American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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FOREWORD

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> If [...] it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time (or, at any rate, who has perceived in it a fault line or a breaking point), then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place or an encounter between times and generations.
> Agamben, "What is the contemporary?" [1]

This book is an exploration of contemporary American theater, in some of its remarkable trends and striking phenomena. The 21st century being now of age, the following chapters broadly propose to examine the tangle of formal innovation, socio-political debates and aesthetic introspection that has emerged along the years to its majority, in the way plays, performances and musical works are devised, produced and received in the United States. If the stage is a shifting echo of the world it performs for, how has it chosen to engage with the new millennium's shattering events, global crises and technological turns? In what directions have drama and performance evolved to reaffirm their mission in a neoliberal age of insecure funding, ever-present screens and urgent calls for collective reevaluations of memory, grief and identity? And how are dramaturgy and spectatorship repositioned by the "constant oscillation" of what has been termed our "metamodern" era? [2]

1 Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?", in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik & Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011, p. 18.

2 Van den Akker and Vermeulen have proposed the concept of metamodernism "as a heuristic label and a periodising term," "characterized by oscillation rather than synthesis," in order to describe a general structure of feeling emerging from postmodernism and reacting to it. See chapter 8 of the present volume where Emma Willis in particular references this theory and applies it to contemporary performances. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism", in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds), *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 39 & p. 41.

In the last decades of the 20th century, dominant critical trends associated theater with the distinct sense of an ending, in turns postulating the "death of character" in favor of auto-representational bents (Elinor Fuchs), the relegation of theater as a genre to "an historical rather than a contemporary art" (Richard Schechner),[3] or altogether speculating on the doomed nature of live performance in times of pervading mediatization (Philip Auslander). Since the start of the millennium, a wealth of artistic productions has eloquently demonstrated the vivid endurance of theater practice, while bearing out the necessity, suggested in those earlier and more pessimistic assessments, for dramaturgies to periodically undergo reconfiguration. The stage always was the site of a perpetual starting-over, but the end of the 20th century particularly thematized certain growing antinomies between art and context which required theater to rethink itself or, as Jean-Pierre Sarrazac proposes, to rise out of its own ashes: "The last paradox of theatricality may very well consist of the (Beckettian) task of being done (again) with theater while constantly dreaming of beginning theater all over again. For theater can only be achieved outside itself [...]"[4] The dynamic Sarrazac sketches out, whereby theater can only be reborn by letting go of itself in cyclical rhythms, appears symptomatic of contemporary developments, and begs for renewed enquiry into current ways of writing, enacting and experiencing theater.

Giorgio Agamben deftly articulates that the contemporary moment cannot be seized strictly from within, but becomes visible in relation to other times, projecting the shadow of the present onto the past, so that the past "acquire[s] the ability to respond to the darkness of the now."[5] From terrorism, wars and the circulation of migrant populations to financial, health and climate crises or social upheavals regarding gender and race, the young 21st century has been rife with fractures and fault lines shifting the paradigm of our everyday circumstances and testing our capacity to make sense of "now" through contextualization, analysis, policy and artistic creation. The present volume does not attempt to map out all of the meaningful developments of the American stage, and lays no claim to exhaustiveness; the picture it draws in thirteen chapters is necessarily incomplete and fragmented. The aim of its essays and interviews is, more modestly, to delve into a range of current theatrical works and practices, placing them against the manifold backgrounds of dramatic tradition, cultural history and

3 Richard Schechner, "Toward the 21st Century", *TDR*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1993, p. 7.

4 Jean Pierre Sarrazac, "The Invention of 'Theatricality'", trans. Virginie Magnat, *SubStance*, vol. 31, nos 2 & 3, 2002, p.70.

5 Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 18 & p. 19.

contemporary criticism, in order to investigate telling evolutions in dramaturgical language, to probe tendencies in casting, staging and spectatorship, and to reignite conversations about the place and function of theater in the community. Rather than a comprehensive account, it offers in-depth forays into, and close readings of, the aesthetics of a number of plays, productions, companies and institutions, placing them in a dialogue with the past to anticipate future prospects.

The plural notion of "dramaturgies" in the volume's title was chosen in full awareness of its Greek etymology—which has traveled through French and German—as well as its contemporary ambivalence. In its earliest definition, dramaturgy refers to the art, or science, of dramatic composition—originally, as Magda Romanska states, "*dramatourgos* simply meant someone who was able to arrange various dramatic actions in a meaningful and comprehensive order."[6] The French language, in which "*dramaturge*" is still used for "dramatist," even as a second meaning pointing to the role of theoretical collaborator derived from Bertolt Brecht's practice[7] increasingly asserts itself,[8] compellingly illustrates the intersection of creative input and critical distance, authorship and analysis, which circulates within the notion. In the words of Katalin Trenscényi and Bernadette Cochrane, dramaturgy, freed from a strict association with Aristotelian poetics or a definition limited to textual analysis, has "gradually reconfigured itself by the late twentieth century, and has become synonymous with the totality of the performance-making process."[9] In light of this broadening scope, the productive polysemy of the phrase "American dramaturgies" seems the most fitting choice to encompass the range of objects examined here, and the methodologies deployed to explore them. Whether they rely on stylistic analysis, on interviews with playwrights and dramaturgs, or on the tracing of dramaturgical devices in the collective space of the city or the collective time of memory, the chapters of this volume are concerned with theater-making as a dynamic process, the ramifications of which extend

6 Magda Romanska (ed.), "Introduction", *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 1.

7 On the development of the role of the dramaturg and its Brechtian origins, see Mary Davies' essay in chapter 6.

8 While some French institutions continue to prefer the phrase "*conseiller littéraire et théâtral*" (literary and dramatic advisor), theater departments and schools like the Théâtre National de Strasbourg have been training "*dramaturges*" for over a decade. The German spelling "*dramaturg*" or the parent noun "*dramaturgie*" are sometimes found on playbills, in an attempt to prevent confusing the audience about the roles of author and dramaturg.

9 Katalin Trencsényi & Bernadette Cochrane (eds), "Foreword", *New Dramaturgy*, London/New York, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, p. xi.

from the playwriting classroom to the frenzied discussion of shows on social media. The choice of the phrase "American dramaturgies" does not imply the embrace of one distinctly categorized definition of the term (as old or new, as either composition, or analysis, or creative support), but underpins the view that its labile and growing meaning is not only an asset but also a reflection of the diversity of contemporary artistic modalities and critical angles.

Since this volume was edited in France, with essays written by scholars from across Europe and from New Zealand as well as from the US, it also speaks to the international resonance of the American stage, and queries what is perceived as "American" aesthetics at home and abroad. A hundred years ago, Paris was just beginning to pay attention to US theater: popular comedies were being translated, leading to the introduction of more innovative writing with *The Emperor Jones* at the Odéon in 1923, and later to a very active and prestigious phase of importing American plays until the end of the 1960s.[10] The picture offered by the first decades of the 21st century is radically different: while it is fairly rare for new US playwrights to be translated and produced in Paris today, it is very common for festivals and institutions to invite downtown theater companies—the Wooster Group, New York City Players, Young Jean Lee's Theater Company and Andrew Schneider have, among many others, all been featured. In France, the definition of American contemporary dramaturgies seems to have narrowed around the notion of experimental theater as represented by identifiable troupes, to the detriment of new writing in a strictly text-based vein or playwrights unattached to a company. Not so in England, where new American playwriting continues to invite sustained attention, as evidenced by the National Theatre or Young Vic productions of the works of, say, Sarah Ruhl, Annie Baker, Lindsey Ferrentino or Jackie Sibblies Drury. An enquiry into the reasons for such disparity in the international reception of US theater would provide the subject for a different volume, but its mere acknowledgement makes an investigation into the definers of an "American" stage all the richer.

