

MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

“This Thing of Ours”: Heterosexuality, Recreational Sex, and the Survival of Adult Movie Theaters

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When venerable funnyman Fred Willard was arrested in July 2012 on the not-so-venerable charge of “lewd conduct” at the Tiki Theater, a Hollywood adult movie house, online wags quickly offered their amused/bemused commentaries. These included backhanded compliments about the 72-year-old’s libido, comparisons to Paul Reubens’s 1991 arrest under similar circumstances, and criticism of the LAPD for wasting taxpayers’ money on policing the autoeroticism expected in such venues. Most notable, however, were jokes about the obsolescence of adult theaters in the era of streaming video; the tube video site YouPorn even wrote a tongue-in-cheek letter to Willard, offering him a free home computer to discreetly deliver pornographic materials via an invention called “the internet.”¹ If Reubens’s arrest came at a time when home video had already begun to cause steady closings of adult theaters during the 1980s, it was all the more surprising that such theaters even existed in 2012.



The Tiki Theater, Hollywood, CA: site of the Willard arrest; not reputed as “couples friendly.” Photo by Ken Wallace.

Although “the desire for privacy and anonymity” has been called “the most fundamental dimension of going to a porn arcade or moviehouse,”² venues for onscreen sex have long fostered off-screen sex acts that go well beyond individual autoeroticism. The very tension between sexual imagery’s impact upon the viewing body and the possibility of interpersonal contact (desired or not) with other viewers “may evoke certain pleasures of its own”³ when “the site of performance is extended into the space of consumption.”⁴ Scholars have especially focused on the potential for these largely homosocial venues to engender homosexual acts, since the very existence of such venues helps constitute what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call a queer “world-making project.”⁵ After all, the policing of adult theaters has more to do with cultural prohibitions against public (and especially homosexual) sex than with the acts shown onscreen. Whereas the latter might be reasonably protected under constitutional rights to free speech, public sex threatens rights to privacy effectively rooted in normative cultural expectations that equate sexuality in general with “proper” heterosexual activity confined to the private sphere.⁶

There is, however, a present-day *heterosexual* subculture of adult theater patrons, made most visible through *Dr. Emilio Lizardo’s Journal of Adult Theaters* (hereafter, *JAT*), a blog reporting on the various forms of sexual play

that take place in surviving heterosexual adult theaters in the US and Canada (over 160 in operation at the time I am writing this piece).⁷ Some of these theaters may reserve one day per week or one separate screen for showing all-male porn, but they predominantly cater to the enactment of heterosexual—if not heteronormative—fantasies. While *JAT* is devoted to the real-world play of theater attendees, like solitary (male) cruisers and swinging couples, its status as the most publicly visible and centralized online hub about such theaters also mediates between public sex acts and private autoeroticism—all taking place before different (but not equal) screens. Consequently, I will briefly explore how *JAT* acts as a discursive node for recreational sexual play within mediated spaces that remain both literally and figuratively policed.

Admittedly, my own position as a researcher lurking on the blog to gather data is not unlike the role of a lurker within the theaters themselves, watching over the shoulder of couples at play. Susanna Paasonen's discussion of online pornography's "carnal resonance" is noteworthy here, since it accounts for how pornographic images can unevenly fascinate, arouse, bore, or repulse the viewer when he or she completes a text's visceral appeal by imagining and indirectly feeling the depicted acts.⁸ Online porn spectatorship is not, then, a "disembodied" experience, but simply embodied in ways different from the sensory potential of in-person theater play: "The fact that pornography is projected onto a cinema screen (of varying size), watched on a TV or computer screen, or watched on the screen of a mobile device and therefore is screen-based does not mean that different media can be conceptualized through [the] same conceptual tools or that the experiences and resonances they give rise to are the same."⁹ The primarily written discourse on *JAT* may not deliver as much visceral impact as pornographic images alone, for example; however, I would suggest that the shortcomings of these explicit writings are compensated for by their tantalizing promises to readers that the distance between online and off-line spaces could be collapsed through real-world participation in what contributors call (in the words of the blog's masthead) "this thing of ours." This tension between the online/documented and off-line/lived spaces of theater play thus echoes the blog's larger tensions between fostering desires for community/publicity and mediating desires for anonymity/privacy.

