The Drag Nuclear Family; How *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Hosanna*
Challenge the Heteronormative Nuclear Family

Alary Sutherland

THEA 41114 LGBTQ Theatre
Dr. Daniel Raymond-Nadon
December 4, 2017
The Drag Nuclear Family; How *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Hosanna* Challenge the Heteronormative Nuclear Family

Fictive kinship, or fictive families, is a concept widely researched within the LGBTQ community and beyond. We can look at Kath Weston’s concept of fictive families as the basis for exploring how drag queen culture has a similar model to the contemporary nuclear family. The musical *La Cage Aux Folles* has excellent examples of both fictive and drag families and we can use this to compare to a lesser known script *Hosanna* and contrast how drag and fictive families are portrayed in theatre. Looking at sources like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a contemporary representation of drag queens and using these as a contrast to *La Cage* and *Hosanna’s* representations of drag culture in the past decades we can dissect how the concept of a nuclear family crosses boundaries to apply to drag families and fictive families in LGBTQ culture.

The musical *La Cage Aux Folles* is a successful musical based off a play sharing the same name. The music and lyrics are written by Jerry Herman and the script by Harvey Fierstein, both well-known names from other famous shows. The show itself is a comedy, bordering on a farce, that was progressive when it premiered in 1983 and continues to be progressive through the revivals in 2009 and
2011. Beyond the comedic face of the show lay familial struggles that translate into everyday life; a son embarrassed by his parents, marital spats and disagreements, thoughtlessness then reconciled at the end. These struggles are depicted in such a way that even heterosexual audiences can relate. Albin; the headliner drag queen for the club *La Cage Aux Folles*, his husband Georges and their son Jean-Michel are the main characters from which the struggles originate. Jean-Michel has fallen in love with a woman named Anne, but her father happens to be an openly homophobic politician. In a desperate attempt to please Anne’s parents, and in turn make a good impression on Anne, Jean-Michel asks Georges, who is his biological father, if he and Sybil, Jean-Michel’s birth mother, can stand in as his parents. He then goes through and tries to redecorate their apartment in a further attempt to seem normal. Albin, who has raised Jean-Michel in lieu of his absent mother, is heartbroken when he learns that Jean-Michel does not want him to meet Anne’s parents. Georges comes up with a scheme to play Albin off as a drunken uncle Al so that Albin can be present for the dinner, but this goes terribly wrong when Sybil refuses to show, and Albin finds he cannot pretend to be a straight man. He then changes to become a woman, acting in as Jean-Michel’s mother. Due to some unfortunate circumstances, they are forced to go out to dinner where Albin is revealed to be an actress and upon pressuring he starts to sing and thus perform. Getting caught up in the moment, he pulls off his wig and reveals that he in indeed in drag. The show culminates in a satisfying moment where Dindon, Anne’s father, is forced to dress in drag to evade the press and Jean-Michel recognizes how selfish
and thoughtless he was and reconciles with Albin and Georges. Deep down, past the comedy, pomp and farce the issues and tensions in play can be translated to just about any audience as these struggles are common in any society.

