Deirdre Heddon

'Glory Box': Tim Miller's Autobiography of the Future

Performance artist Tim Miller has been making autobiographical work for more than twenty years. Dee Heddon explores Miller's recent show, *Glory Box* (2001), arguing that, both in his practice and his use of his own life stories, he is attempting not only to connect with but to energize his audiences, transforming them into activist spectators. One tactic Miller employs in *Glory Box* is futurity – performing an autobiography that he has not yet lived. This future is one that Miller compels us collectively to rewrite, inviting us to change his potential life and life-story in the process. Dee Heddon argues that Miller's commitment to and faith in the transformative potential of live performance enacts a resistance to those pejorative terms too easily thrown at autobiographical performance: Miller may work from his 'self', but his work is far from solipsistic, egotistic, or narcissistic. Dee Heddon makes and teaches autobiographical performance, and her writing has appeared in *Performance Research*, *Studies in Theatre Production*, *Research in Drama Education*, *Reconstructions*, and *M/C*. Her *Devising Performances: Histories and Practices*, co-authored with Jane Milling, is forthcoming from Palgrave.

> The real-time heat of live performing is an especially handy crucible for raising awareness and provoking people to action. I believe the empathy and openness that come through the seductive strategies of live performance – compelling narrative, the performer's charisma (hopefully!), the group dynamic that comes with a live audience – create the ideal conditions for conversion, the channelling of the audience's psychic and political energies into a fight for social justice. I think theatre is primarily a site for liberation stories and a sweaty laboratory in which to model possible strategies for empowerment.
>
> Tim Miller[1]

> *We kissed as we rolled over the map, our bodies crushing South America over Central Europe. South became East. North became West. The love and desire inside us melted these uncompromising boundaries.*
>
> Tim Miller, *Glory Box*[2]

TIM MILLER has been making performance works since 1978. Whilst his pieces have embraced various forms, moving from the more formal stylistics of his earlier performances to what has become his trademark autobiographical storytelling mode, his 'impulse was always autobiographical really, even the very first piece I did'.[3] As Miller acknowledges, even his early, more 'Futurist inspired' work was about a '21-year-old perspective and about being a gay kid coming from California and going to New York'.[4]

Miller's commitment to a performance practice which utilizes the autobiographical mode has continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the new century. In all of his numerous works, Miller has explored the events of his own life and their connections with wider social, political, and historical events as a way to challenge, reveal, or resist. This article aims to elucidate the forms of those challenges, revelations, or resistances, as evidenced in Miller's recent performance work, *Glory Box* (2001). In particular, what I hope to illuminate is Miller's strategic use of *futurity* as a rhetorical device intended to activate the spectator.

This introductory description of Miller as an artist who 'uses' autobiography renders a complex practice simple. In the *performance* of autobiography, the always already fictional nature of the autobiographical mode is made explicit. Such an acceptance and revelation of the constructed nature of the autobiography is vital in its connection to the constructed nature of 'identity' and the 'self'. Miller's use of 'personal experience' is

  DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03000149

a deliberately self-conscious and politically expedient use. Working *with* performance and theatricality, Miller carefully resists positing a fixed, knowable subject or an essential identity. Rather than digging deep to reveal any 'true' or foundational self, then, Miller, as I hope to show, both explicitly plays his 'self', and plays with his self, rendering as problematic any assumed referential status of autobiography.

Autobiographical Influences

In various published interviews, Miller has stressed his commitment to an art practice that is 'about things'.[5] In making work about things, the artist is very much located in the world, and is positioned as a 'social creature, a social worker, and a social activist'.[6] This function of the artist as a social activist and as a citizen is one that Miller embraces in all his work.

Of course, the explicit conjoining of art and politics is not a new phenomenon. Notably, growing up in California Miller was able to witness at first hand the work of feminist artists: 'When I was in high school I was going to the Women's Building in downtown LA, in '76, '77. . . . LA was sort of the centre for feminist performance art as that version of feminist art practice and it had a huge impact.'[7] The continuing influence of that work is tangible in Miller's own as he places value on personal experiences as a means to lay bare, prompt dialogue about, make sense of, and ultimately change our contemporary worlds and the lives that can be lived (and told) in them.[8]

Miller's own performance storytelling, about the life he has lived and has yet to live, is one means of bringing about that change.

> We live in a very different world because of these autobiographies. . . . I just think we can't even imagine what the world would feel like without this wealth of diverse narratives that exists now. . . . How meagre the world would seem without new stories and how we would long for them, I think, if they weren't there.[9]

The stories that Miller tells, 'which . . . bring in, in as pointed and direct a way as possible, the experiences I am going through',[10] focus very much on his location as a gay American, and although Miller does perform his pieces to mixed audiences, his own concern is very much with voicing a queer narrative. As such, his address is primarily to a gay and lesbian 'constituency'. Whilst Miller chronicles his own experiences in his performances, it is also evident that he strives to go beyond the 'individual' in an attempt to create a more 'communitarian' space.[11] Indeed, it is precisely through using his individual experience that he hopes to find 'a window for [the audience]'.[12]

Miller's performances, then, involve constructing and negotiating a bridge from the individual experience to the spectator, thereby refuting the often uncritical accusations associated with autobiographical performances – that they are (by 'nature') solipsistic, narcissistic, egotistic.

It is also important to draw attention here to Miller's choice of the word 'communitarian', as opposed to the more familiar one of 'community'. At the outset I suggest that perhaps this word signals Miller's awareness of the problematic issue of 'exclusiveness' that circulates around notions of 'community'. In order to conceive of a 'community', as it is typically imagined, one must erect borders which serve to differentiate those who belong from those who don't. Once borders are in place, the policing of borders becomes a necessity, in service of the maintenance of a community based on 'sameness' rather than difference.

