Why did you choose to write about John Fryer?

1. My previous Philadelphia-based play, *If She Stood*, was inspired by the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. It ended with an imagined portrait of a real descendent of the society’s core membership, a woman who fought for abolition, women’s rights, voting rights, and racial equality. This woman was also most probably lesbian or bisexual (terms nearly unheard in her day). Though she crusaded for so many causes she never once stood up publically for the private shape of her heart . . .

2. *If She Stood* belonged to a five-play arc of work drawing on nineteenth-century sources, going back decade by decade to find a view of our past scrubbed of nostalgia’s distorting glow. Completing that cycle, it felt imperative I leave the “safety” of that historical past, where I could imagine without the risk of contradicting living memory.

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5. During my intake tour, Lee Arnold, Senior Director of the Library & Collections and Chief Operating Officer at HSP, showed me a double set of drawers in a locked archive room. The right set of drawers, he said, held “steps toward our ideal democracy” while the left held “stumbles along the way.” Those “stumbles” included *Drum* magazine, a Philadelphia-based LGBT publication from the 1960s. Googling *Drum* magazine (haphazardly) led me to seminal LGBT activists Barbara Gittings and then Frank Kameny, who, in turn, led me to an image of the pair seated at a dais next to a man in a mask. That is how I met John Ercel Fryer.

In Dr. Fryer I found the locus for all of the orbiting questions and intentions listed above.

What was your experience in the archives like? How did you go about turning hundreds of boxes into a narrative? Did you feel comfortable doing so? If not, how did you mitigate this discomfort?

I am a research junky. I find my instigating spark from methodically delving into some wormhole of now-obsured fact. The specificity of that launch liberates me from the terrifying generality of the blank page. But then comes a moment when I feel trapped by the tangibility of
all that accrued fact; I cannot find liberty to imagine under such historic weight. Then I try to isolate the “blockage” to see if I may flip that “problem” into “content.” With Fryer I did not want to write a biography—could not see how that was “theatrical”—could not imagine how to find an actor to “be” (more than a pale facsimile of) that six-foot-five, 300 pound man. Artistically, I was more interested in the way my mental portrait of Fryer shifted from older to folder and box to box—how his “factual” history recalibrated in me dependent on the box I held. I realized I could write multiple portraits of him from the perspectives of different figures in his life, through which an alternative “completeness” might accrue. I could play the complexity of Fryer’s “presence on paper” against his corporeal absence on stage.

**What is your definition of truth in theater? How might it differ from a historian’s definition?**

I source real lives for live theater. I am drawn to private figures who (for varied reasons) lurk at the margins of acknowledged public narratives. I look for those who have left enough trace to tantalize but have been enough obscured to “offer” me permission to imagine.

I do question how far conjecture-less accuracy can reach in accounts of human action (theatrical or historical). That a human *is* may be a fact—but *how* a human is surely isn’t. That an event transpired may be a fact, but can the manifold intentions, receptions, and personal costs orbiting that event be *only* “factual,” absolutely verifiable, bordered on every side by accuracy? I imagine that as soon as a moment is plucked from the past for re-transmission to those who were not there, it’s on a journey toward story. The moment’s vital essence is chosen and then highlighted (by the teller) in order to transport the listener. This shaping, to me, trades absolute empirical fact for a narrative force meant to drive the listener to the event’s core “factual” import (rather than all the potentially obscuring factual tangents). I believe history, to be effective, does streamline the chaos of life in order to crystallize a *select* moment; that’s what I do. The question is how far each of us in our field feels permitted to take this process. In theater, I count on my moral compass to determine what of these liberties aid my script—aid truth—make visible what is true—question what has been held as true—question the notion of truth—question theater as another conveyor belt of time-based consumption that forces concision, which means TOTAL truth cannot be on offer.

These days, I am especially drawn to moments that, for varied reasons, belong to individuals/groups/communities that needed to move under deep cover precisely to gain the power to step forward to visibility. How can I make theatrically visible a history that comprised necessary invisibility?