Countering the comedic and joyful show *La Cage Aux Folles*, the play *Hosanna* takes on a darker aspect of drag culture and families. While the only characters show on stage are Hosanna and her boyfriend Cuirette, many other characters show up in either discussion or one-way phone conversations. The play starts as Hosanna returns home after a humiliating Halloween party. It is revealed through the show that her catty and unpleasant attitude spurned a hurtful prank by her colleagues. Through her arguments, conversations and mutual abuse with Cuirette you start to see an unhealthy, even co-dependent relationship between the two men. As you learn more about Hosanna, you hear about how she grew as a drag performer by mimicking older drag queens, but took the attitudes she picked up too far. This was the source of the horrible prank played upon her; wherein the Halloween party was to be women of history and Hosanna’s colleagues knew about her love of Elizabeth Taylor; betting on the fact that Hosanna would show up dressed as Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra. Cuirette, also tired of Hosanna’s rough attitudes, assisted by informing Hosanna’s colleagues and egging Hosanna on. While Hosanna and Cuirette’s relationship is unhealthy, you start to see through the play how they depend on each other, and how the lack of support is almost support. While Hosanna’s drag family, if it can be called that, is never on stage you can see their influences on Hosanna’s character, as well her discussing her
relationships with the older queens. The show isn’t a clear example of drag queen families, but it has evidence that Hosanna did learn from older queens, sort of a student to teacher relationship. There are hints towards a familial relationship, or something close to it. Hosanna specifically talks about another queen called La Duchesse, mentioning her several times, all in a favorable or supportive light. While there seem to be a lack of passages, and you need to dig to find evidence showing familial ties, looking deeper you can find supporting scenes and comments that show a strong, if negative, relationship between queens.

Kath Weston’s concept of fictive families is something that is applied to LGBTQ and queer lifestyles, but the concept of fictive kinship spans many cultures around the world. Fictive kinship is a highly studied concept within anthropology, and has many applications past queer culture (Lewin). Weston’s book *Families We Choose: Gays, Lesbians and Kinship* goes in depth on how fictive kinship in the gay lifestyle has a multitude of explanations and meanings, and how it is a highly personal idea. She discusses her own experiences as well as those of varying gay subcultures, and using these experiences came to the conclusion that “…, chosen families introduced something rather novel into kinship relations in the United States by grouping friends together with lovers and children within a single cultural domain.” (Weston). This quote can also describe drag queen culture, and be compared to the standard nuclear family concept. An often-encountered micro-aggression for an LGBTQ individual involved in a relationship is the question of who is the man and who is the woman, regardless of if the relationship is lesbian or
gay in nature. While this question tends to be grounded in ignorance, and even modern heterosexual families have broken down the gender barriers in terms of familial relations, in any two-parent household there are the parents and children; and sometimes an obvious matriarch and patriarch arrangement; even if it’s unspoken or subconscious. The matriarch or patriarch of a fictive family may not even be in a romantic relationship, thus expanding the way these terms are used. It may not be that one of two men raising children would be the “mother” but maybe a family friend, as matriarch or patriarch used in this way does not always imply a romantic relationship between two individuals. This translates beyond LGBTQ families into found families or extended fictive families that go beyond the nuclear family, to broaden what we consider family.

The nuclear family construct has been present in Western society for decades, and is often the presenting argument when the conversation steers towards LGBTQ family issues. When these issues arise in media and pop culture there are many hate groups that push anti-LGBTQ propaganda forward. One such organization is the National Organization for Marriage, or NOM; a group listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center(“18 Anti-Gay Groups and Their Propaganda”). NOM has used many tactics to fight against what they define as a traditional family; as stated on their website “Advancing[sic] NOM’s mission and vision of marriage requires acclimating youth of all ages to the themes of healthy marriage as a union between a man and a woman. We are working to develop a strong leadership pipeline so that marriage is defended and protected for generations to
come.” Disregarding the obvious typo in their mission statement, they outright state that they regard a healthy marriage as between a man and a woman, and have protested and fought against same-sex marriage and families. Another tactic they use is employing debunked research and false science; also called junk science, to push their agenda forward. Scare tactics and often using the argument that gay men are more likely to sexually abuse children have been methods they have employed (“National Organization for Marriage Continues to Spread Lies About Gays”). Other groups such as The Family Research Council have used similar tactics, pushing a hateful agenda grounded in bigotry and a loose religious basis. There are many lists and information about these groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center keeps an up to date database of these groups and their agendas; making it easily accessible to locate the hypocrisy of these groups. In *La Cage Aux Folles* there is reference to a fictional group called The Tradition, Family and Morality Party, of which Anne’s father Dindon is the leader of. This is yet another way *La Cage Aux Folles* can still resonate with modern audiences; as such groups still exist and are prominent in our society. Yet despite this hate group and the Dindon’s hateful rhetoric the family still overcomes the struggles in the show, even humiliating Dindon’s narrow view of the world.

