



“A Renaissance Man of Gay Theater”: An Ode to Terry Helbing

By

Billy McEntee

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Today, the word multihyphenate describes theater artists who practice many different disciplines. While a trendy noun that speaks to some artists' multiple gifts and collaborative talents, there is a synonymous term that's a touch more ancient but also more glorious: the "Renaissance man," he who shows grace and skill in various artistic departments. Terry Helbing was one such jack of all trades.

Terry blazed a trail, one I am now fortunate to comfortably trod. Terry's love of theater and advocacy for gay stories helped diversify the narratives told on stage, and by proxy integrated queerness into mainstream, uptown culture while simultaneously spotlighting downtown works with an offbeat aesthetic. Many, from Harvey Fierstein to Jane Chambers, had their obstacles lowered thanks to Terry's efforts; his impact, years later, would ease my path as a young gay man. The stories and plays I read were ones Terry has touched, ones that showed me a light.

Hailing from East Dubuque, Illinois and touring the country postgrad in a Jonathan Ned Katz play that broadened perceptions of gay life, Terry came to New York in the mid 1970s. There, he was a beloved critic, publisher, actor, producer, curator, and more. Theater was his life's great scene partner: an abiding lover, a constant appearing in many forms. He wrote prolifically about theater for innumerable outlets. He published legendary gay plays. He produced lesbian works that propelled the LGBTQ+ canon forward. And, following his death from AIDS in 1994, his work has been preserved at the Center's collection of archives. His new play contracts, newspaper clips, and production photos all fit into 15 boxes, but his life teemed with much more. Here is Terry: a spirit captured in the words of his fellow publishers, critics, and friends.



A Christmas card Terry received from one of his bowling friends

Part 1: “The Wacky Drop-in Neighbor”

Tish Dace (Terry’s friend, theater journalist): I moved to New York in 1971, started writing for *The Village Voice* in 1975, and first met Terry in the late 70s. We met on East 4th Street in the block that has La MaMa and New York Theatre Workshop. We were walking in opposite directions after plays let out, and I think he was with someone who knew me, so quick intros were made. He was introduced to me as the managing editor of *TDR*, which in the early days was *Tulane Drama Review* and then became *The Drama Review*. That was the last thing he ever did that wasn’t about gay theater.

Don Shewey (former *Soho News* theater editor): Back in the day we all knew each other the way you do when you’re in a small scene. I was writing for *The Village Voice* and *Soho News*. he worked mostly for *The Drama Review*. The thing that was fascinating about Terry was he was very community-oriented: he acted in plays, wrote about plays, published plays, and there weren’t a lot of people doing all of those things. I remember seeing Terry on stage in Doric Wilson’s *Street Theater*. The times were very funky, like the drag scene before *Drag Race*, before RuPaul made this hit TV show, drag culture was very marginal, and gay theater was like that. It was a lot cheaper to live and create in New York back then.

Gerard Raymond (theater journalist and *TheaterWeek* contributor): He produced gay writers with Meridian [Gay Theater Production Company, now disbanded].

Michael Sommers (former *Backstage* editor): I knew Terry through our work at *The New York Native* and saw his work at Meridian on 22nd Street.

Dace: He acted, too — he did everything you could in the theater.

Bob Sandla (former *TheaterWeek* editor): Terry was hilarious and smart and a lot of fun, easy going, a very quirky person. Working at *TheaterWeek*, Terry was like the wacky drop-in neighbor.

Sommers: He always reminded me of a crane: he had long stringy hair and he tended to wear these thin tropical shirts, even in cold weather. I don’t know how he managed to do that.

Sandla: I grew up in Honolulu and made much of him in his Hawaiian shirts; I’d say, “Girl it’s freezing out, put a scarf on at least.”

Felice Picano (Terry’s friend and co-publisher at now-defunct The Gay Presses of New York): Terry was very sexually active, he was out and around. He was a good-looking guy with a good body, so he got a lot of sex.

David Barbour (former *TheaterWeek* managing editor): One of the amazing things about Terry was *The Native* was a hothouse atmosphere and he sidestepped it all; he had a very good energy about him and was very friendly. The rest of us were so caught up in the drama of the place, but he just came in, did his work, was charming, and then left. Somehow the drama never affected him.