In their introduction to *21st Century Drama: What Happens Now*, Siân Adiseshiah and Louise Lepage point out that, although the perspective of their volume is decidedly British, they prefer to omit any adjective of nationality from the title, in deference to the essential globalization of theater in the 21st century and to the international

10 On the history of American theater in France, see Lewis Falb, *American Drama in Paris 1945-70*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina Press, 1973; as well as chapter X of Bernard Banoun, Isabelle Poulin & Yves Chevrel (eds), *L'Histoire des traductions en langue française*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2019.

range of many of the works discussed. While this is a compelling critical choice for the examination of trends within Europe, it seems that, even in our global context, American theater is still very much defined by its distinction from, and relationship to, European practice, warranting the preservation of the national epithet in the title of the present collection. The performances under scrutiny here are easily categorized as American by the nationality of their authors and the original contexts in which they are analyzed, but the volume's collective critical perspective aims to interrogate that identity beyond the birthplace of the works of art, hypothesizing about the possibility of outlining specific trends and tropes, national moods and modes, and distinct ways to engage with the weight of theatrical heritage.

Foremost among the legacies of the American stage is the supposedly transparent but persistently elusive notion of realism, which the contemporary stage now revisits after the rise of non-traditional performance, and which the first section of this volume seeks to probe and challenge through the texture of new plays. Marc Robinson's exploration of radical experiments in realist performance reevaluates the ambivalence of the genre in a contemporary context, and brings to light the ultimate unreliability of seemingly stable paradigms and objects. Through the stylistically diverging works of Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard Maxwell and David Levine, Robinson subtly traces a disorienting commitment to the realist form which exposes its underpinnings across broken narratives, moving away from the traditional constraints of mimesis to question the intrusion, awareness, or compassion of the spectator's gaze. Narrowing the focus from the overall composition of recent works to the specific orality of their experimental voices, Avra Sidiropoulou next looks into the restoration of a playful textual primacy in the plays of Charles Mee, Mac Wellman and Maxwell. Filtered through the demands of body and space, the fabric of dramatic language asserts its physicality in a gesture which, as Siridopoulou points out, is reminiscent of the landscape aesthetics of Gertrude Stein, infusing the script with the incantatory echoes of poems and the cerebral overflow of novels. The primacy of space and set in the creative process is then confirmed by Maxwell himself, in conversation with Emeline Jouve. The playwright reveals his conception of dramaturgy as three-dimensional sculpture, and discusses his fascination with the rhythmical capacity of words to move things along in an art which is necessarily "a response to the present". In the final essay of the section, Ana Fernández-Caparrós turns to the airy sets and minimalist lyricism of Sarah Ruhl's plays in order to outline a poetics of theater as transformational space, both spatially and epistemologically. Relying on Italo Calvino's defense of "lightness", Fernández-Caparrós sharpens the concept into a critical tool which reasserts the contemporary stage as a place not to escape our humanity, but to engage with our mortality.

The second section of the volume takes a closer look at recent reconfigurations in play development, audience positioning and casting debates, reassessing the journey of creative work from page to stage and to spectator's gaze in light of 21st-century methods and technologies. An interview with Young Jean Lee thus sheds light on her own aesthetics as a playwright-director (downtown, abroad and on Broadway), as well as on her approach to teaching playwriting. She describes how the classroom approximates the pressures of the professional world, molding apprenticeship through commitment and feedback, and stresses the necessity for resilience and survival in a playwright's career. Moving from writing to development, Mary Davies next examines the place and role of dramaturgs at the National Playwrights Conference held annually by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Looking back at the history of the O'Neill and investigating its current practices, Davies uses the concepts of "macro" and "micro" dramaturgy derived from Marianne Van Kerkhoven's analysis to highlight the virtues of a dramaturg's creative freedom. After these enquiries into the craft of textual composition, three chapters turn to specific works and performances, studying them in direct relation to context. The spatial context of the city of Los Angeles is, as Antonia Rigaud demonstrates, the inspiration for a radical rethinking of the dramaturgy of opera outside the opera house by The Industry. Commenting on some of their site-specific productions, Rigaud elucidates the influence of Guy Debord's psychogeography, John Cage's fragmentation and Jacques Rancière's civic aesthetics on the young company's proposal to decenter, desacralize and ultimately reinvigorate the genre. In the following chapter, the decisive context becomes temporal rather than spatial, as the pressures of technoculture and the ambivalent sensibilities of metamodernism inform an oscillating presentation of the self, which Emma Willis explores in Clare Barron's and Andrew Schneider's experiments with solo dramatic storytelling. As Willis clearly argues, the influence of selfie culture and surveillance paradigms is reflected through the mediatized, doubled or disaggregated treatment of identity, in these contemporary pieces where artists are "looking for a self without expecting to find it." Lastly, Valentine Vasak concludes the section by addressing the non-traditional re-casting of classic works, and pointing out its ambiguous power to re-semanticize them. Taking the example of a refusal by the Edward Albee Estate to authorize the casting of a black actor as Nick in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and the ensuing controversy on social media, Vasak questions the power and the limits of authorial intent, and opens up the debate to a topical discussion of race politics on the American stage, referencing August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" as well as a statement from the "We see you White American Theatre" collective.

The third section of the volume shifts the focus to the role of theater in the community, querying its democratic function and examining the way dramaturgies can seek to reflect, shape, produce or fracture the collective. In an original take on a little-discussed play, Pierre-Héli Monot questions the democratic philosophy of Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho*, a staple of the American college circuit, and pinpoints the paradox of Zinn's authoritarian attitude to his Sophoclean inspirations. Building on Plato's argument in *Laws* about the dilemmas of democracy, and on the idea (or ideal) of the theater as a place for deliberation and autonomy, Monot identifies the conceptual contradictions of much post-financial crisis political theater. Turning away from a dramaturgy of political discourse and towards a dramaturgy of communal reflection based on oral history and the interweaving of personal narratives, Diana Benea then seeks to define the aesthetics of Ping Chong + Company's *Generation NYZ*. Relying on the study of interviews, archives, audience questionnaires and talkbacks, Benea delineates the collaborative processes of community-based theater, from conception to reception, as a civil act of recollecting, voicing, and speaking *with*. Another kind of collaboration, this time between two artists, is explored by Sarah Sigal as she dissects the interlacing of text, dance, music and design in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*, which foregrounds the staging of queer stories even as it foreshadows worrying parallels between past tragedies and present policies. Sigal analyzes the play's fragmented aesthetics as a dramaturgy of memory meant to affectively engage the audience, in a gesture that is "at once an act of commemoration, wounding and remembrance." The final essay of the section is also an invitation to further important reflection, as Mary Anderson, Billicia Hines and Richard Haley examine the reverberations of Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67* on stage, both at the time of its site-specific anniversary performance in 2017, and in the time that has passed since, bringing tragically renewed attention to violence against black bodies. Digging into the apparently conventional form of Morisseau's play, the authors use theories of performativity, acoustic space and embodied philosophy to show that the experience of the performance questions the location of shame, disrupts our expectations of history, and in the end, opens up a space for liberation.

The chapters of this volume collectively work to offer a prismatic view of a number of arresting tendencies and currents in American theater throughout the opening decades of the 21st century. They also seek to participate in a broader conversation about contemporary dramaturgies, entering into dialogue with publications on other ongoing developments—such as the digital "survival" of the stage during the coronavirus pandemic—, thus continuing the vigorous and necessary exploration of

an art which "traffics in presence"[11] (in the words of Sarah Ruhl), while being rooted in a movable present, as Hallie Flanagan reminds us:

New theaters
American theaters
Theaters in the making
Theaters from the past
Of the present
Pointing to the future.[12]

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11 Sarah Ruhl, "Sarah Ruhl's Reasons to Keep Writing", *Vanity Fair,* 25 March 2020.

12 Hallie Flanagan, "The Florida Wheel" [first published in 1940], reproduced in Todd London (ed.), *An Ideal Theatre*, New York, TCG, 2013, p. 529.