'Communitarian' seems to me suggestive of an alternative organizational structure that does not take any 'shared' relationship or foundation for granted, but instead acknowledges the more contingent process of co-operative or collective activity – a process that requires *work*, and that does not take the idea of a community – or who belongs to it – *a priori*.[13]

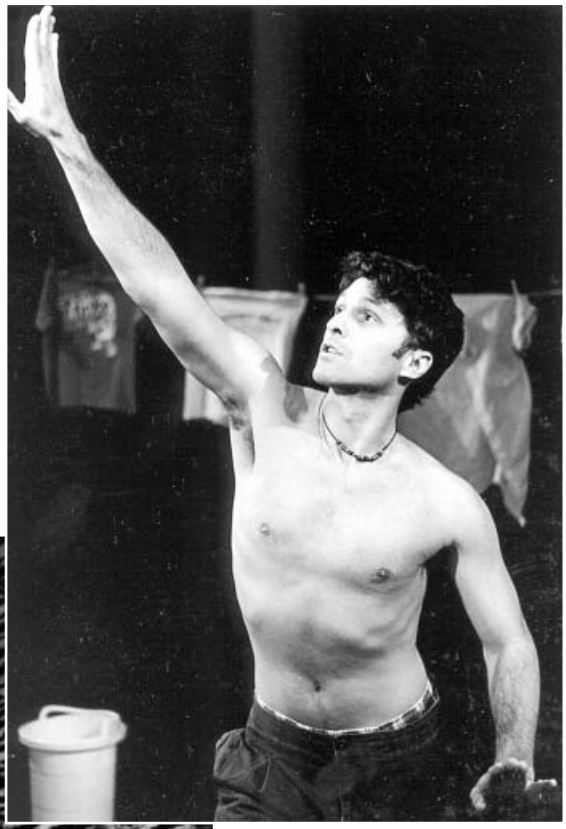
The Issue

Glory Box is, in many ways, a love story, charting a love that refuses to be beaten by a homophobic legislature. More direct in its

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000149 Published online by Cambridge University Press

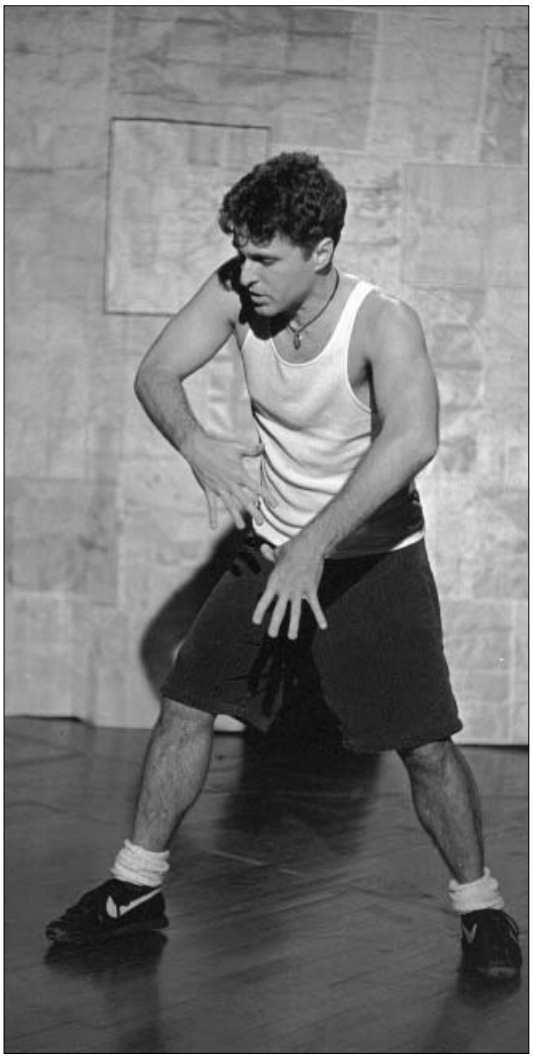
political agenda than, for example, *My Queer Body* (1992), *Glory Box* focuses on the plain fact that bi-national couples of the same sex are denied immigration rights in the United States of America. As with his other work, this performance takes Miller's own life as the grounds on which to stage an exploration of the issues, using the personal angle to reveal the systemic inequality and the attitudes embedded in such inequality – as well as the very real effect that such legislation has on the lives of thousands of gay men and lesbians.[14]

At the start of the performance, Miller tells us that his partner, Alistair, is from Australia, and that 'this will loom large in



Two of Tim Miller's earlier one-man performances. Above: *Body Blows*. Left: *My Queer Body*. Photos: Dona Ann McAdams.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000149 Published online by Cambridge University Press



From Tim Miller's *Glory Box*. Above: the five-year-old in short trousers. Opposite: Miller strips and gets into the 'glory box'. Photos: Dona Ann McAdams.

the show'. Alistair has been in a relationship with Miller since 1994, and for this reason wants to emigrate to the States. Of course, he could emigrate if he were to marry a US citizen. Unfortunately, however, Alistair is unable to marry his lover, since gay marriage – even as a civil union – is unrecognized in the USA (except in the state of Vermont).[15]

The result of this non-acknowledgement of Miller's and Alistair's relationship is that they may be forced to emigrate to a country which will recognize their relationship and afford them partnership rights – including the right of one partner to emigrate in order to live with the other partner. At present there is no way for Miller and Alistair to be together in America, and Alistair risks either deportation (if he stays in the country beyond his visa conditions) or refusal of re-entry (if he returns to Australia in order to get his visa extended).

The narrative of *Glory Box* is one that works to reveal the gross injustice of this situation, and what is at stake is presented starkly. The *actual*, *lived*, *felt*, *material* effects of the situation demand from the spectator an action akin to – or even precisely – direct action. *Glory Box* is clearly a call to arms – or at least a call to agitation.

Employing something of a 'signature device', Miller transgresses the stage/auditorium divide with his first entrance, made through the auditorium. This initial contact with the audience is sustained through an intimate mode of address, in which Miller appears to make identifications with specific audience members by directing particular lines at them, asking them rhetorical questions, and in some instances assuming a shared relationship to certain events. Standing very close to the audience, and looking at one particular section of them, or isolating one individual, and addressing a phrase such as 'I can tell you've been there too', serves as a simple way to build a bridge between himself and the spectator.

