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By GORDON COX

**G**ay characters in legit works have gone through several distinct phases.

After centuries of invisibility, they moved centerstage in then-shocking works like "Tea and Sympathy" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Then there were out-and-proud pieces like "Torch Song Trilogy" and "Angels in America" (subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes"), in which characters grappled with their sexual identity but often came to positive conclusions.

Now a slew of plays are opening in New York that mark a post-gay era — productions in which the lead characters may be gay, but deal with central conflicts that can have nothing to do with sexual roles. And these works are being marketed to straight and gay audiences alike.

The heightened national debate over gay rights, including California's Prop. 8 battle and the rethinking of the military's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, provides a background and a timeliness to these projects, even as the shows themselves rarely bring such issues explicitly to the fore.

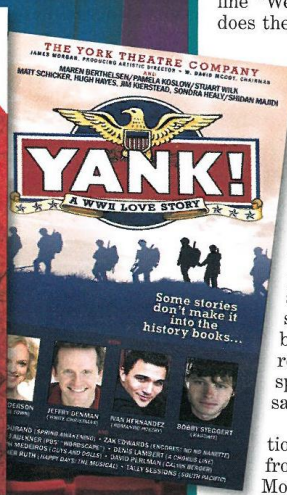
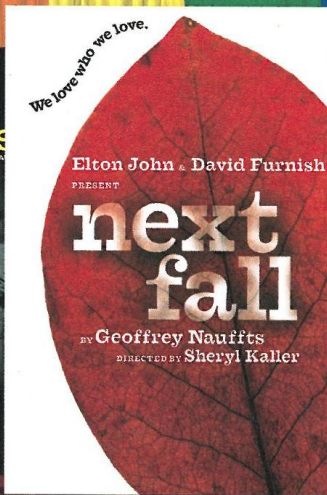
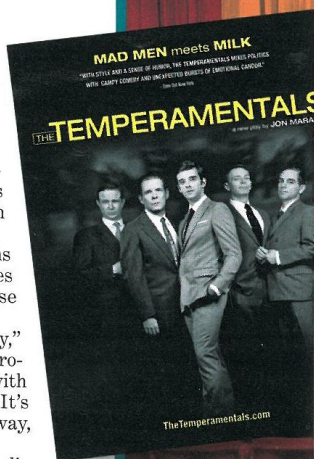
"Next Fall," which opens March 11 at the Helen Hayes Theater, represents a case study of a major shift.

"It's not a gay love story," says Richard Willis, a lead producer of "Next Fall" along with Barbara Manocherian. "It's a love story. And by the way, they're gay."

Among the legit offerings lining up this spring in Gotham for commercial runs, or showing strong potential for commercial transfer:

■ The Off Broadway staging of hit London play "The Pride," a gay-identity story that timeshifts between 1958 and 2008, is earning strong buzz ahead of the Feb. 16 opening of its nonprofit run from MCC Theater. With a couple of commercial producers already in the mix, it's generally acknowledged that the show, starring Hugh Dancy and Ben Whishaw, will likely head to Broadway if press reception and theater availability open the way.

# IN TUNE WITH BEING OUT



## Legit world re-tailors its marketing to post-gay era

■ A tuner about a couple of WWII soldiers who fall in love, "Yank!" will open Feb. 24 in a co-production between nonprofit York Theater and a commercial team that's not at all closeted about its aim to take the show to the Main Stem.

■ "The Temperamentals," a chronicle of pre-Stonewall gay activists starring Thomas Jay Ryan and Michael Urie ("Ugly Betty"), opens Feb. 28 at New World Stages in a commercial Off Broadway run that follows two earlier hit engagements.

And, for a little perspective, New York auds will also get the second revival in six years of musical comedy "La Cage aux Folles" — replete with drag performers, gay anthems and straight marriage — as well as a revival of Mart Crowley's landmark play about a bitchy gay birthday party, "The Boys in the Band," in a production from nonprofit the Transport Group.

As they pitch these shows to the broadest possible audience, marketers and creatives are treading a careful line between playing up a production's universal themes and avoiding the appearance of trying to hide its gay elements.

For instance, the "Next Fall" poster and print ad features a simple red leaf with the decidedly un-sensational tagline "We love who we love." Nowhere does the ad reveal that the romance at the center of the show is between two men.

"It's a challenge," says Stacy Shane, one of the producers of "The Temperamentals." "The gay element is central, but how do you tell ticketbuyers the play applies to everyone, gay or straight?"

Producers of "Next Fall" and "Temperamentals" reported nicely mixed crowds at prior incarnations of their shows. They are further emboldened by the fact that current auds seem more open to spotting universal elements in a same-sex romance.