*La Cage Aux Folles* has an abundance of familial support, both within the core family structure and extended drag family. If we focus on applying Weston’s concept of fictive families to Albin, Georges and Jean-Michel there is a definite nuclear family template with Albin as the matriarch, Georges as the patriarch and
Jean-Michel as the child. The song, and passages surrounding it, *Look Over There* talks about the deep familial ties they share. “How often does somebody sense, that you need them without being told?, when you have a hurt in your heart, you’re too proud to disclose, look over there, look over there, somebody always knows, ..”(Fierstein et al., 71) where Georges tells Jean-Michel how much he has hurt Albin by excluding the man from the dinner with Anne’s parents easily spells out how their family unit functions in a way that is both informative to the audience and an attempt to show Jean-Michel and Albin’s feelings. This song that happens in Act II is simply a more vocal rendition of Jean-Michel’s hurtful and thoughtless actions. Earlier in the play Georges tells Jean-Michel “... I want you to make sure you know what you’re asking me to do. .... The man who has dedicated the last twenty years to masking a home for us. Who has lived almost exclusively for our comfort. Yours and mine. I want you to look at him and consider what you’re doing; throwing him out of the home he has made for us.” (Fierstein et al., 46) This passage shows how Georges views their family as a true family, trying to show Jean-Michel his mistake before it goes further. These words from Georges can outright define their family unit, challenging Jean-Michel’s mindset. Near the finale of the show, Jean-Michel sings a reprisal of this song in an obvious reconciliation with Albin and fitting conclusion to that tension within the show. While beyond the core family, you also see their “butler” Jacob, the *Les Cagelles* and even family friend Jaqueline in supportive and familial roles to the main characters. This extended family, even if not obviously stated, shows Weston’s concept well. It’s curious to note that Jean-
Michel’s birth mother, Sybil, is obviously excluded from this extended family through her absence and lack of support for Jean-Michel. Sybil is oft referred to as Georges’ one-night stand, though Georges does reveal later how he does not consider his affair with her as a mistake, when Albin says “... Just because you had a baby one night by accident” and Georges replies “It was no accident” (Fierstein et al., 62), presumably because of Jean-Michel. Throughout the script Albin is referred to as Jean-Michel’s mother, and several passages discuss how Albin raised Jean-Michel as his own. This kind of family mimics the nuclear family structure with Albin as the matriarch, Georges as the patriarch and Jean-Michel as their child; Sybil is excluded in this structure and despite the obvious need Jean-Michel has for his birth mother, the script concludes with showing that Albin was a better mother to Jean-Michel than Sybil and Jean-Michel coming to realize this, revealing these words near the end “That’s precisely who he is” (Fierstein et al., 90) when Dindon challenges Jean-Michel’s reference to his parents. This kind of resolution is both a happy conclusion and a spit in the face towards Dindon’s hateful beliefs; something we still need to see in our current day.