Dace: Most gay critics were closeted in the 70s and it was worse in the 80s because of AIDS — people were terrified. Terry went the opposite way, he was just utterly himself, and it was incredibly refreshing and delightful and real.

Sommers: You were in show business so everyone was gay in show business, that was not an issue. It was fun, we were younger then. It's gonna sound like a cliché, but I was on Fire Island the summer of 1981 and I distinctly remember reading on a Sunday in *The New York Times* about a gay cancer found in San Francisco, and I looked at the beach and saw all these men sunning themselves. Sex was the gay handshake. It's how you came to New York. I didn't go to the trucks, I didn't go to the baths.

Picano: If I threw a party in New York and invited everyone I knew in 1985, maybe three people would show up from a list of 200. People were sick and dying and trying to do their best. I would go to St. Vincent's Hospital to see someone I knew there, and there was an entire floor of AIDS patients, and I'd see someone else who would say could you get a paper or could you deliver a message, and then it was your entire day.

Shewey: There were not a lot of out gay journalists in mainstream journalism. I'm pretty sure I was passed over for jobs and assignments because I was gay. When I was first in New York I contacted Michael Feingold at *The Village Voice* and he said to me, the theater editor at the time was Erica, and he said, "Don't let her know you are gay." What? The fucking *Village Voice* and I'm supposed to be in the closet? I don't think so. Those were the days, the 80s, when *The New York Times* did not publish the word gay except in direct quotes. It took a certain amount of courage to be out and publicly gay.

Dace: There was a lot of homophobia in editorial positions. Terry was utterly and completely out.

Picano: I was the book editor at *New York Native* and a contributing editor to *Christopher Street* and *The Advocate*. There weren't enough gay people to go around to explain the culture, it exploded in the late 60s after Stonewall. So we all worked like four jobs. Everyone wore several hats, it was a very exciting time.

Sommers: There was more of a hierarchy of publications, back in those days there were the first night critics, the second night critics, and the third night critics. We were rarely quoted on the marquees.

Patrick Merla (*Christopher Street* editor, 1978–1979, *The Native* editor 1982–1988): I met Chuck Ortleb at Morty Manford’s apartment on 14th Street, Morty was a presence in gay activists alliance and was close friends with Vito Russo, and this was a meeting at Morty’s apartment that Vito invited me to, and the purpose of the meeting was to make a gay media group, and that didn’t happen, but someone said you really should design some kind of publication that isn’t just a sex magazine, which everything was then, sometimes with nonsexual editorial content, and Chuck said, “Well I’m in the process of forming one.”

[Charles Ortleb could not be reached for this interview.]

Barbour: Charles Ortleb started out publishing *Christopher Street*, a gay literary magazine, which had a certain cachet.

Merla: *Christopher Street* was beyond influential. When *Dancer from the Dance* was about to be published, the galleys were sent to Chuck, who fell in love with it. He republished the third chapter and did an interview with [author] Andrew Holleran, who was part of the Violet Quill with Felice [Picano] and Edmund White and other deceased authors. *Dancer* is the best gay book ever written, and on the basis of that publication we were told afterward by Eric Garber’s [pen name for Andrew Holleran] editor at William Morrow that they were in negotiations for paperback rights, all thanks to *Christopher Street*.

Barbour: Then came *The Native*, which filled a gap in New York’s publishing scene until it went off the rails. *The Native* was a tabloid size, about 20 pages, maybe a little less. It was a biweekly. I remember when Absolut Vodka started advertising with us it was a big deal because companies were reaching out to gay readers.

Part 2: “A Noah’s Ark of Emotional Distress”

Dace: If applicable, I would write plays with an awareness of my own lesbianism. Terry loved the way I wrote, and he called me and asked if I would write for *The Native*, where he was theater editor. *The Native* had a really fine back of the book; the arts coverage was excellent. There was painting and photography and good dance, theater, music criticism. I was proud to be associated with it, but the front was a mess. The people in charge decided that AIDS was not caused by HIV but the swine flu. They ignored the science and it became really embarrassing, and those of us writing for *The Native* got ridiculed.