PART I

Realism Deposed, Reclaimed and Exposed

NO ADJECTIVES: NEW AMERICAN REALISM

Marc Robinson
Yale University

Theater taxonomists hoping to assign *Three Sisters* to a stable genre—one that remains after the play's various teasing invitations to tragedy, farce, and melodrama have fallen away—often point to the moment near the end of Act One when a minor character, Fedotik, arrives at Irina's name-day party to take a family photograph. He asks the sisters and the various friends, hangers-on, and actual or aspirational spouses gathered around the dining-room table to "wait a minute...hold still" before snapping his picture. It's easy to agree with W. B. Worthen, who imagines that Chekhov offers this scene as a standard by which to evaluate his own art—to see here an image not just of the extended Prozorov family but of the detachment the playwright strives for in his own attention to his characters' anxieties, resentments, and passions.[1] It is also, Worthen adds, a counterexample. Only when the performance returns to instability, after the picture-taking, does it depict reality as it is lived, not merely posed. Yet Chekhov suggests a third, less noted use of the camera. As the family relaxes back into their celebration, Fedotik addresses Irina, who has inexplicably stayed behind, still motionless: "You may move now, Irina Serghyeevna," he says, "that is, if you want to."[2] And only when she does move, or is on the verge of doing so, does he snap one last picture. One assumes the resulting photograph will be a blur—why, we might wonder, did he wait until she started walking to take it? Here—and again when Fedotik gives Irina a top as a present, hypnotizing her by demonstrating how it spins—Chekhov's measured realism admits a disruptive saboteur, strives to accommodate kinetic energies capable of dissolving its poise and smearing its tableaux.

This perplexing scene seems to hover behind Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Really* (2016)—a play that also stages the work of photography, in this case allowing it to fill the entirety of an hour-long performance. Here, as Drury's title suggests, real life in all its unpredictability is always eluding or defying a photographer's (or playwright's) aims

1 W. B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1992, pp. 12-13.

2 Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, trans. Elisaveta Fen, in Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959, p. 270.

to contain it. There is always a deeper core or heightened intensity of experience—the "really" real—that even the most meticulous or obsessive mimetic art cannot seize, frame, and reproduce. As Drury writes in a stage direction from an earlier work, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915* (2014), "the performance calls for real contact, as opposed to realistic contact."[3] In *Really*, she stages a no less demanding encounter, along with its recoils. Here, a young woman known only as Girlfriend makes a series of portraits of her late boyfriend's mother, known only as Mother. Dissatisfied with every image, she keeps adjusting the tension between the sitter's stillness (necessary for the image's clarity) and animacy (true to the subject's life). "Don't move your shoulders," she says at one point, and then repositions the mother's feet so the pose is just slightly unnatural and hard to sustain. "Don't move," she says again, then adds, "I mean you shouldn't be still, you can move, but don't like *move* move."[4] She waits, and then her shutter clicks. In its taut contradictions, the scene illustrates one of Drury's epigraphs, from the scholar Geoffrey Batchen, paraphrasing views of the nineteenth-century inventor Henry Fox Talbot: "Photography [is] an effort to capture both eternity and transience in the same representation."[5] It also foreshadows the many frustrations of that effort throughout the play. The mother, resistant to the girlfriend's attention, or simply destabilized by it, won't stay put, or stop talking. At other points in the play, dissolution takes different forms. A character drops a glass, shattering it. Another person falls from a high bookcase, thudding to the floor. Later, the lights go out and the stage is plunged in darkness, disabling sight. Even when the action isn't so disruptive, the photographer's desire to penetrate the object of her attention—to know this defended, exquisitely hostile woman (a hostility that might have something to do with the fact that her white son's girlfriend is black)—repeatedly brings her up against her medium's inadequacy.

Chekhov's accommodation of a blurred or collapsed realism also predicts the work of several other contemporary theater artists. The playwright Richard Maxwell, who not incidentally directed the premiere of *Really*, ends his own coldly observational play *The Evening* (2015) with its central character, Beatrice, escaping the realist cliché of a

3 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen, 2014, p. 4.

4 *Id.*, *Really, American Theatre*, September 2016, p. 59.

5 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997, p. 177. Drury's epigraph (mistakenly attributed to Talbot himself) appears on p. 58 of *Really*.

drab bar and walking into the stage's suddenly revealed upstage depths, a borderless void misting over with white haze until we can no longer distinguish her from the engulfing climate (**fig. 1**). Her last words mark the triumph of time over mimetic space. As the play ends, Beatrice says "she continues," deferring her sentence's object in perpetuity, and employing the third person to keep us at an even greater distance from herself.[6] In this, *The Evening* recalls an earlier Maxwell play more directly skeptical of realism's promises, the aptly named *The End of Reality* (2006). In this work, among its many other challenges to realist hubris, characters interrupt the action to gaze numbly at supposedly live-feed closed-circuit TVs, where undramatic goings-on—a vacant parking lot, an empty waiting-room, monotonously streaming highway traffic, and at times mere static—prohibit all access to the private behavior such technology is meant to probe.

1. *The Evening*, written and directed by Richard Maxwell, New York, 2015. Photograph courtesy of New York City Players.

6 Richard Maxwell, *The Evening*, 2015, unpublished manuscript, p. 26.

David Levine, an even more conceptually ambitious if ambivalent realist, also relies on extreme "continuing" in his most notorious works. *Habit*, first presented in 2010, stages a deliberately hackneyed realist drama inside one floor of a full-scale, four-walled, multi-roomed house. A 2015 version took place in New York's cavernous Essex Street Marketplace, where spectators could come and go at will: there was no admission fee, nor seating; exit doors were left open onto Essex Street. Audience members took positions outside the glassless windows of the house to spy on the banal doings among a group of three vaguely delinquent millennials (**fig. 2**). The 45-minute play was on a loop, and the whole performance lasted 8 hours—long enough, in other words, for Levine to be confident that few if any spectators were committed, or masochistic, enough to see the entire thing.

2. *Habit*, created and directed by David Levine, New York, 2012. Photograph by David Levine.

Levine's staging of *Bauerntheater* (*Farmer's Theater*) in 2007 spanned an even longer period: a solitary male actor prepared, planted, and tended to a field of potatoes in the German countryside over a period of thirty ten-hour days. Spectators were invited to watch him work, sometimes at a considerable distance, but most of his labor

(which included muttering text from Heiner Müller's 1961 play about land reform, *The Resettler*) and his rest from labor (the hours he slept), were invisible to them. So, too, in *Actors at Work* (2007), in which Levine registered the day jobs of a group of performers with Actors Equity, filing applications and signing contracts to regulate their employment (as receptionists, editors, "poster distributors") as union-approved showcases. Here again, Levine transforms actual, not represented, much less framed, work into performance—and reminds us that performance is work. Of course no one saw even a fraction of these latter performances—no one, that is, who wasn't at the office with the actors, unaware that they were watching art. For Levine, this mode of acting—and by implication all acting—becomes "a metaphor for privacy," upending traditional notions of theatrical presence. At a day job, he once said, "you keep yourself to yourself…it's not 'you' doing it…you're giving the most convenient performance you can to get by." This idea of acting relies on, and deploys, "the part of yourself that makes you seem not present."[7]

In all these works, Levine pursues a realism so pure in its intention and so fervent, even fundamentalist, in its execution that it ends by exhausting the genre altogether. But he also clarifies it—enabling us to identify the premises of a form usually considered transparent, at least in the theater. Indeed, realism is a form that we think requires transparency in order to be persuasive: if we can see the dust on the camera lens or the seams of the fabricated scene, we're taught, representations won't seem real. Yet what of a realism that shines a light on that dust and runs its fingers over those seams (as it were); and as a result not only fails to disillusion us but in fact persuades us with a force unavailable to more habitual realists? Or a realist practice that refuses to compromise with the efficiencies of theatricality—that declines to tailor its representations to a spectator's short attention span, desire for variety, addiction to spectacle, or even expectation of orienting contexts, cogent arguments, and generously expressive disclosures of interior lives?