Founded in 2009, *JAT* features reader-submitted reports about their adult theater experiences. It also posts a weekly "power ranking" of top theaters determined by such reports, as well as criteria like "couple friendliness," overall theater condition, the number of Craigslist ads involving each theater, and through the use of real-time status updates sent by theater staff/patrons.

The larger the number of attending couples, the more successful the theater. And like many websites devoted to cruising, *JAT* posts “No-Fly Zones” warning readers of locations that have recently seen arrests or law enforcement patrols.



Airport Video (Everett, WA): unassuming exteriors for adult businesses outside large downtown areas.



Paris Theatre (Portland, OR): one of the few remaining purpose-built urban movie theaters playing adult films.

Most surviving adult theaters are located in geographical areas conducive to anonymity. Since urban adult theaters purpose-built for showing movies are rare today, unassuming roadside adult bookstores, often located outside urban areas due to local zoning restrictions, house many of *JAT*'s listed theaters. Some consist only of peepshow video booths, while more traditionally theatrical settings consist of rooms with digital projector screens or wall-mounted TVs, with seating provided by anything from plastic yard chairs to auditorium seats to couches. It is perhaps ironic, then, that contemporary adult theaters so closely resemble the home theater setups where porn is more likely to be consumed today. Theater operators often control entry to these rooms through a buzzer-locked door that deters unpaid admission while audibly warning patrons of an impending outsider (including potential police). Internal spatial subdivisions may also exist between main theater spaces and smaller video booths, couples-only sections, or private rooms where couples can choose to see or be seen from outside as well as control admittance. These layers of spatial access allow couples to negotiate their preferred degree of visual and physical interplay with others.



The Art Cinema (Hartford, CT): interior of large purpose-built movie theater (refurbished with digital projector for adult films).



Summit Street News (Warren, OH): common configuration for main theater in back of adult bookstore.

Likewise, many theaters offer discounts for male-female couples. In this sense, solitary (male) cruisers may comprise the bulk of their patronage, but heterosexual couples—or more precisely, the female half of such couples—are privileged as the real attractions. Indeed, some theaters will not admit unaccompanied women, suggesting that patrons are expected to police their own behavior through the rules of etiquette that blogs like *JAT* espouse. Several larger theaters even have devoted Yahoo! groups where couples and other patrons can arrange hook-ups. Some theater operators may also text real-time updates about numbers of couples or single women who have entered, allowing loyal patrons to remotely monitor theater activity—although one must physically visit the specific theater to sign up for them, indicating the importance of in-person patronage for a theater’s economic survival. Meanwhile, for non-attendees who would prefer to play with themselves at home, *JAT* provides links to small paysites run by subculturally renowned female amateurs-turned-professionals (“pro-ams”) and larger paysites like Theater Sluts.

Fantasies about theater play may thus be fulfilled both online and off-line, especially given that *JAT*’s most valued reports include not only practical

information about specific theaters one could visit, but also lengthy, sexually explicit details of contributors' real-world escapades. The self-production of pornographic discourse is one of *JAT*'s core functions, with first-person accounts sometimes illustrated by photos/videos of participants in action (their faces physically or digitally obscured). Signifiers of amateurism, including poor lighting, obscured genitals, and quotidian body types, contribute to what Paasonen calls an aesthetic of realness and immediacy.¹⁰ This aesthetic heightens the dialogic resonance between viewer and image, offering greater fantasies of sexual accessibility than the heavily modified corporate porn star. These couples, then, may be largely anonymous, but it is often implied that they are not physically unreachable for *JAT* readers. Like other websites devoted to cruising, the creation of user-generated pornographic discourse may be primarily based in written text, but it also can "literally give image to its potential 'amateur reporters'" in an attempt to overcome the blog's archaic stress on the verbal over the visual in today's pornographic mediascape.¹¹ By replicating in real-world spaces the type of explicit sexual acts performed on theater screens, players effectively become performers in pornography's generic "supertext"¹²—or even *meta-pornographic* performers when their play, illuminated by theater screens, is mediated across computer screens to *JAT* readers.