In Hosanna there is still the dichotomy of blood relations versus found families, to the other extreme that La Cage is. Hosanna’s mother is still in contact with her, and while in the beginning you have Hosanna discussing her relationship with her mother in an almost favorable light, there is the revealing passage “Raymond, there are times I hate that woman so much I don’t know what to do to her, I don’t know what.” (Tremblay et al., 53) about how Hosanna really views her
relationship with her mother. This is a stark contrast to her relationship with Cuirette, and the rough co-dependence that is portrayed there. Her relationship with Cuirette is unhealthy, and at times unbalanced, but there is a sense of support there that Hosanna clearly lacks with her mother. Her and Cuirette both depend on each other in both healthy and unhealthy ways, forming a family that is less idealistic but perhaps more realistic than is comfortable for an audience. You have in this play, like La Cage, a sense of realism and true to life situations that can resonate with nearly all audiences. While La Cage takes a more comedic approach to presenting realistic and tenuous situations, Hosanna does not. Within Hosanna these situations are presented in a serious, even negative, tone. There are brief moments of comedy, but these are so self-deprecating that they fall flat at being humorous. Her familial ties with Cuirette on the surface seem more of financial relationship, with Cuirette being the homemaker in return for Hosanna being the main income earner. This kind of fictive family arrangement is not uncommon, but as the play progresses you are able to see that they depend on each other for more than finances. The conclusion of the play wraps up with Cuirette being visibly supportive as Hosanna comes to grips with his gender. Going so far as to say “Claude ... it’s not Hosanna that I love ...”(Tremblay et al., 87) despite the conflict that spans most of the play of Cuirette leaving to go hook up with random individuals.

RuPaul’s Drag Race has normalized, and celebrated drag queen culture to an extent that would not have been possible even fifteen years ago. The show’s success
has brought an ever-expanding interest and knowledge into drag queen culture.

One of the things that has been openly discussed on the show and in discussions about drag culture is the concept of a drag queen family, also called a “sisterhood”.

In Season four of the show, drag family values were discussed multiple times, and certain values specified or spelled out. There is often mentioned what are called drag family values; a set of unspoken rules similar to a code of conduct that are used to foster relations yet keep the peace within the Sisterhood, a term that is also often used within the culture represented on the show (Simmons). Some values mentioned include showing respect for other queens and upholding a sense of professionalism as a queen. While these family values may seem vague, they are expressed through actions and leadership within the community. Being a part of a drag family often includes being part of the larger queen family as an entity, and often awards privileges and support upon just entering the family. As with any family, even a nuclear one, there are disputes and arguments; yet within the drag family discussed in the show they also have a way of handling disputes internally and are often expected to handle these disputes maturely and with grace. Some disputes are considered friendly, or familial in nature, and any outsider who attempts to take part in teasing or harassment of queens is met with opposition, as teasing is reserved for family members only, as is with the case in blood families.

This modern representation as a less theatrical, yet still dramatized, representation of drag queen culture can be an excellent comparison to both *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Hosanna*, using both the positives and negatives viewed in this television show.
you can use *RuPaul's Drag Race* to compare how drag culture has evolved and yet still follows a familial code, and the nuclear family structure has not changed in the span of these shows.

When reading or viewing *La Cage Aux Folles* with a focus on the underlying drag family structure, you can see how the relationships define both the club and the characters within the show. Albin, as Zaza, is the clear headliner of the show and is shown as the matriarch of the club and family contained within. While Georges is the owner of the club, he also comes across as the patriarch to *La Cage* as a whole. The drag queens that open both the musical and show contained in *La Cage*, also called *Les Cagelles*, only show up in brief intervals in the show but have considerable impact on both the characters and plot. They show up as visible and vocal support for Albin, Georges and Jean-Michel, and are often spoken about in a supportive light. You have moments like when the Cagelles are talking in the dressing room about getting a gift for Jean-Michel’s wedding. This is an obvious show of support for Jean-Michel and by extension Albin. Yet there is also a hierarchy visible within the show, and how they defer to Zaza as the headliner, even the opening of the musical is about placing Zaza in the spotlight. You can see evidence of Georges as the patriarch in scenes such as in the beginning he needs the Cagelles to stall for Zaza’s late entrance when he makes the comment “Francis, would you please get her back on the stage” (Fierstein et al., 16) and follows it up with “How about this; You do the encore this instant or tomorrow night you appear as a man” (Fierstein et al., 16) and the further order to convince the queen Hanna to
return to stage by “Francis, inform wardrobe. I’m sure they can find a pair of trousers large enough to fit Hanna” (Fierstein et al., 16). While these are orders that Georges gives to Francis, the manager and Hanna, one of the queens, there is a sense of respect there beneath the comedic presentation of the scene. You can see evidence that the queens and other characters respect Georges, and respect Albin as their matriarch. It comes across as if the queens are almost children to Albin and Georges, with both of them looking out for the queens and supporting them as they do their son. Within the club La Cage there is more than enough evidence of familial support but also mutual respect and even the occasional ribbing between characters and queens; much like an average family.