**Why highlight the boxes/foreground the research process itself (as opposed to striving for verisimilitude)? Is it to say something about the constructedness of narratives?**

Oh, there are a number of personal/creative stances at play here.

1. For me “verisimilitude” is one of many options rather than a fixed goal toward which a playwright might strive. For instance, in my work, I have a personal disinterest in “fourth-wall naturalism” (in which the actors pretend the audience is not there while inhabiting a “realistic” set metaphorically sealed off by an imaginary fourth wall that
the audience agrees to “see” through). I admit I find that form of naturalism \textit{artificial}. So many unspoken compromises in the hopes of maintaining a familiar illusion—why not just construct an event-specific illusion? I myself am more able to access a natural emotion through overt theatricality.

2. My primary working relationship for eighteen months of research was with those inanimate boxes (three per day). Some boxes were revelatory, some tragic, others stultifying. All that complexity bursting from banal cardboard, to me, was the fresh theatrical impetus. To have transmuted that back to some naturalistic context (most probably biography, which never interested me) felt akin to ignoring the true inspiration.

3. And, yes, the “constructedness of narratives.” I suppose I am a diehard postmodernist. I want to offer the moment unimpeded, then frame the moment apart from natural context, then call that framed moment out as “constructed,” but, all the while, suck you in emotionally.

\textbf{What did you change about the Dr. Anonymous speech and why?}

I made two categories of changes.

1. Rhythm and shape. Fryer’s words were intended to dramatically affect the fight to free homosexuality from the stigma of mental disease. With his eye for theater, Fryer costumed himself to deliver these words (though his imperative was fear for his livelihood.) But, however much Fryer’s speech was “performance,” his medium was not theater. Rather than accentuating his vital points, Fryer occasionally circled back, which, to me, dulled his radicalism. I denied myself the option to extract his words mid-sentence in the hope of “driving” (his inherent) drama—that felt dishonest toward the audience and dishonoring toward Fryer (quixotic, I admit). I did permit myself the option to end a paragraph at its high point.

2. Fryer, while pushing forward to a more complete liberty than his era offered, was simultaneously a man bound by the shortsightedness of his time. He was truly invested in the rights of other (what we now call) disenfranchised communities/cultures, but, from our modern vantage, his view of these communities can sound insensitive. In the full text of the speech, Fryer likened the need many gay psychiatrists felt to “pass” as akin to the journey of some African Americans. I am pretty sure the audience to whom he said these words was overwhelmingly Caucasian—certainly the panel was. Forty years later, this makes me hear his words as irresponsible, even offensive. Fryer then used the highly inflammatory N-word to point toward the syndrome of societal oppression in which the dominant culture forces other groups into a restrictive and guarded existence. I felt these issues with Fryer’s sociopolitical understanding in 1972 (he evolved to more contemporary viewpoints as the decades passed and the cultural dialogue matured) obscured the cogence and bravery also held in the speech. In essence, his blundering insensitivity
masked his articulate bravery. I edited to rescue the incredible importance of his speech from the generational errors that he (and hopefully most of us) outgrew.

Do these changes make the speech more or less true, according to your definition of the term?

Honestly, neither. I don’t imagine I could affect a complete extant document, like the speech, to make it more or less true. What I do feel (as I say above) is that the speech has become hard to truly “hear.” How can we grasp its import in a visceral way rather than as a (however vital) relic? How can we experience what it was then—now?

You chose not to represent Fryer himself in this play. Why? Does this relate to Fryer’s own masking in the most important moment of his life? As Gross puts it, “John Fryer’s most visible moment [is] preserved in this artifact that forever obscures him.”

Much of this is connected to points I raised earlier. I did not want to write a classic-form bio-play; I personally find that construct relatively flat on stage; the audience knows it usually begins with youth, ends in death, and has a (hopefully) long chronological middle. As a diehard postmodernist, I get pretty disgruntled when I sense a linear narrative engine kicking into an inevitable flow that I can see I must endure until it ends. Additionally, I could not imagine casting an actor to be more than a pale imitation of Fryer’s booming baritone emanating from his huge frame. Also, going through Fryer’s boxes, he became almost too “known” to me—I could not feel “permission” to imagine him. I chose others in his life who were even less known. which gave me the first open door to imagine on the page.