Levine may be an extreme case, but many contemporary American realists are equally committed to alienating the style that enchants them. The enchantment is as important as the estrangement. Their analytical sharpness derives from their ecstatic surrender to the real. Their best works contest the promise of realistic embodiment

7 David Levine in Christian Hawkey, "A Conversation with David Levine," *The Believer*, no. 60, February 1, 2009, p. 72. See also Marvin Carlson, "David Levine's *Bauerntheater*: The Return of the Matrix," *TDR*, vol. 52, no. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 34-43; Sarah Kozinn, "Making Theatre Art: David Levine's *Habit*," *TDR*, vol. 58, no. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 171-76; and Shonni Enelow and David Levine, *A Discourse on Method*, New York, 53rd State Press, 2020.

even as they seem to zealously fulfill it. How much can one magnify or scatter the focus, or rinse affect not just of melodrama but all drama, and still foster our engagement—even achieve a pathos that would be unavailable to more embroidered modes of theatricality? Character, here, emerges not from artificially eloquent and graceful acts of self-revelation, but rather from unnuanced presence—a manner of display that, in its disarming candor, actually serves as a wall against invasive spectatorship. Similarly, action progresses not from suspense or argument but from the completion of non-expressive tasks or simply submitting oneself to (and directing attention to) the slow drip of time's impersonal passage. Doing precludes pretending, as Richard Maxwell once argued, rejecting the simulacra of authenticity in favor of a less importunate form of action.[8]

Earlier playwrights have tackled some of these same questions, in pursuit of more intricate variations on realism's established themes. In the 1950s and 1960s, the British playwrights David Storey and Arnold Wesker trusted in the processes of labor alone to sustain theatrical interest: actors erected a huge tent over the course of Storey's *The Contractor* (1969), cooked real restaurant meals in Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1957). In the 1970s, the German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz, in such deliberately unconsoling plays as *Farmyard* (1971) and *Request Concert* (1971), conducted a fluorescent scrutiny of unvoiced suffering and other kinds of debasement. Even some textbook realists of the nineteenth century tested their genre's premises, dissenting from the policies they helped codify. David Belasco's object-fetishism transformed his sets into installations, so obsessively assembled as to alienate the genre. *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) is a representative example, as is his staging of Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way* (1909). Emile Zola's 1873 play *Thérèse Raquin* (as Amy Holzapfel has shown) exposes the violation inherent in portrait-painting, photography, and seeing in general. In the process, the work renders morally ambiguous, if not corrupt, realism's vaunted objectivity.[9]

8 "Remember your task…return to your task," Maxwell often told actors in rehearsal for *The End of Reality*, reports Sarah Gorman. "The acting can't take the place of the action." As Gorman writes, Maxwell is less interested in establishing a "throughline to explain [a] character's psychological motivation" than in enabling an actor to "genuinely invest in the task of turning the page, or reading the newspaper." The motivation clarifies only when the task is underway. Sarah Gorman, "Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players—*The End of Reality* (2006)—Exploring Acting," in Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (eds), *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2010, p. 185 and p. 191.

9 For more on Belasco as a practitioner of "realism against itself," see Marc Robinson, *The American Play*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2009, pp. 134-51. On Zola, see Amy Holzapfel,

All these writers help us feel the current rushing under apparently tranquil settings in contemporary realism. Spectators at Maxwell's *Good Samaritans* (2004) might recall the unlikely aura that haloed a container of dish-soap on the otherwise drab rehab-center set. Poised on the edge of a functioning sink, it was mesmerizing, sunflower yellow, luminescent, throbbing. No mere reality effect, it seemed capable of distilling the bright desolation of the play's characters into a sign. So, too, the long silent minutes in *Really* in which the Girlfriend loads film into her camera. Seizing back the time stolen by digital efficiency, she allows us to read in her capable hands and their measured manipulation of film cartridges, barrels, wrappers, levers, and buttons a seriousness that, later in the play, sustains her under the assault of other people's distrust and infantilizing disdain. Dull work—yet, as we've seen, such undramatic activity, conscientiously executed, gestures toward impalpable emotion and controls interior turmoil. It roots its subject in the room, and in the body, on which she will come to depend as anchoring forces.

In a related way, Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* (2014) dissents from the culture announced by its title in the quietly, and on occasion not so quietly, subversive manner of its presentation. As Lee writes in a prefatory note: "the pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions...should create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men." [10] The loudness of that music (black feminist hip hop) and the mutedness of the scene changes (when gender-nonconforming stagehands fastidiously and, it sometimes seems, pointlessly move items around the single living-room set) teach us to acknowledge the choices resulting in this deceptively unmarked realism. Everything—a taupe sofa, a brown recliner, beige wall-to-wall carpeting, white tube socks, a bowl of chips, a denim workshirt, a *Star Wars* glass—now emits a signal, a code that communicates the factitiousness not just of the environment but of the identities of its inhabitants. Nothing is natural despite the naturalism. Only after the stagehands frame the play's object world with their clinical demeanor, handling props and furniture like curators caring for perplexing artifacts, can we see the performance with the analytical awareness Lee expects from us.

At first sight, the décor of all these productions seems to confirm the wisdom of Bert O. States about the realist environment's explanatory function. An "art of pinning

Art, Vision, and Nineteenth-Century Realist Drama: Acts of Seeing, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 47-78. An important precedent and companion text to *Really* is Ibsen's own critique of realism, *The Wild Duck* (1884), especially its skeptical attention to the work of photographic retouching.

10 Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men,* in *Straight White Men / Untitled Feminist Show*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2020, p. 73.

things down," States calls nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century realism—with the stage as "a laboratory where heretofore unarticulated social processes and species could be examined under the strong light of the new electrical lamp"[11]—a formulation that is recalled by Stanton Garner's later comparison of Zola's theatrical naturalism to "vivisection."[12] States continues: "Space is destiny" and "furniture is visible history" in realist and naturalist theater. Even though "the dialogue says, in effect, 'We are…free to go elsewhere,' the setting says, in effect, 'It will all end here!'"[13] States seems to build on Raymond Williams's understanding of realism as an art of "enclosed rooms" from which their inhabitants try to "extricate" themselves.[14] The punitive nature of all these formulations is significant. Verisimilitude doesn't simply support the action but becomes active itself, a mercilessly restraining force. The accuracy of the scene is not reassuring—one of realism's typical justifications—but disorienting. Despite its familiarity, we cannot place ourselves, or rather, we are placed there too brutally: the space suffocates us as much as it does the characters. Alisa Solomon has memorably read Nora's plight in *A Doll's House* in just these materialist Williamsesque terms.[15] Hal Foster, writing about superrealism in painting, even more directly identifies the aggression implicit in the style. It is "an art pledged not only to pacify the real but to seal it behind surfaces, to embalm it in appearances."[16]

This legacy haunts contemporary American realism. Its most sophisticated twenty-first-century practitioners often push back against such claustrophobia. Mimesis, in these recent works, is aerated. Their reality effects are exhibited in spaces that—in their minimalist restraint, or museum-like decorum, or Brechtian separation of elements—heighten the expressiveness of any single object, and do so without coercive cues nudging us to particular conclusions.[17] As these scenes maintain an unemphatic

11 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985, p. 61.

12 Stanton B. Garner, Jr., "Physiologies of the Modern: Zola, Experimental Medicine, and the Naturalist Stage," *Modern Drama*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2000, p. 530.

13 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

14 Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, London, Verso, 1980, p. 130 and p. 141.

15 Alisa Solomon, "The New Drama and the New Woman: Reconstructing Ibsen's Realism," in *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 46-69.

16 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 141.

17 In this regard, Devin Fore's *Realism After Modernism,* and especially his reading of

reserve—a kind of agnosticism about their meanings, and meaningfulness—we may find ourselves roused from the spectatorial complacency that theatrical realism often forgives, directing our newly alert compassionate eye to what had been hiding in plain sight.

Indeed, when arranged in such a manner, objects and actors may, for all their illusionist or ethnographic accuracy, seem suddenly anti-realistic—strenuous rather than natural, lurid rather than subtle. The shift is salutary. Alain Robbe-Grillet, in his influential 1963 essay "From Realism to Reality," identifies the key to what was then the "new realism" not as the "little detail [that] 'rings true'" but, "on the contrary, the little detail that rings *false*"—"the stone abandoned for no good reason in the middle of the street, the bizarre gesture of a passer-by.... Partial objects, detached from their use, moments immobilized, words separated from their context...whatever...lacks 'naturalness'—it is precisely this which rings truest." [18] Such strangeness and diffidence are also fundamental to the theatricality of these American plays—that, and what Robbe-Grillet calls a "hallucinatory effect [that] derives from [the] extraordinary clarity" of objects, gestures, and words. He concludes, in words that still serve to illuminate present-day realist experiments, "nothing is more fantastic, ultimately, than precision." [19]

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To move from such forceful estrangement to someone who at first seems to be realism's mildest contemporary practitioner may seem counterintuitive: what could Richard Nelson, in plays of unhurried domesticity, have in common with the stark exposures in Maxwell, Drury, Lee, and Levine? Especially lately: Nelson's engagement, early in his career, with history and international politics has modulated to a more thoroughgoing investment in private life. His shift in priorities was apparent even before a character in one play, *Sorry* (2012), is seen reading Philippe Aries and Georges Duby's magisterial *History of Private Life*. Yet not even that character settles into her realist interior easily. Nelson's people are always aware of what is just outside their doors—sometimes literally so, as in the quartet of plays from which

Brecht's *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* (1938), is pertinent. Brecht's characters, "perceived as mediatized images" capable of "*reproducing* emotion without *expressing* it," exist on a stage that "liquefies" traditional realism, "restoring the dynamic metabolism between the individual and his environment." Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2012, p. 148, p. 155 and p. 175.