In Glasgow, where I saw the performance, Miller also had the opportunity to claim a 'special relationship' with that city, since it is where Alistair's father was born – a fact mentioned in the performance. It is also a city that Miller and Alistair have spent time in together, falling in love. In Glasgow, then, Miller was able to include references to the city that served to bring the story even closer to those witnessing it. Part of this love story *happened here*. Glasgow has a part to play in this. The city is given significance.

Miller capitalizes on this connection by referring to geographical and cultural symbols, such as 'Safeways on Byers Road'.[16] This tactic of identifying the locale and localizing the story has the effect of connecting the performer and his story (which might, otherwise, seem distant) to *these particular*

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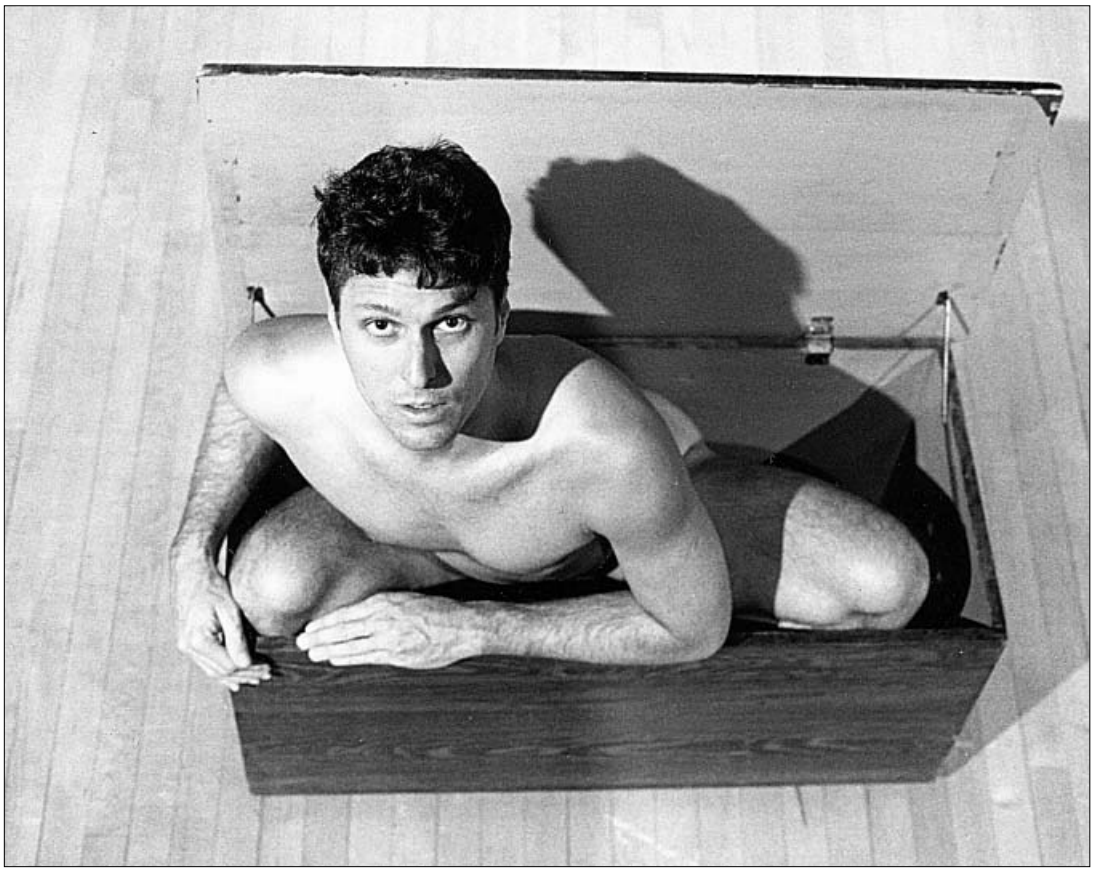

spectators – *to me*. (Do I have a part to play in this story, then?)

Spinning Tales

Early in the performance, Miller informs the audience that what he needs is a 'glory box', the Australian term for what in America is called a 'hope chest' and what in Britain is perhaps better known as 'a bottom drawer'. As a young boy, Miller believed that a hope chest was an actual part of the body, 'behind the sternum and to the left of the heart', where we put 'the things we hoped for'. He is therefore disappointed to discover from his mother at the age of five that it is merely a box in which young women assemble the things they would need when married, 'like dishes and linens'.

Miller refuses this mundane vision, his own glory box becoming, in fact, a story box that also functions as a soap box, which is filled over the course of the performance with tales of resistance – Miller's tools of survival – which might just enable him to realize his hopes. Miller's glory box pays homage to those moments which 'honour resilience, and that voice for justice, or some kind of tiny little triumph, like crossing your fingers' – so that what you may be forced to say doesn't count.[17]

Glory Box, like all Miller's other performances, constructs a non-linear narrative, as he weaves together various stories from different periods in his life in a combination of fact and fantasy, past, present, and future. As with all autobiographical productions (literary and performance), Miller is concerned here with a process of creation, in which the self that tells the life story is as much a product of creative construction as is the life story itself.

Whilst Miller explicitly draws on autobiographical material, he also marks the gap between the self that is being narrated and the self that is performing, destabilizing any

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sense of referentiality between the story and its actual happening. Early on in the piece, for example, Miller sits on the chest, playing himself as a five-year-old boy, when his 'little legs only reached halfway down to the floor'. While Miller is saying this, in front of us we *see* the grown adult, with adult length legs, which not only touch the floor, but could extend way past the floor. There is an immediate dissonance between what is said, and what is seen, forcing a recognition of this scene as being an *enactment* of a *remembered* past.