Barbour: Charles Ortleb, who published it, was insane. He was a major conspiracy theorist. He believed that HIV did not cause AIDS, he thought it was engineered by the government, theories would come and go so quickly. There was one about pork, telling people to avoid ham sandwiches, then there was the dolphin theory, and they went running through the archives to put a picture of Flipper on the cover. A bunch of dolphins died somewhere, and that was part of the conspiracy.

Sandla: As things moved on with *The Native* it got crazier and crazier, and at one point it was something about dolphins and it was a big open office, and I’d say what’s on the cover, Flipper? And a week later, guess what was on the cover? Flipper. Theories were crackpot-ist and dangerous, because it’s people’s lives we’re talking about. Very “Who’s this guy Anthony Fauci?”

Sommers: My own doctor said, “You really believe that crazy stuff?” And I didn’t want to be part of the publication anymore.

Barbour: It was what someone had called a Noah’s ark of emotional distress.

John Harris (*TheaterWeek* editor shortly before it folded): *The Native* would take unpopular positions on the epidemic, so advertisers would drop out. Chuck [Ortleb] would often start a new publication to support another, or build up the other ones. The name of the parent company was That New Magazine Inc, the umbrella company, and under it were *Christopher Street*, *The Native*, *TheaterWeek*, and maybe an opera outlet.

Barbour: Just to give you an idea of the recklessness of this, *TheaterWeek* was designed to bring in money, and the week I started there was a story about the city giving AZT to prisoners because a lot of prisoners were ill with HIV. So the headline of *The Native* said, in big bold font, “CITY PLANNING TO POISON BLACK PRISONERS.” Not just prisoners, black prisoners, and my jaw hit the floor. Bob Sandla, my editor, said, “Welcome aboard.”

Harris: I started freelancing for *The Native*, and when David Barbour and Bob Sandla left *TheaterWeek* they needed a new editor and I stepped in. I have very fond memories of those days though it was a fraught time to be gay in New York, and over time *The Native* became more about theories about AIDS. As a protective measure, I tried to keep my distance at *TheaterWeek* from the rest of the company. Offices were on 25th street just west of Madison Square Park. The whole company was on the fourth floor of that building, so we shared staff, art department, and receptionists.

Sommers: I worked on *The Native* during the middle part of the 80s. Terry was my editor, it was different generally speaking on a technical basis. There were no computers. I would write the review on a typewriter. I would walk it over to *The Native* office, or Terry's apartment sometimes. He would look at it, and if he wanted to make major changes he would call me. This was marking paper on pencil.

Sommers: I'll be damned if I remember how much they paid for a review. It wasn't much, maybe \$25 a piece. *Backstage* paid me \$5 a review, and I was the first person they ever paid for a review.

Shewey: At *Soho News* I was the theater editor so I don't know if I got paid extra for reviews, but they paid pitifully. Trying to think, when I would write theater reviews for *The Village Voice*, the concrete numbers are nowhere near in my head. Short pieces would be like 75 bucks.

Harris: *TheaterWeek* paid by the article, not word count. My mind is drawing a blank as to what those rates were but they were very low for the industry for sure.

Raymond: I still continue to have my bills paid by something else, I have a 9 to 5 at a legal services organization. I could not live on theater writing. It was never my job but what I did on the side.

Sandla: I think it was like \$150, but I honestly don't remember. As things were failing, *TheaterWeek* became the source of cash because fewer people were purchasing *The Native* or wanting to advertise in it, and the checks were not being paid, and I looked at David [Barbour] and said I can't really ask people to write for us if they aren't going to be paid.

Sandla: *TheaterWeek* was born out of *The Native*, which spun out of *Christopher Street*. When *TheaterWeek* started in 1987, I was asked to be the managing editor and immediately thought of Terry.

Part 3: “We Each Put \$100 In”

Merla: Terry was already in place as editor of the theater section at *The Native*, and then wrote for *TheaterWeek*, but I already knew him because I was the designer for Gay Presses of New York books.