Despite reporters' heavy emphasis on interpersonal contact, José Capino argues that "spectators in adult theaters cannot and do not totally disengage from the text even when they seem preoccupied with sexual pursuits. The pornographic text exists ubiquitously on the screen and in the soundscape of the theater and is embedded in its spatial configuration as well as in those practices of bodily engagement that spectators perform."¹³ This helps account for why some swingers and cruisers prefer theaters over other sites. Screened movies are rarely mentioned in *JAT* reports—except when couples action is absent—and are primarily valued as a stimulating prelude to play. Other reporters comment on cutting short their visits after realizing that a given theater was only screening all-male porn on a given day. This is no coincidence. Since *JAT* only publishes reports about heterosexual action/theaters, queer sexuality is only ever fleetingly mentioned and is almost always described as the remit of *other* people, not the (potentially self-censoring) reporters themselves.

At a basic level, adult theater play often involves a gamble—whether or not a willing couple will attend during a given visit—since many *JAT* reports note that such heterosexual loci for play never materialize. Beyond theater play as a game of chance, however, is the competence required to play with a couple,

given the subculture's highly structured rules of etiquette and cues for engagement.¹⁴ Some couples prefer to play alone or only with other couples, whereas others are more open to inviting single men. Hence, a large portion of *JAT* reports detail the incremental spatial movements in the cruising process as an integral component of play, as well as include equally detailed descriptions of the respective reporter's success or disappointment. Reports written by single men and couples similarly detail the dance of anticipation and engagement between "pursuers" and the "pursued"—although the couple's privileged status means they preserve the upper hand in choosing fellow players.

Much as spatial divisions within theaters help control varieties of participation, the notion of play also involves the easily collapsed differentiation between participants' roles. The distinctions between single/pursuer and couple/pursued blur, for example, when the couple dictates how many participants they wish to join them and what kinds of acts the single men may perform. The woman is allowed to control the scene, although she and/or her male partner may relay her cues, preferences, and rules to potential participants. Despite her apparent degree of sexual submissiveness, *JAT* sees participants' respect of female players' wishes and limits as crucial for enjoyable and responsible play. In this regard, theater play bears strong similarities to BDSM play, in which players performing submissiveness often have the most power in actually initiating and shaping the scene. Whereas some *JAT* reports written by male members of couples extol their female partner's submissiveness to multiple men, others feature accounts by female reporters hoping to break their own records in terms of the sheer number of men they can sexually satisfy in one visit.

By performing pornographically for the erotic stimulation of participant-viewers within spaces mediated by heterosexual pornography's supertext, *JAT*'s written and photographic reports overlap with pornographic niches for "amateur" and "public" sex as well as recall preexisting niches for "cuckolding" and "gangbang" themes. These niches are similarly rooted in fantasies that an average man (especially the supposed "husband") cannot satisfy a woman's spectacular desires. As much as the image of many men penetrating and ejaculating on a sole woman may seem outwardly misogynistic, such images also challenge the phallic authority of any one man as sufficient to match the power of even one woman's sexuality. Indeed, female reporters on *JAT* sometimes note the "performance anxiety" of male participants, and often express preferences for players with larger penises and/or black men. This emphasis on the number, size, and racial identity of

male participants suggests that play also involves porn's hyperbolic rhetoric of excess—from the violation of antiquated taboos against adultery and miscegenation, to the use of words like “filthy” or “slut” as generically honorific descriptors.¹⁵ Play therefore involves a temporary interplay of spatial divisions between pornographic media and “real life”—two realms normatively expected to remain separate. Accordingly, distinctions between exhibitionism and voyeurism are impossible to maintain: not only does theater play depend on the very publicness of sexuality for its erotic charge, but (male) theater patrons can quickly become participants and observers of each other.