Miller then strips naked and gets into the chest. Drawing attention to this space between present and past, he focuses attention on the humorous or incongruous re-enactment that is being staged, an enactment that can never be the actual event, or ever hope to represent that past: 'In case you're wondering, at the age of five my body was much smaller then and I had no pubic hair.' In such moments Miller makes clear the gap in the temporality of the tale and its telling.

Whilst this is a solo show, Miller uses various modes of address, plays multiple roles, and *shows* his stories using his dramatic skills. There are moments of enacting events, moments of narrating events, and moments of acting out other characters and staging dialogues. Stories are played with humour, poignancy, urgency, anger, despair, hope, compassion, and love. Tensions and emotions mount and are alleviated as the pace shifts. Although difficult – impossible – to place Miller's live body into this written text, what I am attempting to get across here is the *theatrical* nature of this event, in which Miller works his own body into a sweat as he stages his appeal.

Transparent Theatricality

As in many of Miller's performances, the theatrical devices implicit to performing are revealed. Early in the performance Miller metaphorically places all the negative things he has received from his culture into his hope chest, amongst them 'the hundreds of times I was called a sissy or faggot as a kid growing up, . . . the thousands of signals I received . . . that told me my relationships with other men aren't worth shit. . . . ' Miller then pulls himself up short, and in a moment of self-irony (as well as self-consciousness), foregrounds the act of construction.

Oops, I'm getting ahead of myself. I have found, over many years of performing, that you should never put the overbearing political rant in the first 45 seconds of the show. It's much better to wait for at least one good joke and perhaps some cheerful nudity.

'Cheerful nudity' is, indeed, not long in coming. This self-consciousness of the performer is reintroduced when, much later in the performance, Miller offers the following to his lover:

Just because we're two gay men, we can't do what all our straight friends can do – get married and get a green card. The INS just rolls out the red carpet for the fabulous heterosexuals exercizing their goddamned privilege. I am so pissed that the fucking US government does not recognize our relationship. Do you know, Alistair, I was on the Internet last night, on the Lambda Legal Freedom to Marry website. Do you know there are 1,049 rights, 'special heterosexual rights', that our straight friends get the instant they get married that you and I will never have even if we are together for the rest of our lives?

This 'speech' continues for a few minutes more, at the end of which Miller states, deadpan:

In case you were wondering, this was the overbearing political speech I had referred to at the top of the show.

In addition to foregrounding the 'craft' of the performer in the telling of his tale, Miller constructs a very deliberate narrative device in *Glory Box*, foregrounding it *as* a narrative, a process of story *making*. Throughout the piece, the story is told in a parallel time, with past and future intercutting continuously. Miller very deliberately builds bridges between these two time frames, so that their link to each other is explicitly contrived. For example, as one scene ends, Miller uses the last word of the scene as the first word of the next scene:

My hands charting his boundaries . . . My hands . . . my hands . . .
My hands . . . my hands . . .
My hands have been slapped a lot in my life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000149 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Another technique that troubles an assumed referentiality of the events that Miller recounts is his layering of time. Throughout the performance there is a dizzying interplay between past, present, and future. As Miller performs an event from his past, he frequently comes out of his playing of that past self to make comments from his present, adult self. For example, relating a tale of his nine-year-old self, he lists the contents of his lunch box, which include Wonder Bread, peanut butter and jelly, and corn chips. From his adult self, he is able to look back and comment ironically: 'Mmm, all that delicious sugar, oil, and salt! Everything a young American needs to grow strong.' Such reflection and commentary not only break the narrative flow, but again foreground the gap between the Tim being enacted and the Miller enacting, revealing how the one necessarily affects the other, as Miller interprets his past from his present (adult) position.

This located interpretation of the past from the present is made clear in the details that are selected for re-enactment, and the meanings that can be inferred from them. *What* is remembered is itself a political act (as is that which is left out of the narrative). In the same scene above, we witness nine-year-old Miller voicing the fact that when he grows up he wants to marry his friend Scott. Scott was a 'second cousin of President Richard Nixon', and again we see that Miller is able to use his knowledge of how his life has turned out to produce a (present) reading of the event, a perspective impossible for the nine-year-old Tim. 'So you can see, Republicans have been fucking with me for as long as I can remember.'

Unfortunately for Miller, his nine-year-old self tells his dream of marrying Scott *to* Scott, which results in Scott 'torturing' him so that he will 'take it back'. Scott argues the 'impossibility' of marriage between them:

'Boys can't get married to each other. Everybody knows that.'
'Why not?'
'They just can't.'
'Why?'
'Because.'
'Because why?'

Even as a nine-year-old, both Scott's and Miller's ideas of the world and how it works are already saturated with dominant narratives. Miller himself acknowledges that he 'knew he was making a mistake even before [he] opened [his] mouth'. Or at least the adult Miller *claims* that the nine-year-old Miller knew this.

Miller Playing Miller Playing . . .

Tim Miller's performance of 'himself' is thus multiply layered, just as the narratives that he tells are multiply layered. So various are these layers that it is impossible ever really to arrive at any secure knowledge of 'who' Miller 'is'. In the section of *Glory Box* where Miller asks his mother about her hope chest, for example, Miller (whoever he is) plays the performer who is playing Miller the forty-year-old who is playing Miller the five-year-old, whilst the Miller who is performing is also playing the part of the mother, as seen from the perspective of . . . well, which Miller?

Even when Miller comes onto the stage after the curtain call, supposedly outside the performance frame, whilst we are admittedly confronted by a new Miller, one that has not appeared in the show itself, isn't this other Miller merely playing another role – that of communitarian activist? Though he doesn't actually reference the multiple Millers that are on stage, Miller has admitted he is

> only performing a version of myself. . . . A persona that is concocted out of the amplification that goes on when I speak to fill a large room; the kind of adrenalin that's summoned when I perform, period; the fact that I take my glasses off, all those things, you know, and my concentrated experience, and which in some ways I don't even know is that different than the way Charlie Chaplin concocted the tramp out of different parts of himself and may be no closer to who I actually am in some ways.[18]

The autobiographical experiences, then, are 'concentrated' representations, represented by a persona that is not Miller. The difference between autobiographical and non-autobiographical performance begins to slip. However, the one piece of ground that can be held

on to is that these experiences, from which the 'concentrate' is made, *are* drawn from the life of the person who performs the stage version of Miller.