While the drag queens in Hosanna are only spoken about and never actually present on stage, Hosanna’s revealing of her relationship with them happens to be one of the main conflicts of the show. The material isn’t as obvious or strong as what is found in La Cage Aux Folles, but there is enough to show a familial relationship. Hosanna’s passage about finding her way in the drag scene and into the club she works at is telling of how older queens typically adopt younger queens, and younger queens mimic and learn from the older queens in a parent-child-like relationship. Her words “At first I just watched La Duchesse and Sandra at work. I studied every move they made. I saw how they’d watch everyone else, then shit on them, smack them on the ass, stick out their tongues, tear off their wigs and their false eyelashes, and … I learned.” (Tremblay et al., 73) is telling of how she watched other drag queens and made the naïve assumption that she needed mimic their
actions; taking the faults she perceived and exaggerating them in her own way so that she would fit in, paying little attention to the moderation or even familial discourse. She talks about being aggressive and rude because she watched the older queens do just that and it became her persona. While Cuirette tries to point these out to her, it seems like she doesn’t grasp it until the end of the play where she admits “I never knew you all hated me so much ...”(Tremblay et al., 83). This causes the audience to look back at her actions through the play up until that point, also causing the audience to evaluate how they see Hosanna’s actions and reactions to the other queens. At first Hosanna plays the victim, which she is in part, but as the play progresses you can see that what was supposed to be a prank amongst the queens as revenge for Hosanna’s rude behavior was taken too far. This kind of thing happens frequently in any family, often in the form of sibling rivalry. While there isn’t much evidence of a parent-child bond through the queens past Hosanna’s brief passage about coming into the culture, there is evidence of sibling relations between her and the other queens in how she talks about the rivalry and teasing, as shown in the quote “… When I managed to get my hooks into Cuirette, Sandra, who’d had her eye on him for a long time, finally deigned to notice me, the bitch, at which point I told her to go jack off with a handful of thumbtacks.”(Tremblay et al., 73). This is almost stereotypical of sibling relationship, with how Hosanna took Cuirette because Sandra had her eye on him. There is a definite lack of support between the drag queens in Hosanna, but there is compelling evidence of family ties, especially showing how they are a dysfunctional family.
La Cage Aux Folles and Hosanna are both scripts that feature drag queens, clubs and their relationships. Both are excellent examples of various forms of fictive families; though how this concept is shown is different in each show. La Cage Aux Folles’s over the top and comedic approach to familial ties and fictive kinship are a stark contrast to Hosanna’s dark yet down to earth feel. The families featured in both shows, while LGBTQ in nature, can be translated to heterosexual and other forms of fictive kinship that reaches to a wide audience. In La Cage Aux Folles, there is a large presence of a drag family that can be easily viewed and picked apart, while in Hosanna the drag family there is only discussed in memories and passages from the main character. Yet both of these examples of drag families show how the nuclear family concept can be applied to drag families; in ways beyond the basic concept. In addition, Weston’s fictive family concept can be extended beyond just a family and child relationship; with drag families you see the matriarchal and patriarchal system but also sibling rivalry and other forms of familial relationships. The struggles and tensions that are born from the familial ties within both La Cage Aux Folles and Hosanna can translate to any audience; these kinds of tensions arise in any family situation; fictive or blood, and the resolutions found within both shows are plausible conclusions to the problems presented despite jarring differences between the comedic and angst presentations.
Bibliography


Fierstein, Harvey, et al. La Cage Aux Folles. 2014.