And then, yes, the idea that I would take this man whose incredible bravery had been obscured in history, whose masked identity had masked his place in the LGBT pantheon—the conundrum that had drawn me to him in the first place—the idea that I would now say, “Oh, never mind, here he is,” felt like letting all the air out of a balloon. Fryer remains the man in a literal and metaphorical mask as we try to know him through those who knew part of him. Fryer, despite 217 exhausting boxes, remains never truly knowable; after the fact, isn’t it always a construct (see question above)?

I’m also interested in how this masking(absence relates to the concept of privacy, which was denied gay men and lesbians in the 1986 Supreme Court decision Bowers v. Hardwick. In the play, Gross also talks about hiding. Should privacy be an important goal in movements for change, or does it reinscribe invisibility? Or are these two different concepts?

Mmmm, I don’t think issues of privacy—or-not were playing out in me. “Secrecy” was. When Gross talks about hiding, he is dissecting a cultural phenomenon. He says, “Secrecy: our delight, our defense, our culture, curse—epitaph?” He (as imagined by me) questions whether the phenomenon of a secret gay world (amid the heteronormative world) built on stolen glances and coded alliances should now retroactively be inscribed only as survival against oppression. He asks, in essence, was that life organic/genetic in some way to LGBT people? He does not scrub that secrecy of oppression, fear, and intense suffering, but he asks, are LGBT people losing part of their culture though the mainstreaming of their desire with the rise of so-called
heteronormativity (he cites “retrofit morality”)? Does the increasing visibility of gender and sexual minorities also mean that these groups are increasingly conforming to the model of bourgeois, heteronormative monogamy at the expense of the unique cultures they established earlier? Fryer thought so: as he put it in 2002, “There is this thing in the gay world where gays are encourage to become like straight people . . . I didn’t want to keep that mythology alive by trying to live the heterosexual model.”
All three of these characters were real people, but their personalities are largely inventions. What did you take from the archives, and what did you have to make up? How do these inventions relate to your definition of truth? Also, why did you choose these particular characters? Why and how did you think they could illuminate Fryer’s story better than anyone else?

Isn’t “invention” what any biographer does when animating via words the deceased flesh of a real-life person they never knew? A biography of FDR describing him in his private early-morning reverie before the first day of the Malta Conference, rather than in the day’s public proceedings, has to imagine it. I absolutely cop to invention, happy to, but it is a question of where you draw the line.

I took Alfred Gross’s persona from his writing style in epistolary exchanges with Fryer and from the texts of various speeches/addresses, etc. This style falls somewhere between Oscar Wilde and a solitary old lady coated in erudite verbosity with an underbelly of self-deprecation. While Gross’s words in the play are mine, I believe the style is his. I “grew” the character from his vestiges on paper. In the play we meet him in the post-mortal limbo, haunting Fryer’s archive, where he is a minor player. I believe that this open-face framing device, which freely acknowledges that Gross is a phantom who lives only in a box, grants me permission to imagine him—the play presents him as a ghost, so he is not real, so I am not claiming “accuracy.” I am often attracted to characters I feel need “rescuing” from the oblivion of public forgetting. I imagine the character and I make a contract (I know this is self-serving, as only I can “actively” agree). I get emotionally attached to the plight of their invisibility; this opens the door for me to get “inside” them.

What few biographical details I included on Gross were from research sources—the nature of the work he did, as described in the play, were from those same sources.

My reasons for settling on Gross—what I thought he alone could say that I felt relevant to Fryer’s life and the present evolution of LGBT rights—are detailed in my answer to the previous question.