If only it were that simple.

Activating the Spectator

Challenging the supposedly secure ground that I've just established, Miller figures into this autobiographical performance *a future that has not yet happened*. This is perhaps the most important device used in *Glory Box* in relation to placing the spectator in an active position.

There is nothing new in proclaiming the spectator to be 'active' rather than passive. Since the late 1970s at least, with Barthes's declaration of 'the death of the author',[19] the centrality of the artist in relation to the creative act has been displaced by the centrality of the reader or the spectator. Alongside this widely accepted notion of the 'active spectator', I would like to posit another type of active spectator – the activist spectator. Through his employment of *futurity*, I would suggest that Miller is inciting the formation of just such a spectator, pushing the idea of 'active' towards another realm. Whilst theatre might not cause a revolution, Miller's brand of performance art might just result in a form of direct action.

As has already been explored, the act of remembering is precisely that, *an act*, involving action. The act of remembering involves considering past events from the location of the present, such that the present provides a perspective from which to give past events particular meanings. Past and present, rather than being discrete and separate time frames, in this way become interlinked in autobiographical processes. In Mark Freeman's words, whilst we tend to think of autobiographical narratives as unfolding so that the beginning leads to the end, in fact 'there is also a sense in which the end leads to the beginning, the outcome in question serving as the organizing principle around which the story is told'.[20] For Freeman, the idea of a life story as starting at the beginning of a life is a 'trick' of autobiography, since the story has actually begun at the end, at the point of writing. It is from this 'end' point that one then returns to the so-called beginning. Such 'stories thus move in the opposite direction from linear time'.[21]

What is vital in *Glory Box* is that there *is* no end – no autobiographical end, anyway. Instead, what Miller presents us with is an imagined, fictional end, a theatrical 'what if'. Inserted between every remembered 'real' event is an unfolding 'fictional' story:

The future. I am now in the future, okay? Got it, smart audience. Here in the future I'm waiting outside of Immigration and Passport Control at Los Angeles International Airport. I'm waiting for Alistair to get through customs.

In this fictional story, Miller and Alistair are returning to America, having travelled to Australia to get Alistair's student visa renewed at a cost of $12,000, so that he can remain in the States. As Miller stands waiting for Alistair at Customs, he shares the experience (and remember this is not an autobiographical experience) of their transatlantic flight, where they

put a blanket over laps, 'cozied' and cuddled close, kissed a little, and acted like we were normal people! What nerve! I don't know if you've noticed that when two dykes or two fags act like normal people and show their affection in public, that intimacy sort of crackles through the cabin.

What is most tangible in this scene – and in the whole narrative – is the tension and fear that both Miller and Alistair are experiencing, as the 'what if' keeps rising to the surface.

'How ya doin'? I asked him.
'I'm okay. I'm just pretty scared of how this Immigration stuff is going to go off. . . . What'll we do if something goes wrong and they don't let me in?

Each time the performance switches back to this narrative of an imagined future, Miller returns us back to the Customs queue. Each time, the tension mounts.

But since I can't share my country, share my citizenship with my love, I see my partner of many years looking scared to death stuck in a US Customs line with his Australian passport clutched over his heart.

The Autobiographical and the Fictional

Part of the power of this particular performance is Miller's insistent switching between the two modes of storytelling – the autobiographical (already happened), the fictional, and our inability definitively to determine what is autobiographically informed and what is not. (Admittedly, the same undecidability should be applied to any material claimed to be autobiographical, since all autobiography is necessarily fictional – as I have already shown in relation to Miller's *performance*. However, there are different types of fictionality.)

In one section of *the fiction*, Miller tells us about an incident that happened two nights before boarding the transatlantic flight, in which he and Alistair had 'comfort sex'. Insensitively asking Alistair where in the world he would want to live, he is met with the response: 'How can you ask me such a stupid thing? . . . I don't care where we live as long as we're together'. Within this narration of a supposedly fictional event, Miller then tells the audience about his love of maps, and, indicating the maps that are hung as his stage set, he reveals that

a lot of these maps here on my impressive set are maps I've had since I was a kid and got my first subscription to National Geographic. *. . . Here's a NY map from the day when I first set foot in Manhattan as a teenager.*

So, in a fictional hotel, having had fictional sex, Miller makes a fictional *faux pas*, but then appears to step out of the 'story' to tell us about his abiding love for maps. Is this love for maps, then, fictional or 'real'? Are the maps really his maps? And what is the relationship between the Miller in this fictional story, and the Miller(s) that inhabit the other stories? Isn't it possible that this particular event is in fact a 'real' event, that this exchange between Miller and Alistair did actually happen and Miller has merely transported it to a fictional context? In which case this fictional narrative is not quite so fictional as perhaps first imagined. The binary between fiction and autobiography is beginning to crumble.

Complicating matters further, a little later in this scene, as Miller apologizes for his insensitivity, admitting that he gets 'freaked out too', Alistair – or Miller *as* Alistair replying to Miller – replies,

I get so scared. . . . What if it's like in '97 when the US wouldn't let me in? That almost destroyed us. Our whole life is in LA. What would we do then?

This revelation provides us with a further reason to read this narrative as being based on an actual life experience – and therefore as being autobiographical. However, perhaps this didn't actually happen to Alistair either and is just part of the fictional narrative, placed here in order to give a rationale for the fear and anxiety that both Miller and Alistair are feeling *in the story*? Then, near the conclusion of the performance, Miller talks from the 'real' place of 1997, where we learn that 'Everything is pretty good except for one thing. Alistair is not here with me.' This is because Alistair is in Australia.