18 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 63.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Sorry originates, collectively called *The Apple Family* (2010-13).[20] Here, Nelson's characters are continuously monitoring their house's borders even as their talk seems desultory—looking toward the open windows that let in too much outside sound, or to doorways that accidentally let out the dog, or that admitted a relative who failed to call ahead, or that are weak barriers against the whims of a wandering uncle with dementia. Characters in many Nelson plays also struggle to preserve their therapeutic distance from wider public spheres that threaten their composure more grievously—environments stained with the indelible memory of personal and communal tragedies, or that undo the moral or ethical contracts on which they've long depended, or that rob them of the clear-thinking and self-knowledge they've long assumed their strongest suit. In *Sweet and Sad,* set on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the Apples count the miles between the still-recovering city and the small town of Rhinebeck, two hours away, to which they've fled. In *Farewell to the Theater* (2012), the artists taking refuge in Williamstown, Massachusetts, are safely removed from, yet persistently haunted by, World War I, which is raging as they talk Shakespeare. *Nikolai and the Others* (2013), set in a Connecticut country house where Balanchine and Stravinsky collaborate on their 1948 ballet *Orpheus*, is only deceptively idyllic. The characters' retreat is encircled by both Stalinist and McCarthyite surveillance.

Amid such uncertainty, Nelson's characters work to rebuild a sense of security from the ground up, and they do so with simple rituals of fellowship—most notably and frequently, sharing food. To attend any of Nelson's recent works is to be witness, at the start of the action, to actors setting the stage on which they will play, a stage that often includes one or more tables at the center, chairs, tablecloths, and on them, appliances, dishes, and utensils for preparing, serving, or eating a meal. It is as if the performers must assemble the very idiom, realism, in which their characters will later exchange filial intimacies. When the food arrives, it becomes the currency in which to do so—to forge a collective bond against individual anxiety. In *Sorry*, characters pick at left-over Chinese food, a tin of cookies, tangerines, and grapes. *Sweet and Sad* has turkey, cole-slaw, lima beans, and carrots. *That Hopey Changey Thing* (2010) offers a menu of chicken, boiled potatoes, and another bean salad. *Nikolai and the Others* is the most lavish. The Russian emigrés gather around a long table laden with foods from the lost homeland: *katletka*, *pirozhki*, *schuba*, *Salade Olivier* (**fig. 3**). In these plays and others, the characters cultivate, and guard, their

20 *The Apple Family* has since been joined by other works that strike related, but distinct, notes: *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family* (a 2016 series of three plays) and *The Michaels* (2019). Nelson has also revisited the Apples in a trilogy for *Zoom*, premiering during the coronavirus pandemic: *What Do We Need to Talk About*, *And So We Come Forth,* and *Incidental Moments of the Day* (2020).

fellowship without pretending that it compensates for the loss of absent, deceased, or estranged kin. Yet there's always room for one more chair—an adjustment that Nelson stages as a way of gesturing toward the larger emotional negotiations that resist speech. In *Farewell to the Theater,* the host extends the table by another leaf, the circle of friends opens, and then it closes more tightly around itself.

3. *Nikolai and the Others* by Richard Nelson, directed by David Cromer, New York, 2013. Photograph by Sara Krulwich / *The New York Times* / Redux.

That process was especially pronounced in the first staging of *Nikolai and the Others*. Spectators seated in the rows nearest the stage at Lincoln Center were unnervingly close to the play's imagined world, but they also faced a wall of backs whenever the actors sat down for their meal. These viewers simultaneously enjoyed intimacy and suffered exclusion: Nelson's actors recovered privacy in the public forum of theater. A different theater for another Nelson play—and a better seat—meant a different invitation. When the Apple Family plays were first produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival, they occupied the Anspacher Theater, where raked seating banks enclose three sides of a small playing area at their base: spectators gathered around the stage just as the actors gathered around their table. The plush atmosphere deepened as the performance unfolded. The actors' subdued demeanors, conversational voices (sometimes audible only to those leaning forward), and limited range of actions (a character doing a jigsaw puzzle is about as eventful as things get) all formed a deliberate rebuke to the declarative

tones, over-emphatic posturing, and relentless frontality found on most other stages, even those claiming to be realist. It "should not be directed out to the audience," Nelson writes about a mummers' play staged in *Farewell to the Theater*. "It should feel like a private, intimate event, done only for themselves."[21] Indeed, when Nelson directs his own plays (as he did with the Apple cycle), he makes clear that their domestic interiors and halting confessions will be persuasive only to the degree they control our claims on them, resist our desire to identify with the characters and enter their world.

Yet the actors' seeming indifference to our presence opens space for other, potentially richer forms of engagement. At the first productions of the Apple plays, spectators looked at each other across the thrust stage, enfolding themselves as much as the actors with their dilating attentiveness. Seeing in this theater was bifocal. Our peripheral vision roamed the margins and probed the depths of our field of vision, reading the quickening, mirroring faces that surrounded the life onstage: they became its context as much as any larger history. Simultaneously, we magnified more proximate landscapes, recording the textures and subtlest tremors on the actors' surfaces, accounting for (not just acknowledging) them. Of course such double vision will be familiar to anyone who has sat in an amphitheater or around any thrust stage. Here, though, the act of attention seemed flush with more palpable warmth, charged with urgency and a greater sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone we see. All of us—characters, actors, and audience—were part of the same world, something especially true for those lucky enough to be seeing these productions on their opening nights—Election Day in 2010 and 2012, the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in 2011, and the fiftieth anniversary of the JFK assassination in 2013—which are also the days depicted in each Apple play. These productions were intensely local without being provincial.

Despite all these markers that, in the hands of another realist playwright, might read as reassuringly familiar—cooking and eating, citing identifiable places and events, relaxing the dramatic structure and indulging in Chekhovian languor, and fostering a close-knit community on and offstage—none of them, in fact, can be trusted. Nelson's characters are often only temporarily resident or not yet fully welcome in these spaces. They are, instead, bound for an assisted-living home in one play, or, in another, tenants of a boarding house, or house-guests, exiles, or people living abroad, dislocated by choice or force.[22] Their precariousness reminds us of our

21 Richard Nelson, *Farewell to the Theater*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012, p. 82.

22 See in addition to *Sorry* and *Farewell to the Theater*, Nelson's *Rodney's Wife* (2004), *Madame Melville* (2000), *New England* (1994), *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1992), and *Some Americans Abroad* (1989), among many others.

own: eventually, of course, we'll also have to leave. Even the rare play occasioned by a return home—*Goodnight Children Everywhere* (1997), in which siblings who had been transported out of England ahead of the Blitz reclaim their family apartment as adults—prevents its characters from settling. In that play, one sister says, "You step outside today—just one foot out of your home—and it all makes no sense anymore."[23]

In a theater where the houses aren't quite homes, and where periods and places sit at a remove from those of social upheaval, character is also a matter of "not quite." Nelson's people are stepmothers confirming they're not mothers, uncles treated as fathers, siblings who serve as parents, devoted ex-spouses, vulnerable new partners. They are forever monitoring their equivocal standing and the shifting ground under them. Nelson finds these states uncommonly expressive—because, not in spite, of their ambiguity. When those characters are artists, as they often are in these plays, that ambiguity is redoubled. Nelson is drawn to actors, composers, and writers who cannot rely on the history of their achievement for security. Benjamin Apple was once a well-known actor, but now has amnesia and can't memorize lines. Another, younger actor in the Apple plays has steady work only in restaurants. Not much better off is the unfulfilled actor in *Nikolai and the Others*, well-regarded in his native Russia but now, in America, cast only in villain roles. To these studies in frustration might be added other kinds of artists: the stunted composer Nikolai who lives in Stravinsky's shadow, or the aging painter who Balanchine didn't hire to design the *Orpheus* scenery, or, in the Apple plays, the industrious Jane, a writer of non-fiction who can't get her latest book published.