Picano: In 1977, I decided to start the first gay male publishing ever, the Seahorse Press. The seahorse is one of the two male creatures that actually give birth. Terry started his publishing company on money he had gotten from an uncle dying. It was called JH based on the initials of his uncle. He thought the uncle was gay but had no proof. We had a conversation in 1980, maybe, at [fellow publisher] Larry Mitchell's suggestion, so the three of us got together and got dinner at a place called The Black Sheep on Jane Street. We discussed the idea of pooling resources in order to lower whatever production or overhead we had. The idea was to do one new book a year that the three of us would all get involved in. Terry said I saw these two plays by Harvey Fierstein at Café La MaMa, and maybe we can get him published. I got Harvey's phone number, he was living in Brooklyn, and he said I wrote a third one but I have to finish it, and I need an editor. He said would you be my editor for the plays? So, we signed a contract, we each put \$100 in (me, Larry, and Terry) into a bank account, and at that point it had earned a little bit of money so we wrote out a contract and sent it to Harvey with an advance of \$300. It was *Torch Song Trilogy*, and it had not been produced as a full trilogy. By the time we published it in late 1981, Harvey was still working on producing it. When Harvey won his Tony, he thanked us by name for having faith in it.

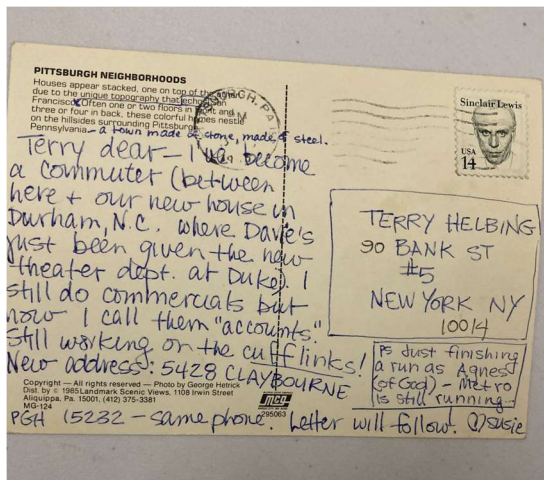
Shewey: Gay Presses really played an important role in the story of *Torch Song Trilogy*, Harvey Fierstein almost single handedly forced New York journalism and theater to be more accepting.

Dace: You saw more gay theater open up. Looking back on it all, the playwrights who most excited me right from the beginning of their careers were Paula Vogel and Martin Sherman.

Sommers: Terry in those days lived in the West Village off Hudson Street, maybe Hudson and Bank.

Dace: He lived on the corner of Bank Street and Abington Square.

Merla: Terry was living at 90 Bank Street, where he had his accident.



A postcard sent to Terry at his Bank Street address

Part 4: “Whitey”

Dace: Terry had a bowling buddy whose name I cannot recall; he was the person who realized Terry was missing.

Picano: We were meant to have a financial meeting. This was the late 80s. Terry had till then done all the Gay Presses of New York finances. He didn't show up. So I went over to his apartment and a woman peeked out and said “I think they took him away in an ambulance.” I started calling local hospitals, and I found out he was in a hospital and in a coma.

Merla: He fell down the stairs.

Dace: The bowling buddy very shortly after that started calling hospitals, and probably started with the one right around the corner, St. Vincent's. It was a major hospital in the Village. The bowling buddy's first thought was to call me. Terry was in a coma. I wanna stress the person who knew him the best and longest was Rachel Green, a friend from Canada who went to New York and took over caring for Terry. I regret that I cannot reach her. Rachel somehow found his older sister, who was about 20 years older. She was a mother figure and sister. Rachel found her in East DuBuque, Illinois, where Terry grew up. It took her a while to get to New York. She didn't stay very long but got him to wake up by describing his childhood dog. And Terry smiled and said, “Whitey.” He woke up.

[Terry's sister could not be reached for this interview.]

Picano: I only found out Terry was HIV positive when his brain surgeon told me; by proxy I became one of the people to handle his healthcare. The brain surgeon told me the problems he would have after the coma, and he said, “And of course we're treating him for HIV.”

Dace: When Terry finally came to, the ICU doctor said a lot of people had been brought in that day and he was the only person to survive. It unquestionably had something to do with the fact that he had someone in the room with him talking to and touching him. The four of us — Rachel, the bowling buddy, Felice and I — decided that we think Terry picked up a stranger late at night, they climbed up to his fifth floor apartment, we think he pushed Terry down the stairs and then grabbed Terry's wallet. He was mugging him, but in any event the guy fled, and it wasn't until the next morning that one of Terry's neighbors found him, blood all over, and called 911.