Gay activists have seen cautious signs of optimism, ranging from the popularity of "Brokeback Mountain" and "Will and Grace," to multiple gay cast members on reality shows and the enduring success of Ellen DeGeneres on daytime TV.

Polls show that even if one-third of Americans are against legalizing same-sex marriage, a majority support some sort of legal recognition for gay couples. A recent survey showed 57% of the public believes gays should be allowed to serve openly in the military.

For the new crop of gay plays, marketing and publicity must balance a progressive approach — underscoring broad-appeal themes by treating the

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# NEW WAYS TO SELL GAY PLAYS

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characters as humans whose gayness is just one facet of their personalities — with an open acknowledgement of queer themes. To do otherwise might risk alienating a gay audience and that's often vital to the success of any legit endeavor, much less one that tackles homosexuality.

"Let's face it, the gay audience is one of the more important for any musical, and particularly this one," says Stuart Wilk, one of the commercial producers attached to "Yank!"

Willis of "Next Fall" agrees. Of the decision for a commercial transfer, he says, "People thought we were a little nuts, because it's a gay love story and it doesn't have any stars. But in this particular show's case, you have one giant asset: the gay community."

Producers of "Next Fall," "Yank!" and "Temperamentals" all agree that while their shows reach out to the gay community — with ads in specialized print publications and online outlets, for instance — they're generally not targeting that audience more than they would for any other legit offering.

After all, the traditional demo of regular theatergoers includes a relatively sizable chunk of gay New Yorkers. And they're a desirable quadrant for almost any production.

The poster art for "Yank!" plainly refers to the central gay romance, with a line of soldiers depicted in silhouette — and two G.I.'s on the end holding hands.

"We're broadcasting very clearly what's at the heart of the show, but doing it in a sophisticated way," Wilk says.



"Next Fall," starring Patrick Breen and Patrick Heusinger, has the backing of Elton John and David Furnish.

The publicity shots for "The Temperamentals" also aim for sophistication in their depiction of nattily attired men under the tagline "Mad Men' meets 'Milk.'"

All these productions come to the market at an intriguing time in the public consciousness of gay stories, poised between the era of the closet and a theoretical future world where queer characters onstage or on-screen raise nary an eyebrow.

That post-gay movement seems to have been around at least since 2006, when hit London transfer "The History Boys" swept the Tonys and sailed easily into the black — with a marketing and publicity profile that never let on a homosexual incident played an integral part in the storyline.

"Next Fall," however, would

be a dicey commercial proposition even without its subject matter. Although the play by Geoffrey Nauffts earned raves last year in a much-extended Off Broadway run from Naked Angels, the cast — headed by Patrick Breen and Patrick Heusinger — has no star names to attract attention in a season crowded with celeb thespians such as Denzel Washington and Scarlett Johansson.

The simple, iconic nature of the ad art for "Next Fall" was chosen in part because there wasn't a famous face to put on the poster. "We need people to be able to look at the red leaf and say, 'Oh, that's that show,'" producer Manocherian says.

Producers also hope to get a boost from Elton John and David Furnish, who recently signed on as presenting producers and, according to Manocherian and Willis, are willing to tubthump through a variety of publicity events. (Furnish saw "Fall" last year, and he and John are connected to various members of the production including Nauffts, who is one of John's collaborators on a score for developing pic "Showstopper.")

While the publicity images don't play up the gay elements of the show's storyline, they do tout the endorsement of John and Furnish, one of the most famous same-sex couples in the world.

Manocherian and Willis say they also took pains to keep operating costs low to allow the show to run during what is

the solid structure of the script, which follows the couple as they grapple with differing religious beliefs, will allow it to hold up against any play, gay or straight.

Wilk echoes the sentiment when he describes "Yank!"

"It's a great big old-fashioned musical," he says. "It's very much a mainstream show rather than a boutique-y gay one. I think it has more in common with 'South Pacific' than 'Falsettos.'"

Gay-themed plays have had a checkered history in terms of finding a wide audience. The 1968 "The Boys in the Band" was an Off Broadway hit that marked a breakthrough in its subject matter. More recently, the 1995 Broadway run of "Love! Valour! Compassion!" recouped a swift six weeks after opening.

But the last commercial Rialto outing to revolve around a gay romance, "The Little Dog Laughed," had a disappointingly brief Broadway run after a ballyhooed 2006 preem Off Broadway.

Still, producers of "Next Fall" see ample cause to hope that the universal elements of their show will win the day to attract auds.

"Things have changed in the last 15 years," Manocherian says.

Off Broadway's staging of "The Pride" is earning strong word-of-mouth and could head to the Main Stem.