Nelson has great compassion for most of these quietly unhappy, strenuously optimistic, or just befuddled characters. But he also has something more than compassion. He recognizes that artists burdened with identities either not yet coalesced or beginning to decay are alert in ways their self-assured fellow characters are not. Their uncertainty is productive, full of the possibility of change. Even some non-artist characters feel this. A politically connected lawyer in *Sweet and Sad* says, in a line that sums up the value of Nelson's approach to character in general: "I don't know where I'm going politically…I know I've—jumped…I'm waiting to see where I land. If I land."[24] The opportunity in such a state of suspension (anything can *happen*!) coexists with danger (*anything* can happen)—as in a key scene from *Sorry*, in which

23 *Id.*, *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, London, Faber and Faber, 1997, p. 69.

24 *Id.*, *Sweet and Sad,* in Richard Nelson, *The Apple Family: Scenes from Life in the Country*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2014, p. 164.

Benjamin, exposed and exculpated by his dementia, reads aloud from his journal about his niece, as she and her siblings look on. His confessions of incestuous desire shatter the placid surface of a relationship no one in the family had ever questioned.

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The trauma of this scene—one character, his identity eroding, no longer knowing and thus no longer heeding boundaries; his witnesses not knowing what comes next—returns us to Drury's *Really*. Her commentary on her play is important to bear in mind, for she warns us away from treating it as photorealism, despite its engagement with photography, and, in an echo of her note to *We Are Proud to Present*..., hopes that her language, as it "come[s] out of someone's mouth" sounds "not naturalistic, or realistic, but true...in some way."[25] The distinction may explain why many of the conversations and disclosures in *Really* turn on the relationship of seeing to knowing—a well-

traveled circuit in many realist works, in which (as Peter Brooks reminds us) the prime epistemological instrument is sight.[26] Drury doesn't echo this claim but unsteadies it. She marks vision's insufficiency, and measures knowledge's failure. The photographer in *Really*, admitting her frustration with her craft, says, "I don't know how to know how to make what I want to see."[27] This percussive confrontation with futility has been building throughout the play. The filler phrase "I don't know" recurs so frequently as to reset the action, to return it to a point from which Drury painstakingly builds up the narrative and raises the emotional temperature, until they inevitably collapse once more. That degree-zero of narrative, situation, and affect is enhanced by Maxwell's direction. His well-known interest in neutrality (as befits the author of plays with such titles as *Neutral Hero* [2012] and *People Without History* [2009]) serves Drury's own desire to contest the legibility of character, in the interest of revealing more nuances of presence ordinarily kept from developing under the stage's bright lights.[28]

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25 Richard Maxwell, "The State of the Arts: An Interview with the Playwright," *American Theatre*, September 2016, p. 56.

26 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2005, p. 3.

27 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

28 Maxwell's views on neutrality are not fixed. Long opposed to critics who term his work "deadpan" (it only seems deadpan in relation to a theater that habitually italicizes emotions, he argues), Maxwell has recently moved even more forcefully to complicate his work's affective surfaces. "For most of my directing career," he said during rehearsals for *Isolde* (2014), "I've usually asked [actors], 'why are you pretending?'" But for this new play, "I realized I have to ask them, 'Are you afraid of pretending?'... It's not about 'not pretending' but being in a place where they can either pretend or not pretend." Jeremy M. Barker, "Richard Maxwell Discusses 'Isolde'," *Culturebot,* April 10, 2014. In a separate conversation with the playwright Christina Anderson, Maxwell acknowledges that "a neutral play" is "impossible," and explores the ways in which neutrality is a

That is the reward for sustaining our own attention to *Really*'s obdurate surfaces. We gain access to a ruthless vulnerability, a still simmering pain, a febrile self-consciousness—all these rise into view once the habitual forms of character and feeling have been stripped away. (In this, the play's protagonists recall the subjects of Andy Warhol's Screen Tests. Both groups submit to extreme exposure and defend against analysis.) *Really* takes place on a boxy, bare, plywood set, modeled on a *camera obscura* and at one point functioning like one (**fig. 4**). It is illuminated, in part, by visible instruments that the actors manipulate to cast the most interrogatory light on the camera's objects: actors are only barely veiled by illusion. The directness and restraint here recalls one of Frank O'Hara's poems in honor of Edwin Denby: "Feelings are our facts / As yet in me unmade."[29] The feelings' unmadeness matters as much as their factuality. Unrealized, even deeply buried emotions pulse more expressively than those that are fully formed, familiar, and thus potentially inert.

4. *Really* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, directed by Richard Maxwell, New York, 2016. Photograph courtesy of New York City Players.

privilege available only to some characters and performers. Christina Anderson and Richard Maxwell, "On Neutrality: A Discussion Between Christina Anderson & Richard Maxwell," *Culturebot,* January 18, 2013.

29 Frank O'Hara, "To Edwin Denby," in Donald Allen (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara,* Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1995, p. 287.

In Drury's play, the matter-of-fact handling of sentiment does not signal, or breed, indifference. At least not as Maxwell directs it. He once spoke of striving in his own work for a theatricality that is "emotionally drained but not devoid of emotion. It has the gestures of the emotion, but they've become attenuated."[30] Much of that flat but insurgent affect comes from the procedures of theater itself. His stages, regardless of the various landscapes they simulate or invoke, never obscure their reality as stages, nor the particular unease of being on them. "I don't want you to pretend that you're somewhere [other] than this room right now, doing what you're doing," Maxwell once said to an actor. "You're not sure what you're doing. It's uncomfortable. That's all part of the reality here.... I don't want to deny that. I also don't want to deny that we've done this before."[31] All these ideas receive further elaboration in Maxwell's recent book, *Theater for Beginners*, a title reminding us that virtuosity often impedes sincerity.

One section ostensibly describes some warm-up exercises, but it takes little effort to see their traces in finished performances, in Drury's work and his own: "The goal for the actor...is to not communicate any adjectives whatsoever. ...to [deliver] text without an attitude about it." And later: "Try speaking your lines of text as though your job were that of the control room person 'giving' the text to the anchorperson. Give the text so that the receiver can use it: speak clearly, speak efficiently; be accurate, be heard, be understood."[32]

Really is an extraordinarily detailed example of this magnetic transparency. It tacitly argues, among other things, that the work of listening must be as alive as the actors' "clear," "efficient," and "accurate" speaking. Of course, *we* are listening and looking, too—we are "receivers" who "use" the control room's text. And so it is perhaps fair to ask how we might fulfill that role. Drury's attention to questions of form—rendered stark in her and Maxwell's matte theatricality—illustrate the ethics under scrutiny in the play. How we look at the characters in *Really* is as charged as how they look at one another. Our claims to know them by the end of the hour's performance

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30 Daniel Mufson, "The Hydras of Style and Irony: An Interview with Richard Maxwell" (1999). Originally published in *Alternativetheater.com*, now available on Mufson's website.