Barbour: Terry was different after the accident. His voice had lowered a bit, and he was almost more himself but whatever filter he had had vanished. I remember standing at the back of the Brooks Atkinson Theatre and seeing him and asking how he was doing. He went on about how he was using his own urine on his Kaposi sarcoma and it was just *marvelous* and all working out — and I was like, that's nice!

Sandla: I didn't know at the time what was going on, one doesn't ask certain questions, you let the person tell you, but it was clear there was something different about Terry, and whatever the social inhibitions were got turned off, so he would talk very loudly about something that was odd or strange or perhaps embarrassing but he was still a sweet guy and he was this lovely person, and it was always like Terry is so colorful but, ooh, what happened here? And you felt badly for him; everyone liked him.

Picano: He emerged from the coma, and he was different, a nicer Terry. He was very defensive and guarded, very smart, he had a sharp tongue. But that's not who he was after, I would go to the hospital three days a week throwing a ball with him on the roof like he was four, five years old. He lived four or five years more. He went back to theater, he went back to reviewing, he was in speech therapy. He said to me, I need to have a companion to go to the theater with me every night, I need to make sure I am getting it out and not zoning out. So two friends and I did that every night. He was rigorous, he would call up and read the review and ask if he missed anything. I guess it was *TheaterWeek* and *New York Native*. Of his accident, Terry remembered nothing.

Dace: But he met this lovely man, whose name I can't remember. When Terry finally died of AIDS in 1994, the boyfriend and I divided his collection of Broadway albums. We were fighting over them, it was comical. Everyone wanted heavy things, the microwave, TV. The boyfriend was really really nice and good for Terry, and I think it was so important that they had that extra time.

Sandla: I didn't go to the service. At that point, it had been a number of years and *The Native* was painful for everyone. There were so many deaths and memorials that at a certain point it was like somebody else, somebody else. I wouldn't say burnout, but people could drop like flies back then and it was always awful.

Dace: I was unable to go to the funeral. I was an academic, and when I started teaching in Massachusetts I could spend at least three full days and an additional evening reviewing in New York; when I was dean it was a little harder. I couldn't leave when I had obligations at the university, so I wrote a statement and asked [theater critic] Holly Hill to read it. Holly was a colleague of ours at ATCA who some years ago retired back home to Texas. I remember being sad; she gave me a tape of her reading my statement. And I was a little sad that she had apparently never heard of Queen Latifah because Terry would call me Queen Lateesha. Latisha is my name and he would distort it slightly to make it work, and Holly didn't understand and said La-Tish-La instead and no one got it. She was a straight critic and didn't quite tune into Terry's sense of humor. The service was at a theater that was dark because it was Monday night, quite possibly at La MaMa.

Part 5: "The Explosion of Gay Characters"

Picano: In 1994, I disincorporated Gay Presses of New York. At that point, my partner became an attorney and said we had grown to the size where we should be incorporated for copyright protections, insurance, et cetera. So we became a partnership corporation, which means we also became a tontine: that means if one person dies the other two share the profits. So we—Larry, Terry and I—did that, and the first one to go was Terry.

Harris: One of the thrilling things about being involved with *TheaterWeek* the 90s was the explosion of gay characters, theater pieces with trans characters, everything was changing during that time, *Angels in America* was being written and then produced Off Broadway and on, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Kander and Ebb was up and running, *Falsettos* by Bill Finn, all of these things. It was a tremendously rich time to witness and report on LGBTQ+ theater and that to me was the most exciting thing, and we were able to cover that very in depth.

Raymond: The dot com bubble took down a number of publications, in some ways making it harder to get work in theater writing.