This returns us to the question of how heterosexual theater play compares with queer theater play. Some men who have sex with men may prefer heterosexual adult theaters because watching straight porn mitigates potential homophobic shame when playing with other male patrons. These male patrons may also be considered *queer* in the sense that their desires and practices willfully evade minoritarian identity categories like “gay” or “bisexual.” The exhibition of straight porn has never discouraged those deliberately seeking male-to-male encounters—and *JAT* reports imply that homosexual activity is the default mode of play for some patrons when there is an absence of heterosexual couples. Additionally, the heterosexual theater cruiser and home *JAT* reader alike may masturbate to the “gangbang” scenario's central spectacle: myriad sets of male genitalia in action. Although *JAT* may not publish explicitly homosexual reports, its content is, at best, a displacement of queer intensities.

These examples of recreational sex may be outwardly oriented around heterosexuality, but, as Paasonen argues, “heterosexuality should not be conflated with heteronormativity” when it can encompass diverse practices normatively denigrated as “bad sex.”¹⁶ Paasonen sees such practices as potentially “queering the straight.”¹⁷ For Berlant and Warner, however, queer world-making comprises intimacies “that bear no necessary relation to . . . the couple form”¹⁸—yet the counterpublics contingently formed through heterosexual theater play largely rest upon the sanctity of heterosexual monogamy as a norm to be titillatingly broken. Consequently, there are limitations in expanding notions of “queerness” to include forms of public sex where the heterosexual couple remains key (but not essential) to play.



Annabelle's (Winston-Salem, NC): video tour of theater space in back of adult bookstore (with lights on), showing flat-screen TVs and adjoining private rooms with windows.

Nevertheless, the political stakes remain notable for theater patrons whose behavior still violates normative associations between heterosexuality, privacy, and good citizenship. When several Tampa-area theaters were raided in March—April 2011, for example, one *JAT* reporter filed a public records request to investigate details about the arrests, despite his suspicions that police might be monitoring *JAT* to coordinate raids. His research found that police were more likely to arrest “low-hanging fruit” like men and women playing in the main theater area, but not couples and their guests within adjacent private rooms. This raised questions of whether police could arrest people for “having sex in a private area of a public place,” or whether couples in private rooms could have greater expectations regarding their right to privacy.¹⁹ Yet, following Berlant and Warner, if heterosexual couples are more likely to rent these private rooms as a means of policing their participation with specially invited individuals, then normative social correlations between heterosexuality and privacy are maintained, despite the non-heteronormativity of the couple’s quasi-public sex acts. In theory, Warner says, adult theaters should be considered inherently “private” places because all attendees consent to enter a space set apart from everyday life, where they will expect to see sex both onscreen and off-screen. But, in practice, such liminal spaces involve “not only a world-excluding privacy, but also a world-making publicness” and are thus subject to (self-)surveillance.²⁰

As a publicly accessible blog, *JAT* reproduces this tension between public and private by mediating between fleeting moments of contact and longer-term relationships; just as some theaters have regular local patrons, the blog itself fosters communal renown. Its process of photographically “giving image” to theater players extends to the publishing of avatars and email addresses for recurrent *JAT* reporters. Despite the theater scene’s associations with anonymity, then, *JAT* helps render certain participants known and even particularly desired—hence the handful of female pro-ams with paysites devoted to theater play. Some pro-ams go on tours of multiple adult theaters across a large geographical area, and although theater management prohibits any patron from soliciting money for sex, these tours still build name recognition for pro-ams’ paysites. Thus, capital cannot be divorced from the sites of theater play, whether it be the acquisition of erotic/subcultural capital or the (indirect) acquisition of monetary capital.

