

ON EDITING ROY COHN/JACK SMITH, Jill Godmilow

Roy Cohn/Jack Smith is my 1993 film about artist Ron Vawter's performance of the same name. Directed by his partner, Greg Mehrten, it opened at the Wooster Group's Performing Garage in 1992 and traveled throughout the U.S. and Europe until Vawter's death from AIDS in 1994.

For starters, two quotes from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology Of The Closet*:

"Silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech in relations around the closet. Ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as knowledge. Ignorance (or pretend ignorance) is a power tool."

"Closetedness itself is a performance, initiated as such by the speech act of silence - not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts in relation to the discourses that surround and differentially constitute it. The closet allows for the ignorant one to define the terms of exchange.'

For example: a 1982 Mitterrand & Reagan discussion as reported in the press. Mitterrand spoke English (badly). Reagan spoke no French. Therefore their conversation was conducted in English, in which Mitterrand, the one with two languages, was *less* fluent, and thus less powerful than the ignorant one, Reagan. Mitterrand had to "translate" himself and his needs and his agenda, into the language of the ignorant one. He had to give up his specificity, his force and his ease. Same goes for the gay woman or man in the closet – s/he has to offer self-ness in the performance of her/himself in straight terms.

The closet is a place you can go to produce silence: to repress the hate speech and attacks of enemies by agreeing to *not insist* on their knowing who you really are (by not forcing them to speak, and thus acknowledge, what they either already know or could guess about you).

THE STRONG PARALLELS BETWEEN ROY COHN & JACK SMITH:

Two men in two different performances of the "closet"—in Ron Vawter's interpretation of their performances (at least) the closet performed and the closet refused. Both infuriating for entirely different reasons. Both men dead of AIDS, (you could say) "anyway".

In 1993, in the theatre, I watched myself: it was too easy to hate Cohn, even admiring his deceptions, and simply enjoy the other. Too easy to sit there escowling at the very very black, sinister, very funny comedy of Roy Cohn—the man we love to hate... the man we feel so comfortable hating, that is, if you fancy yourself a liberated, liberal, non-homophobic, humanist, struggler for truth and social justice type of person. Here he was, the slick asshole, the menace of our liberal/socialist/commie parents, seen through and exposed—dancing there on Ron's string for our enjoyment of his sinister, self-loving comic, self-knowing winking-at-you genius. But, because Ron had embraced him (in a way no different than his embrace of Jack Smith) all the while that you're laughing, you're sinking, because you can understand that Roy's brilliant performance of self was an absolutely necessary performance for him... a defense against what oppressed him, ie. the horribly punishing, ruinous homophobic American culture of the 50's, where there were laws that said no homosexual could be employed by the federal government directly or by any private corporation that had defense contracts with the federal government.

There it was in front of your eyes, most entertainingly. It was the Clarence Thomas syndrome, the Camille Paglia syndrome, not unlike, at times, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Spike Lee, Rainer Fassbinder. or even Buster Keaton – a performance of self full of half-truths in the service of a search for transcendent identity and uniqueness... the climb out of the mire.

And the performance was *for you*... (and who are you for whom this performance was created? And what is your performance in the face of what oppresses *you*?)

The Cohn performance was a translation of what he knew of himself and his own experience into the dominant language of homophobia. Thus, he maintained his silence about himself by camouflaging

himself, by turning himself into his enemy.. a witty, urbane confident enemy, full of in-jokes (normally fun– here hateful) about Jews and Jewish judges and Jewish spies, and Jewish mothers and Jewish camp counselors and lefties, and liberals and Jane, and Tom, and feminists and bull-dykes and gay activists, and gay teachers, etc.) All the while he's leaking his knowledge of gayness out, knowing full well that nobody in that audience would ever call his bluff. Why? Because they needed his performance to feel less threatened and more powerful—to know who they were—against who they are.

Jack Smith, on the other hand, another guy who spreads his frightening fragile flamboyant passionate self all over the stage all the while letting you know that he knows how frightened we are to love it, and to hate it you are. Then, somewhere in the midst of his broken, obsessive performance of his own pathos, surrounded by his favorite trinkets and his degraded concubine—*while your not really watching*— he shows you the door, the crooked door, to actually loving what he loves: his obsessions, his coca cola poetry, his cheap jewelry and his B-movie idols, the ghosts of Salomé and St. John the Baptist, Liz Taylor, Nijinsky, Maria Montez, Elmer Fudd, Big Bird. Because Jack completely embraced his own distortions and his paranoid adjustments to oppression. As Ron Vawter embraces Jack, somehow, maybe because he was so brilliant... and Ron is too... you can embrace them as well. Whatever resistance, discomfort, distaste I have at times felt in the face of the flamboyant gay stance—something that has confused me and made me uncomfortable at times—dissolves.

So then who is Ron Vawter in all this? Utter sanity, in the midst of these guises... the performing being who can find both Roy and Jack pleasures in himself who is not afraid of either of them, *and* the man who has shared their oppression and their disease.

OK - then why is my film the way it is, intercutting the two performances? It had four jobs to do, as I saw it.

1. to save Ron's extraordinary performance for posterity and the Ron's *idea* of the two juxtaposed performances

2. to *not* produce the illusion for the film audience that you film-watchers are in that very hip audience in that very hip downtown theatre space... in Ron Vawter's *live presence*. (It seemed important to *not* create the illusion that Ron was still alive and to make sure that there was a time figured in the film where he was dead and you were looking at him *when he was alive*.)

3. to make sure that you could not see these performances only as entertainments, for your pleasure, but performances addressed directly to you, *about yourself* - whether you are gay or not gay... performances that ask with every breath, who are you in the face of this?

4. to insist, *more* than Ron's theatre performance did, on the parallels between the two performances, not on the differences, which all comes back to the closet and how it can be variously performed, and for what.

Gianni Rondolini wrote in *La Stampa* when the film showed in the Torino International Festival of Films About Homosexuality, 1995

"Both dead of AIDS, Cohn at 59 in 1986 and Smith at 57 in 1989, these two personas are resurrected in a performance by Vawter in a contrast of stance – political and moral, ideological and cultural – using tones of voice, gestures, looks and words that shed light on their abysmal differences. It's from this contrast, which the movie underlines with great efficiency through a structure of alternating appearances, that is born, little by little, a sensation of undoing, of sadness, of finitude."