31 John Kelsey, "Richard Maxwell," *BOMB*, no. 105, October 1, 2008.

32 Richard Maxwell, *Theater for Beginners*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2015, pp. 21-22, and p. 28. For an exploration of other expressive opportunities in "flattened" or "attenuated" emotion, see Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2015, pp. 191-213. Berlant's subject is a kind of film acting in which obvious markers of psychology get "no traction" on actors' faces—an observation that might also apply to performers of Maxwell's plays.

are as debatable as they are for characters withstanding each other's presumptuous claims of intimacy. The most intrusive of those are exchanged in flashbacks between the Girlfriend and her late boyfriend, Calvin. (His name is the only one we hear, as if in this world identity sets only upon death.) He was a photographer, too, more established than she, and liberal with his advice in a scene in which he takes her picture. "You should listen to me more," he says, "because…I can like *see* you…. If you would just let yourself be what I can see you are."[33] The Girlfriend responds in one of the play's only shows of emphatic action: she shoves him. The scene may make us revise our memory of an earlier exchange, in which the Mother lashes out at the Girlfriend: "You have no idea what kind of person Calvin is."[34]

In the face of all these bruising forms of attention, Drury opts not for more comprehensive portraiture but for impersonality and even absence. One seemingly meaningless bit of stage business sets out the ideal. The Girlfriend refills a Britta pitcher and stands watching the water drip through until the process ends. Silence settles over the stage for two long minutes. Here, the object of attention, the pitcher, sets the pace and controls the mood. In a play filled with clashing proprietary claims, this desired thing will only be seized, literally, when it's ready. And so it is with animate objects of attention. When the box set becomes a functioning *camera obscura*, the actors are offstage, visible only as upside down, ghostly simulacra. Even when present and palpable, the actors, for all their emotional nakedness, more often than not rebuff us. Our looking bounces back upon us—not in the programmatic manner envisioned by Elin Diamond in her famous idea of gestic feminist performance, the actress "looking at being looked at," but in a more diffident manner.[35] Drury's performers are opting out of the culture of showing and looking (which includes looking back) altogether.[36]

33 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

35 Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 82-94.

36 Drury sharpens her critique of spectatorship in *Fairview* (2019), underscoring its complicity in racism. The play, ostensibly inhabiting a realist milieu, begins with an African American character asking her husband, "what are you looking at?!" It then moves into a merciless indictment of how white audiences often see black bodies. In the play's last minutes, a character breaks out of the realist frame to ask white spectators to relinquish their seats and climb onstage. "No one can own a seat forever," she says as she moves into the audience and speaks only to the people of color who stayed behind. "Do I have to keep talking to them… / only to them / until I have used up every word / until I have nothing left over for / You?" Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2019, p. 8 and p. 103.

That choice clarifies the value of the Girlfriend's instructions to the Mother during an impromptu photography lesson near the end of *Really*. As the Mother holds the camera awkwardly, unsure of what to do or where to look, the Girlfriend says, "just see the lines."[37] She is referring to the lines orienting the image in the camera's viewfinder, lines that find their theatrical equivalent in the playwright's and director's own draftsmanship. For the Girlfriend's part, she is interested in what she calls the "space" of intimacy, not in its occupants, and hopes to make "documentary" photos representing that.[38] Ultimately, though, she decides to "never make anything for anyone to see" so that she's not "polluting the future."[39] Perhaps that is the only way to resist photography's (and realism's) specificity, while still remaining true to one's lived experience. As she says in trying to explain her alienation from photos of herself: "I don't feel like any of them are actually me… Or that each is seen too particularly to leave room for me. *(Pause)* It's nice to think of oneself as more than one thing."[40]

That insight about the oppressive particularity of identity should change the way we see Drury's and other playwrights' realism. It may at first seem acute in its own portraiture—the "particular" phenomenon seen for itself—but here a more radical realism suggests itself, one in which the single representation doesn't exclude the "more than one thing" the Girlfriend cherishes: other possibilities for embodiment. Drury's published script calls for a final scene in which the stage walls are filled with many photo-portraits of the Girlfriend, multiple versions of her self, but Maxwell's production did not include them. Perhaps to have done so would have limited the infinite possibilities available only when no images are present. Instead, *Really* ends in the blackness of a sudden black-out, the inverse of the white-out that ends Maxwell's *The Evening*, and akin to the invisible performances in Levine's *Actors at Work*, and even close cousin to the illegible image after Irina moves in *Three Sisters*. All have escaped mimesis in the interest of more expansive, even more humane forms of being. As we look into the nullity of *Really*'s darkness, the closed, roofed, windowless wooden box of the Girlfriend's studio becomes the most open of spaces, and her realism the most variable and unreliable, and her photography (all process, here, and no product) not deadening but vivifying.

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37 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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Notice

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century American experiments in realist performance commit so thoroughly to the form as to estrange it. Its most conceptually ambitious playwrights and directors—Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard Maxwell, and David Levine, among others—rigorously test its premises and principles, stripping representations of ornament or underscoring their factitiousness. In the process, the artists cultivate in spectators an awareness of how their seeing intervenes in, and sometimes threatens to violate, the objects of their attention. This essay pays special attention to two works at seemingly opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum—Drury's *Really* (2016, first directed by Maxwell) and Nelson's *Apple Family: Scenes from Life in the Country* (2010-13, first directed by the playwright). For all their differences, both playwrights are scornful of coercive forms of mimesis, attentive to subdural emotion, and drawn to interrupted narratives and kinetic, mutable dramatic worlds.

Key words

American theater; realism; spectatorship; theatricality; neutrality; photography; Jackie Sibblies Drury; Richard Nelson; Richard Maxwell; David Levine

Résumé

Au XXI^e^ siècle, l'expérimentation américaine en fait de réalisme théâtral s'en remet si complètement à la forme qu'elle finit par l'aliéner. Les auteurs et metteurs en scènes les plus conceptuellement ambitieux – Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard

Maxwell et David Levine, entre autres – mettent rigoureusement à l'épreuve les prémisses et les principes du réalisme, dépouillant la représentation de tout ornement, ou soulignant son artifice. Ce-faisant, ces artistes cultivent chez le spectateur la conscience aiguë d'un regard qui opère, parfois de manière transgressive, sur son objet. Cet article s'intéresse particulièrement à deux œuvres que leur style semble opposer : *Really* de Drury (pièce de 2016, créée dans une mise en scène de Maxwell) et *Apple Family : Scenes from Life in the Country* de Nelson (cycle de 2010-2013, créé dans une mise en scène de l'auteur). Au-delà de leurs différences, ces deux auteurs rejettent la mimèsis dans ses formes contraignantes pour faire émerger l'émotion souterraine et le récit brisé, au sein d'univers dramatiques mobiles et instables.

Mots-clés

théâtre américain ; réalisme ; réception ; théâtralité ; neutralité ; photographie ; Jackie Sibblies Drury ; Richard Nelson ; Richard Maxwell ; David Levine

FROM GERTRUDE STEIN TO RICHARD MAXWELL: LANGUAGE, PERFORMATIVITY AND SENSUOUSNESS IN 21ST-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMATURGY

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The notably playful, anti-mimetic *écriture* of 21st century American playwriting has introduced into the text elements that point to the act of performance and directly affect the reader's and the spectator's senses. The trend reflects a desire to grant back to language its aural immediacy, and display the dramatic text as an iconopoetic game of words resonating with enunciative and corporeal influences.[1] As performance enters the domain of textuality more assertively,[2] language becomes dense and physical, if conspicuously descriptive[3]—perhaps less a matter of "understanding" and interpreting, and more of a visceral engagement with one's senses. Not only does "drama-in-action" emancipate performers from the demands of psychological acting; it also builds a kind of neuro-sensual dramaturgy based on rhythm, sound, repetition and silence. Given that words are freed up from their signifying structures, plays are treated and celebrated as embodied linguistic installations.

Such performative emphasis had been long anticipated, partly due to mutually contradicting factors: on the one hand, the adulation of realism in American theatre during the larger part of the 20th century; reversely, the scorn of the verbal text in the experimental performance of the 1960s and 1970s; and the rise of "directors' theatre" in the 1980s. In fact, from the late 1960s to the 1990s, the battle for supremacy between dramatic theatre and physical performance dominated the theoretical debate on whether theatre could be the product of a single agency (i.e., the playwright), or a collaborative, more "porous" response to an original (non-literary) impulse. In the early 1990s, in the United States as much as in Europe, reversing the traditional

1 Donia Mounsef and Josette Feral (eds), *The Transparency of the Text: Contemporary Writing for the Stage*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2007, p. 2.

2 Already prominent in Beckett's later drama, where form is inseparable from content, and further developed by writers such as Valère Novarina, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Enda Walsh, and others, in the 1990s. See further Sidiropoulou 2010.

3 For more on language's descriptive function in the theatre see Puchner, *Stage Fright*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins UP, 2002.

roles of author-supreme text and author-servile performance provided the necessary push to alternative dramaturgies, which were accommodated within a wide range of hyphenated practices and intermedial performances. Reawakened interest in less orthodox experiments with writing put the text right back at the core of praxis. The reassertion of the dramatic text was effected through a ritual of purgation: language gradually re-emerged cleansed and empowered, an autonomous entity of high performative value. Significantly, it also became the vector of a certain culture —the circuitous diplomacy and cross-purposes of 21st-century talk, convoluted or empty communication, fearful gaps and "post-truth" verbosities and clichés. Language is culture, and its "failings" reveal the lack of moral compass in a precarious world ruled by hollow politics and meaningless human rapport.