I was drawn to Katherine Luder through my sense of her working relationship with Fryer. In other words, it was the tenor of their bond that began her conjuring in my mind rather than her individual traces. Gross was the first character I settled on, but I had not yet confirmed for myself that Fryer himself would not appear. When I found Luder, the play began to take its final form. There are a few scrappy notes from Luder to Fryer in the boxes. Most are fairly businesslike; all written in her elegant, nearly archaic cursive, which conjures turn-of-the-century schooling. My grandmother and her sisters had that same penmanship drilled into them—even as they received curtailed educations designed for wives and mothers, not career ambitions (an enforced limit they felt but could not entirely articulate). These thoughts resonated as I searched further for Luder among the boxes. I found perhaps three personal notes from her to Fryer betraying a more roiled emotional/intimate relationship parallel to their business one. I began to see them as platonic lovers. This nonsexual marriage (as I imagined it from paper) felt like a fresh vantage on Fryer, this lost icon of homosexual liberty. Last, I found the file in which Fryer prepared her memorial. This included his notes about her (and notes from other friends) for his
speech and the printed obituaries that followed. These obituaries all mention her habit of haunting thrift shops for remarkably colorful (often nearly clashing) bargain garments. This information clinched it for me. Partway through working on her text, I had tea with Harry Adamson (a close friend of Fryer and therefore Luder), who showed me one of her pastels and spoke of her diabetic condition and carrying cottage cheese in her purse (all of this was promptly transmuted into the play).

Ercel Ray Fryer, Fryer’s father, is perhaps the hardest of my three characters to locate in the boxes (which naturally attracted me in my perverse process). There are hundreds, if not thousands, of letters from Fryer’s mother, all of which are very theatrical (almost Southern Gothic). Despite their overt theatricality, their plentitude turned me away from her as a viable character (see my answer to the question re: research and feeling blocked by too much tangible history). Partially, Fryer’s father’s proximity to his mother turned me toward him as I pushed her to the side. Along with her stacks of letters are just a very few from him. I was attracted to the drama of his absence (do you sense a pattern here?). Some of his letters are signed “Love, Daddy” (as said in the play, I did not invent that). I know enough of the era (my own grandfathers were born within a decade of Ercel) to understand that such a man, in such an era, signing off “Love, Daddy” was extraordinarily rare. I mulled over that open-face intimacy from a man who rarely wrote and who appeared in photos to recede from view. Lastly, while I do not know whether Fryer eventually came out to his mother (she outlived his father by quite a few years), I am pretty certain his father never (consciously) knew. That was the key into writing Ercel.

As for my inventions and the question re: definitions of truth, I don’t believe I am offering some greater truth through inventing amid the gaps of “factual” information; I do believe I am inventing something based on fact that is as viable as any other form of more traditional conjecture—this is what I think always happens when any person assembles any incomplete set of facts to paint a portrait of an event that they did not witness. (Even supposedly pure “documentation” is essentially the act of one person choosing to save some things around a select event—it is not whole—it is already an edit that, it could be argued, ushers in a “fictive” filter.)

Why did you choose Ercel to give the Dr. Anonymous speech?

This answer may be deceptively simple.

1. I knew the speech had to be in the play—the speech is the reason I found Fryer and the reason anyone lauds him. But how could its inclusion be theatrical (rescued from the potential doldrums of biography’s enforced chronology)?

2. As said above, I worried that the speech was near impossible to “hear” now. How to solve that through performance?

3. Once I had decided not to haul Fryer himself on stage, I wondered who else could speak his words. I wondered which character could have their own personal investment in the speech that might parallel the risk Fryer took in originally delivering it. How might that alternate emotional investment revivify the speech to make us “hear” it anew?
4. Ercel was the clear locus of all these questions. The loving father who never acknowledged his son’s homosexuality. The man who wrote so few letters to his son but signed off with such heart. The man who stood at the rear of any picture, seemingly receding from view, now asked to stride to the lip of the stage in front of an audience in the play—might his saying his son’s speech be a road to acknowledging his son’s homosexuality?—a final, intensely intimate letter to his son? I force the character to inhabit the circumstances of the play (rather than the naturalistic verisimilitude of a fourth-wall pretense) to coax him to a precipice where he must do things, in death, that he was unable to do in life.