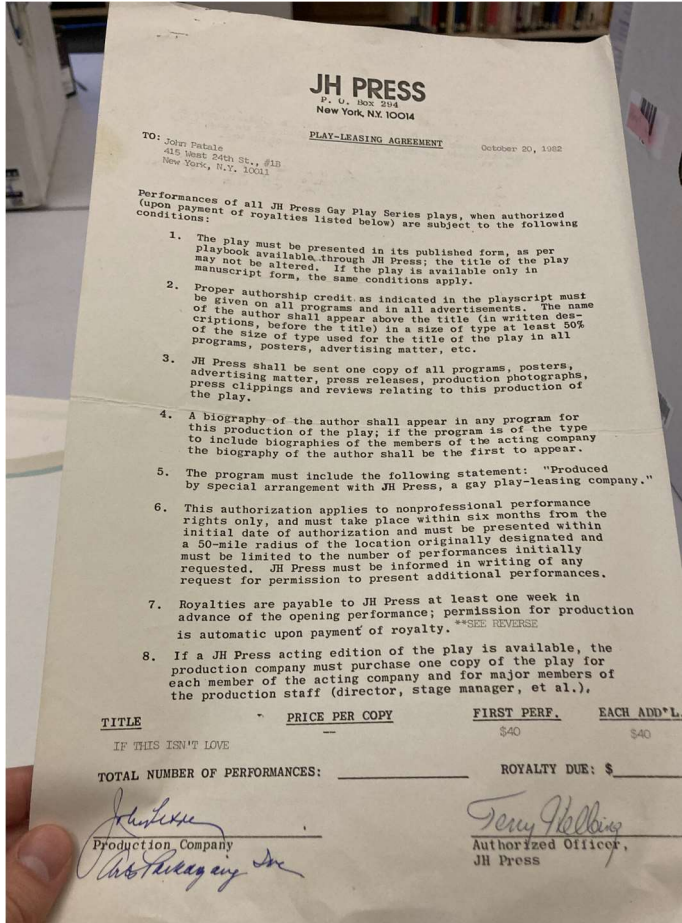
Shewey: The creation of the internet changed everything. For instance, I cycled out of journalism after a peak experience of doing a very ballsy interview with Madonna at the time her movie *Truth or Dare* came out in 1991 for *The Advocate*, and that was just before the internet, and *The Advocate* was a little national gay magazine but it wasn't online so my agent sold that interview to the *LA Times Syndicate* and they published it around the world in 19 languages. It made me a nice tidy sum; that could never happen now because everything is instantly available largely for free, so the internet changed everything.

Harris: I was at *TheaterWeek* from 1989 to 1996; it disbanded in 1997. The company was always struggling, so it was never a lucrative project for everyone. We only had a readership of about 10,000, and now theater lovers who aren't in New York probably have much greater access to information about shows than they would have then, so while we provided terrific service at the time, it's exciting that if you're a kid growing up in the Midwest today you don't have to wait for a publication to arrive once a week to read about your favorite show.

Dace: When Terry died of AIDS at 42 on March 28, 1994, several of us in ATCA and in his gay bowling league had the obvious thought of collecting money to honor Terry by supporting gay theater and its interpretation. I personally called every member of ATCA and begged them to give money. One of the things I managed to achieve was setting up the fund and got called something along the lines of Concerns for Gay and Lesbians in Theater. There was the money and it could be used for anything having to do for gay criticism, and we agreed we'd raise \$50K and the interest would pay for whatever we were doing. It was wide open as to what it might be used for. Naming it for Terry happened because he died, and I got people to donate to that fund because of his death. Before that I was begging for donations for the foundation, and quite a few of us set up in our wills so money would go to the donation. I then contacted the people I knew who were friends of Terry's and his sister, and I think everyone I contacted made a donation to that fund, and I did, and every year I gave more money to that fund, and others did too.

Sandla: For real, whatever their eventual faults, *The Native* and *TheaterWeek* had a certain atmosphere, we were younger then, there was an atmosphere of people in the same room, they were passionate about that thing, and there are differences about being in the same room and being passionate about the thing and being passionate about something and not being in the room. If you're gonna have a newsroom, you need to have people in the same room to communicate, no matter how informal that space is. That Terry could walk in the door and you could get a lot done in a 15 minute chat was special. And Terry just went to everything. He always knew everything, and if he didn't he was interested in finding out. And we were interested in everything. We asked, who's out there doing stuff, and how do we bring it forward?

Dace: Even at the time of his death, Terry was editing gay theater books for Heinemann, the publisher; see his seven-work collection *Gay and Lesbian Plays Today*. He was a Renaissance man of gay theater.



A rights agreement to a JH Press work as signed by Terry in 1982