The US Consulate won't let him into the States, has rejected his student visa, his return ticket is no good now, and he has had to drop out of University because he's missed the beginning of the term and our lives are falling apart thanks to the US government. . . .

This scene is *not* set within a fictional time frame, and so we can therefore assume that Alistair *has actually* lived through the experience of not getting through Immigration Control before, which means that perhaps the events that Miller is relating in the *fictional* scene are not fictional at all. Throughout this entire narrative there is an irresolvable undecidability, as it becomes impossible to tell fact from fiction, recounting from inventing. This blur serves to render the 'fictional' moments as invested for the spectator as the autobiographical moments, but it also leads us to question again the referentiality of the so-called 'real' events. When does 'fact' become 'fiction' and vice versa?

Story as Rhetoric

In creating this simultaneous narrative, Miller has strategically provided another

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000149 Published online by Cambridge University Press

frame from which to enact his political position. Returning to the extract above in which Miller delivers his speech to Alistair concerning inequality, as if that speech is actually part of a fictional exchange between the two of them, it is also evident that Miller has constructed this part of the fictional story in order to be able to deliver *this message to the audience*.

Miller uses his performance to deliver facts and information about a specific subject. Although the speech is embedded into the narrative, it also stands alone, as a mode of political rhetoric, establishing the argument. In relation to activating the audience, it is vital that Miller 'persuades' them, and gets them on-side. Of course, one could argue that since the majority of audiences Miller will be playing to will be gay or lesbian, they will already be on-side. But David Román provides an important counter-argument to this assumption:

> For critics who argue that gay and lesbian performance only preaches to the 'choir', it is important to recognize that such a choir does not exist unless one presupposes (which Miller does not) that there is only possible a singular monolithic community of activists who reflect the 'ideal spectator'.[22]

This is particularly true around the issue of gay and lesbian marriage, since many gay men and lesbians disagree with the *institution* of marriage, and its historical signification, particularly in relation to gender politics. Miller admits to having felt this way himself about marriage – reluctant to support 'a corrupt bourgeois institution, etc.' – but,

> it really rings hollow when you are facing your lover being deported, or can't get into the hospitals to see your partner, or the immediate family takes away the house you left your partner because your will was not acknowledged.[23]

Miller's task in *Glory Box* is to convince the spectator of the urgent need for same-sex marriage legislation, domestic partnership legislation, or civil union legislation. *Glory Box* is also not singularly concerned with the status of gay partners. An equally pressing, different – but related – agenda for Miller is surely the lack of recognition *within* the gay and lesbian 'community' of the problems facing bi-national couples, and the discrimination – not to mention pragmatic difficulties – that such couples encounter.

According to Robert Paine, political rhetoric 'is devoted to persuasion',[24] and political speech should result in the listener to the speech being 'disposed to act'. Or, as is said of Demosthenes, the ancient Greek exemplar of oratory:

> When Cicero spoke, the people said, 'How well he speaks! When Demosthenes spoke, the people said, 'Let us march!'[25]

By positioning Miller as (among other things) a rhetorician, I am suggesting that part of his agenda with *Glory Box* is to spur the spectator to pragmatic action, which, in this instance, would involve agitating for legal recognition of same-sex relationships.[26] Ken Plummer's insights into 'modern tales of desire' are apt in relation to Miller's work: 'personal suffering[s] are (often) transformed into political ones through an emerging *political narrative* and rhetoric'.[27]

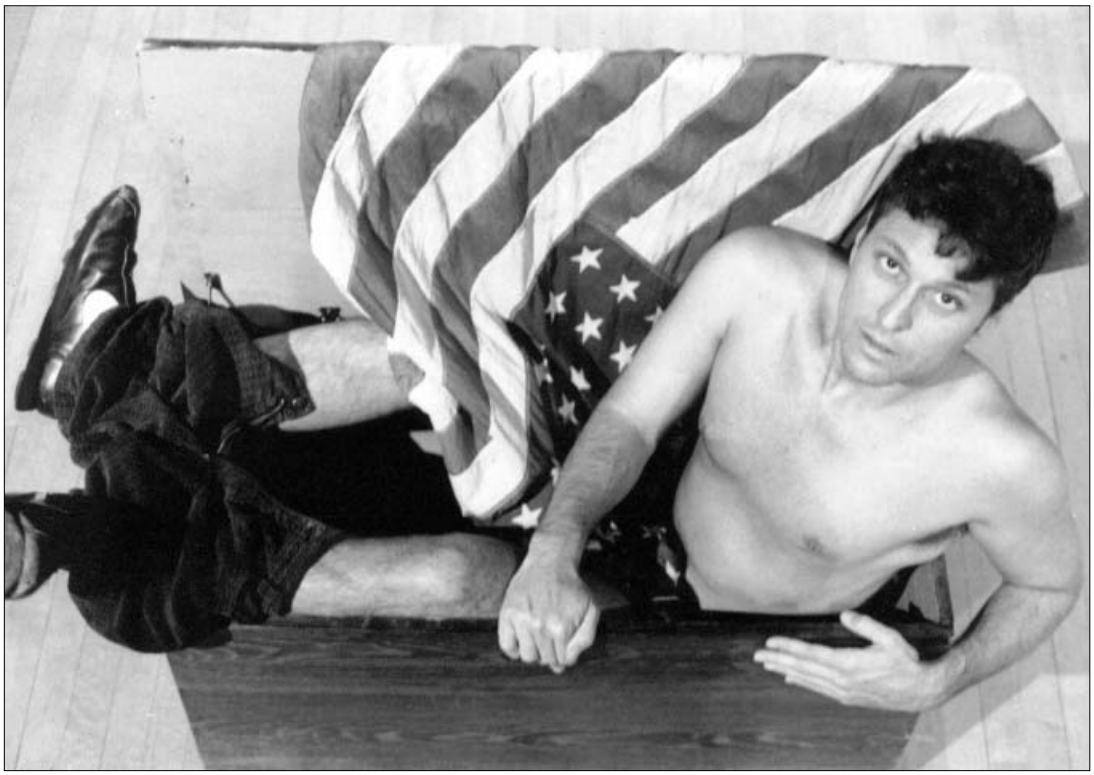
One rhetorical action employed by Miller is the repeated drawing of attention to the rights awarded to heterosexual couples in contrast to the lack of rights granted to same-sex couples. Through such a tactic, Miller is also implicitly establishing an 'us' and 'them'. An example of this focus on the differential status of relationships has already been cited, when Miller delivers his speech to Alistair. Miller closes this speech with the forceful assertion:

> *I feel so oppressed by* THE TYRANNY *of heterosexual hegemony and the complete denial of my civil right of marriage!* ARRRGHH!

