the King's Head Theatre, one of the London Fringe's top venues, F**king Men has transferred to the West End. So far, so Theatreland: successful Fringe shows transfer to the West End all the time. But not usually this type of Fringe show.

F**king Men is a play about gay men looking for love and sex in modern-day America. Naked Boys Singing, the show which appeared with it as a double-bill for the last six weeks of its run at the King's Head and accompanies it to the West End, is a light-hearted musical revue focusing on the joys of the male form. Not your typical West End transfer.

So how did Phil Willmott, one of London's most prolific theatre directors, himself out and proud, make this contentious double-bill so attractive to mainstream audiences? And what advice does he have for young gay theatre makers hoping to explore difficult subjects but fearful of alienating their audiences?

When Joe DiPietro's play F**king Men premiered at the Finborough Theatre in May 2008 'it mostly appealed to gay men who wanted to see something a bit salacious', explains Willmott. It was only after receiving four-star reviews from a host of mainstream publications that it started to attract a wider audience.

'Suddenly it was like you were allowed to see it. Maybe you fancied seeing it before but it was a bit dirty; but then you read in the Times or the Guardian or the Standard that it was good, so you thought, "that's it".'

Willmott's initial focus however wasn't courting mainstream audiences. He wanted to have fun with a piece of theatre 'about gay men, for gay men' that would create dialogue within the community. The director, who also works as a playwright, journalist, teacher and actor, was struck by how most gay plays emphasise the search for love, while in reality 'loads of gay men have loads of gay sex, which has nothing to do with finding a boyfriend. Somehow that's a really unpalatable thing to say in plays'.

Willmott puts F**king Men's popular and critical success down to the fact that 'it's a mixture of a respectable play and a sexy play...It's so well written and so well acted and so funny in places and poignant in places. There are gay pieces I could have done which don't have that quality about them'.

Willmott acknowledges however that Fringe theatre is always at the mercy of the critics; whether your show is controversial or entirely non-contentious, 'if they don't like it you're fucked and you're not getting an audience'. In some ways, he says, young gay theatre makers are actually at an advantage because gay theatre has 'a very clear target audience'.

'If you do a gay play and shamelessly market it as sexy - because that's a key thing - you can get photos of your sexy lead actors in gay magazines, you can get people writing about it and talking about it.' Willmott's advice may sound cynical, but being cunning about these issues is what allows young theatre makers to make the work they want to make: 'If you're a young gay man and you're fascinated and you're passionate about what it is to be a young gay man, you must absolutely make theatre about it'.

So the secret to making theatre about controversial topics while avoiding alienating mainstream audiences? Sex sells, but only if it's good sex.

Jo Caird