When serendipitous off-line *contact* gives way to more remote, motive-driven means of (online) *networking*,²¹ blogs like *JAT* may thus offer a sense of publicity and community at the expense of the privacy and anonymity that theater players have long valued. For example, one couple complains that, despite subculturally promoting themselves via a Yahoo! group devoted to their frequent theater play, online renown can interfere with underlying desires for anonymous sexual encounters: “Nancy loves putting on a show and would love to suck the entire theater off but the few times we were in the couples section they [male theater patrons] totally turned her off by repeatedly calling her name, as if we were there to talk to them lol[.] We go for anonymous, [no-strings-attached] fun but the wolf pack seems to think we’re there to talk and make friends.”²² In its function as a subcultural gatekeeper, *JAT* can indirectly police such overly aggressive patrons by demoting a given theater’s status as not “couples friendly,” which can significantly hurt business if owners do not take steps to police patron behavior. As the heterosexual adult theater’s privileged unit of economic value, the couple is therefore inextricable from the various forms of capital ensuring these theaters’ survival. In a media culture that privileges user-generated self-surveillance, then, heterosexuality (and the accumulation of capital that has historically been its cultural prerogative) can both support and contain public sex spaces, even when heteronormativity bends to uneasily accommodate the potentially queerer counterpublics emerging in these meta-pornographic spaces. The challenge remains for adult theater aficionados to celebrate the supposed sexual/cinematic free expression that these off-line spaces afford without losing sight of the unintended consequences of their online mediation.

Notes

- 1 "YouPorn to Fred Willard: Here's a Free Computer, Ya Know . . . for PORN," TMZ.com, 22 July 2012; www.t TMZ.com/2012/07/22/fred-willard-youporn-offer/. Also see Tricia Romano, "Fred Willard: Arrested in a Post Pee-wee Herman Universe," The Daily Beast, 19 July 2012; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/19/fred-willard-arrested-in-a-post-pee-wee-herman-universe.html>; and Sean O'Neal, "Fred Willard Arrested for Improvisational One-Man Show in Adult Movie Theater," A.V. Club, 19 July 2012, <http://www.avclub.com/article/fred-willard-arrested-for-improvisational-one-man--82676>.
- 2 Scott MacDonald, "Confessions of a Feminist Porn Watcher," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 11.
- 3 Amy Herzog, "In the Flesh: Space and Embodiment in the Pornographic Peep Show Arcade," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 62 (2008): 35.
- 4 Ibid., 36.
- 5 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 198; Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, "The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-male Moving-Image Pornography," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 142–53; John Champagne, "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 76–97.
- 6 Herzog, "In the Flesh," 36–37; Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 192–95; and Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 91.
- 7 *JAT* is accessible at dremiliolizardo.blogspot.com. All submitted reports are posted under pseudonyms to preserve contributors' anonymity, and I have only examined discourse that is publicly available outside members-only groups.
- 8 Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2011), 16–17.
- 9 Ibid., 183–84.

10 Ibid., 78–85, 172.

11 Cante and Restivo, “Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities,” 150–51.

12 José B. Capino, “Homologies of Space: Text and Spectatorship in All-Male Adult Theaters,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 59–60.

13 Ibid., 57.

14 “Public Service Announcement from Dr. Emilio Lizardo: Adult Theater Etiquette,” *JAT*, posted 20 November 2010; dremiliolizardo.blogspot.com/2010/11/public-service-announcement-from-dr.html.

15 Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, 57–59.

16 Ibid., 151.

17 Ibid., 150–153.

18 Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 199.

19 “I-Team Report: Drew Park Update #2 in Tampa by Enzyte Bob—The Nitty Gritty,” *JAT*, posted 20 April 2011; dremiliolizardo.blogspot.com/2011/04/i-team-report-drew-park-update-2-in.html.

20 Michael Warner, quoted in Cante and Restivo, “Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities,” 146.

21 This distinction derives from Delany, *Times Square Red*, 128–29.

22 “A Few Minutes With Gloryhole Nancy & T: Their View on Toledo,” *JAT*, posted 22 June 2013; dremiliolizardo.blogspot.com/2013/06/a-few-minutes-with-gloiryhole-nancy-t.html.

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