In the next section of the futural narrative, Miller again pushes the point of inequality between sexualities. As he stands watching Alistair stuck in the Customs queue, Miller reflects:

> *Why can't I share my nation with him? Invite him on to my citizenship with me? Never forget this, this is what every straight person can do and no gay person can, get married, get a green card and share their country with someone else they love.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000149 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Tim Miller wrapped in the flag in *Glory Box*. Photo: Darrell Taylor.

His 'Never forget this' is a direct appeal for the spectator to recognize the situation as it is. As Miller states, 'I think gay people are in such denial about our actual condition, as any oppressive culture will train us to actually pretend we're not being fucked with'.[28]

Part of Miller's agenda in *Glory Box* is to reveal this 'second-class' status. This is not difficult to do, since the 'real' stories that Miller places around this fictional narrative are, in the main, stories concerning homophobia, from the Tweenie being shoved down his throat at the age of nine, to the bottle being thrown violently at him as he makes his way to a lesbian and gay wedding at the 1997 Gay Pride in Montano.[29] Such stories again serve to forge an 'us' – people oppressed because of our sexuality – and 'them' – homophobes or people who support homophobes, or people who do not fight homophobic legislation.

I believe right now for a heterosexual person to get married while gay people can't is a completely immoral act. As immoral an act as going to a restaurant that doesn't serve black people, joining a country club that won't allow Jews.

Miller's call to action is, importantly, *not* just directed at gay men and lesbians or bisexuals, but also at straight people. The 'them', in this instance, is not about sexuality but is about where a person stands in relation to equality, justice, and human rights. 'We' can be a diverse movement.

In relation to rhetoric, Paine insists that rhetoric is action: 'saying is doing'.[30] Thus, rhetoric is performative. And one clear instance of the performative nature of *Glory Box* is Miller's statement, already cited, that he is going to keep on talking about 'this marriage stuff . . . as long as lesbian and gay folks' relationships are under attack in America'. *Glory Box is* just one example of Miller's 'keeping on talking'. In his very performance of this work, he is putting into action what he says he will do, and is also doing what he is encouraging his audience

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to do – agitate, politicize, demand. In this sense, *Glory Box* is also saying *through* doing.

Writing the Future

Why does Miller choose to incorporate a 'fictional' narrative into this 'autobiographical' piece – what sort of tactic is this? Fairly early in the performance, Miller tells us that he is going 'to gather the things I need and put them into my glory box and make our future happen!' And yet the future that happens in the piece is not one to be relished. In the final section of the fictional narrative Alistair is 'next in line'. It has taken him the entire show to get here. The immigration officer asks him whether his visit is for business or pleasure. Alistair replies that he is a student:

> *'I'm here for study. I'm here to do an MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University in Los Angeles.' The Immigration officer suddenly looks down at her computer screen. It's not a big look, but it's enough for me to know that something bad is about to happen.*

And indeed something bad does happen, as the immigration officer informs Alistair that, as they have reason to believe he has 'developed significant ties to certain persons in the US and that you will have no intention of leaving the US', he is being denied entry and will be returned to Australia on the next plane. Miller attempts to intervene, but to no avail. As he holds Alistair close, declaring his love for him, an officious cop tears them apart, dragging Alistair off in a choke hold. Alistair, looking over his shoulder, begs that Miller 'Do something! Don't let them send me back!' Miller, in turn, is being dragged to the exit.

> *'You assholes, he's my lover, my partner, my husband. You can't do this. I'm a fucking American citizen. I have rights! You can't do this.'*

As Miller and Alistair have just found out, this is precisely what they can do. The door is shut on Alistair. The immigration officers simply shout, 'Next.'

Unlike the ending of *My Queer Body*, in which Miller figures a rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet* by imagining a future in which it is all right to love and be loved, a future which inscribes, amongst other things, the first black lesbian president, the ending of *Glory Box* is not rewritten. Yet of vital importance is the fact that this story is placed in the performance as *fictional* (although of course, a version of it may already have happened to Miller and Alistair in 1997). The *actual* story, then, has not yet been written. It is *still to be written*. And the outcome of that 'real' story surely depends on the bringing about of *real* changes in the legislature.

Miller, then, is asking the audience to provide the ending for the real story. Alistair's plea to Miller, recited by Miller here and now, rings loudly in the auditorium: do something. It is the spectators' agency, their *activity*, that will determine how Miller's and Alistair's life-story turns out (in relation to the issue of immigration, at least). This surely puts a different spin on the 'spectator as author', for in this instance, the spectator, through his or her actions (which include non-actions) *will actually* author Miller's autobiographical story.

Rewriting the Future

Miller recently admitted to an enduring belief in the act of writing about a life being a transformation of that life.[31] As Liz Stanley also comments, 'the act of writing is . . . also *transformative* in its own right of the relationship between truth, lies, past, present, reality, ideology, self, and other'.[32] Autobiographical processes, then, do not just present the life that is lived, but also affect the life yet to be lived. Here again past, present, and future become complexly intertwined. In Miller's own words,

> Writing about my life has always carried the potential for liberation. . . . I have a completely unsubstantiated faith that if I write this story, I may be able to affect how the story will end. I have always used the memories of things past to rewrite the ending of what is to come.[33]

In giving us this story, Miller hopes that collectively we might be able to rewrite 'the ending of what is to come'. Whilst Miller claims his own agency through writing, in

Glory Box he also demands an agency from the spectator. If we want a different future to happen (for Miller, Alistair, and ourselves), then it is up to us to contribute our energies to enabling that transformation.

Whilst Miller *could* choose to rewrite the story here and now, thus providing a happy theatrical ending, such a rewriting would be literally textual rather than material, and what Miller and Alistair urgently need here is a material transformation. And this is surely the power of autobiographical performance. The story that Miller is sharing with us is one that is lived and felt, not only by Miller but by hundreds and thousands of other people. Whilst *My Queer Body* may have provided a fantasy ending that the spectators are being encouraged to aspire to and hope for, in *Glory Box* the spectators are shown how the fictional story could very well end up being reality, and so are being asked to help find a way to avoid that. For Miller, it is 'the future we're haunted by'.[34] If so, then an exorcism is called for.[35]

At the end of the show, the house lights come on, and Miller takes the stage once again. He thanks everyone for coming, acknowledges again that he is in Glasgow, and that that has special significance for him and Alistair. He then urges everyone to sign a petition demanding that new legislation for partnership rights be passed. Miller has placed the petition in the foyer of the theatre. Here, then, 'outside' of the theatrical frame, is the direct political address to which the performance has been leading the whole time. The 'success' of the show surely depends on the number of signatures that Miller collects tonight, since each signature will bear witness to the spectator's activity and agency (literally, to their having been moved) and might go some way to transforming not only Miller's story, but all our stories.

Miller's appeal is not simply to the active spectator. Just as Miller locates himself, through his practice, as an activist or social citizen, here his use of multiple theatrical devices and autobiographical storytelling that draws on the 'real', attempts to *activate* the spectator, transforming them through this process into *activist* spectators.[36] As Miller himself has stated, it is these activated spectators who are the 'absolutely crucial agents for change'.[37]

Notes and References

The research for this article was supported by the AHRB.

1. Tim Miller, 'Out of the Box', *Theater*, XXXI, No. 3 (2000), p. 89–90 (p. 89).
2. Tim Miller, *Glory Box*, 2001. At the time of writing, Miller's performance was unpublished. All citations are taken from an edited script copy provided by Miller. Passages in italic are taken from this script. My writing is based on the performance I saw at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, in November 2001. The performance script has since been published in Tim Miller, *Body Blows* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).
3. Interview with the author, 4 November 2001.
4. Tim Miller, 'California Performance, Vol. 2', *Mime Journal*, 1991–92, p. 123–42 (p. 126).
5. Steve Durland, 'An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul: an Interview with Tim Miller', *The Drama Review*, XXXV, No. 3 (1991), p. 171–7 (p. 174).
6. Miller, 'California Performance, Vol. 2', p. 123.
7. Interview with the author. The artists Miller is referring to include Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy. For more on 'Womanhouse' in LA see Moira Roth, ed., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983); Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001).
8. The motto of Highways performance space, co-founded by Miller, confirms his commitment to this creed: 'to encourage artists in this exploration of finding connections between society and ourselves'. See Miller, 'California Performance, Vol. 2', p. 134.
9. Interview with the author.
10. Miller, 'California Performance, Vol. 2', p. 131.
11. Interview with the author.
12. Miller, 'California Performance, Vol. 2', p. 140.
13. See Biddy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]', in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 77–103, for her objections to the assumptions circulating around notions of 'the community'.
14. Miller puts the figure at 100,000.
15. The present situation in the UK is better in that the partner of a British citizen can apply for British citizenship providing they can prove that they have been in a committed relationship (and can provide documentation of this) for a minimum of two years.
16. This supermarket is located in the West End, a 'trendy' area of the city, and is known – at least in mythical terms – as being good for 'cruising' on a Sunday.
17. Interview with the author.
18. Richard L. Harrison, dir., *Tim Miller: Loud and Queer: a Documentary* (1992).
19. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977).
20. Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 20.
21. Ibid., p. 96.

22. David Román, 'Performing All Our Lives: AIDS, Performance, Community', in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p, 209–21 (p. 218).

23. Tim Miller, in William J. Mann, *Windy City Times* (2001).

24. Robert Paine, ed., *Politically Speaking: Cross-Cultural Studies of Rhetoric* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981), p. 1.

25. Ibid., p. 13.

26. Miller does not only agitate the audience present at his performance. If the experiences of his performance in Glasgow are anything to go by, Miller is also able to use his show as a means to generate more public debate around the issues that are explored. Thus, whilst in Glasgow, Miller was invited onto a national radio programme to air his views, and the national daily newspaper, *The Scotsman*, carried an extensive feature concerning partnership legislation. In both of these instances, Miller did not so much talk about his work as about the concerns that lie at the heart of it. His performance serves, then, as a catalyst enabling other dialogues to take place. Miller sees this outcome as consistent with a feminist practice, where the work is considered 'of value in itself, but can also be used for discussion' (interview with the author).

27. Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 110.

28. Interview with the author.

29. Whilst such weddings have no legal status, many couples undertake the ceremony as a public – and often political – gesture of commitment to one another.

30. Robert Paine, op. cit., p. 19.

31. See Tim Miller, 'Memory and Future', *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, VI, No. 2 (Spring 1999).

32. Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: the Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 87.

33. Miller, 'Memory and Future'.

34. Interview with the author.

35. Miller *does* suggest another possible ending – that he and Alistair will leave the USA. Through such a declaration Miller is demonstrating the strength of their commitment to one another. Boundaries will not separate them. However, the central question remains, why should Miller be forced to leave his own country in order to be with his partner? This alternative ending is not one Miller embraces willingly or chooses lightly.

36. Readers interested in the issues raised by Miller should visit the American site http://www.lgirtf.org/ and the UK site http://www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk/

37. Miller, 'Out of the Box', p. 90.