The work of the American experimentalists Charles Mee, Mac Wellman, and younger-generation Richard Maxwell, pays tribute to this hierarchical shift in practice, in which textual primacy is restored after having been filtered through production, design, and delivery considerations. Although it is difficult to speak of direct influences—all three playwrights operating within a different aesthetic framework[4]—one notes a common interest in the non-semantic aspects of language and a zealous investment in the linguistic aspect of plays as a means of developing the theatrical form. Reflecting contemporary life's ambiguity, lack of authentic expression, and indeterminacy, their texts are infused with structural elements borrowed from fiction or poetry, anchored in incantatory traces, in all the "active, plastic, respiratory sources,"[5] which Antonin Artaud had envisioned decades before our time. They include musical notations, excessive storytelling, heightened poeticism and melodic recurrence, neologisms, puns, songs and gibberish, unorthodox grammatical and syntactical construction, alternating narrative angles, and heavy soliloquizing. In fact, they embrace literariness, but also the conviction that the embodied-ness and orality / aurality of drama is not limited to the actor, but can be predetermined by the writing.

Endorsing compositional elements of purely performative nature, Mee's, Wellman's and Maxwell's texts place themselves at the service of the director,[6] who can use them

4 Clearly, Maxwell is part of the New-York "Downtown scene" of artists and companies—such as Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group or Elevator Repair Service—and is indebted to the writing of Sam Shepard and David Mamet.

5 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 120.

6 It needs to be said that Maxwell directs his own plays with The New York City Players. In this context, the role of playwright and author merge into the function of the arch-intepreter *auteur.* For more on the mutually nurturing relationship between director and playwright, see Sidiropoulou 2011.

as malleable *corpi* of meaning in search of contextualization. Blending fact and fiction, they often feature third-person narration and self-dramatization, enactment and demonstration, Brechtian alienation, real conversation and direct audience address, as well as pseudo-dialogue and extensive monologue forms. On many occasions, one is left to determine the play's circumstances, assign lines to alternative personas, isolate action, situation, and character out of a thick pile of words. We are often lured into the novelistic rudiments of long, dense monologues,[7] lack of descriptive stage directions as well as performance-angled playwright's notes, the collapse of logical chronology, the removal of all punctuation, and a disappearance of psychologically defined characters.

In Mee's and Wellman's plays, in particular, traditional dialogic structure has been replaced by an exchange or citation of elaborate speech, which draws attention to the very act of writing, the craft of composition, and the musicality of language. Clearly, there is a celebration of the dual function of the word: as a complex system of mental and symbolic association on the one hand, and a generator of sensory impact on the other. Here, the boundary between the mimetic and the diegetic seems "much more porous and unstable than is usually imagined."[8] On other occasions, as in Maxwell's work, speech becomes minimal to the point of disappearance. While the violence and absurdity of language communicate the displacements of contemporary American society, these texts also build up with words, as Marvin Carlson points out, "landscapes of the psychic imagination, recalling the earlier experiments of symbolism and expressionism"[9]—more notably, Gertrude Stein's whimsical, if ultimately, un-performable, drama. Despite the lack of formal acknowledgment of any direct influence, some of Wellman's, Richard Foreman's and Adrienne Kennedy's plays, among others, echo Stein's *landscape* writing, which reverberates in the powerful mix of "actual physical landscapes of psychic projection with verbal langscapes."[10] For one thing, their circularity, repetitions and lack of distinct punctuation seem indebted

7 While long monologues have been a consistent feature of 20th-century American drama (as in the plays of Eugene O'Neill or Sam Shepard), the novelistic style of 21st-century American playwriting is characterized by an emphasis on narrative techniques that are part and parcel of the genre of fiction. It favors, for instance, the use of third person over the dialogic "I". As a result, the narrative takes on an objective façade, as the omniscient narrator enters the domain of the subjective experience which typically characterizes drama.

8 Brian Richardson, "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama", *New Literary History*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, p.690.

9 Marvin Carlson, "After Stein: traveling the American theatrical 'Langscape'", in Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (eds), *Land/Scape/Theatre*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2002, p.148.

10 *Ibid.*

to Stein's admission that she was "completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on."[11]

Indeed, as one becomes more and more familiar with contemporary dramaturgy's penchant for poetry, one cannot help but acknowledge Gertrude Stein's legacy on playwrights like Maxwell, Wellman and Mee. Simultaneously modernist and postmodern, alternately centripetal and open-ended, Stein's playwriting legacy restored the balance between drama and theatre; more specifically, it reconciled the communicative and multisensory functions of the word on page and its corporal utterance on stage, a reconciliation which is at the heart of the writing Mee, Wellman and Maxwell produce. After all, in her words "plays are either read or heard or seen... and after, there comes the question which comes first and which is first, reading, or hearing, or seeing the play."[12] Engagement with repetition, recurrent phrases, words, or recognizable sound patterns builds emphasis and mood; it also provides narrative structure. For example, in Wellman's *Anything's Dream*, the repetition of the phrases "we hear" and " we see" in different parts of the text, besides building rhythm and creating a formal shape, introduces the content of each section.

> We hear an awful noise. An
> axe upon wood?
> [...]
> We see a large shape
> approach, a hell-mouth proscenium theater.
> [...]
> We see only the myriad tangle shadow of pointed ears.
> [...]
> We hear a match off to one side, and for the
> briefest instant catch sight of the French
> teacher who trembles and attempts to speak
> but is unable.[13]

11 Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (1931), London, Virago, 1988, p. 217.

12 Gertrude Stein, *Last Operas and plays* (1949), Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, p. xxx.

13 Mac Wellman, Anything's Dream, 2008, available as a pdf on the playwright's website, pp. 3-4.

The sensitive application of linguistic musicality, which can be indebted to Stein, may be a way of "exploring the 'problematics of communication' and involving the audience at different cognitive levels."[14] Words function as sound morsels, processed instinctually rather than intellectually. The investment required of the performer is equally exacting, calling, as it does, for a "style of acting different from the usual representation of a character's psychology." In fact, the actor can no longer "simply interpret a prescribed role but must make audible a text, vocalizing its musicality, rhythms, and tempos."[15] This revised and empowered use of language will provide the lens through which we shall examine prevailing and common aspects in each of the three playwrights' work.

CHARLES MEE'S PERFORMATIVE INDULGENCE

Matching a collage structure with the freshness and precariousness of everyday conversation, Mee's scripts are playful, stage-friendly texts that defy linear structure, relying on painterly composition and cubist narrative angles. Conventional dialogue is often replaced by poetic and novelistic speech, which is, nonetheless, curiously "actable" and life-like, despite or perhaps thanks to its immediacy and intentional awkwardness. In *Big Love* (2001), an exuberant play about fifty brides awaiting their wedding day, based on Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*, the repetition of the third person "he" alludes to the novelistic convention of the omniscient narrator. See Guiliano's speech:

> Giuliano – I knew a man once
> so kind and generous.
> I was a boy
> I was on a train going to Brindisi
> and he said, I'm going to marry you.
> He asked how far I was going.
> To Rome, I said.
> No, no, he said,
> you can't get off so soon,
> you need to go with me to Bologna.
> He wouldn't hear of my getting off in Rome

14 David Roesner, *Musicality in Theatre Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 159.

15 Donia Mounsef and Josette Feral, *op. cit*, pp. 2-3.

or he would get off, too, and meet my family.
He gave me a pocket watch
and a silk scarf
and a little statue of a saint
he had picked up in Morocco.
He quoted Dante to me
and sang bits of Verdi and Puccini. [16]

Orestes 2.0, part of Mee's the (re)making project, is inspired by Euripides' tragedy, as well as by a variety of inter-textual sources, including excerpts from *Vogue*, *Soap Opera Digest*, William Burroughs and Apollinaire. Written at the end of the twentieth century, it ushers in major dramaturgical sensibilities of the new millennium. Non-

linear narratives shift between dialogue and monologue forms, interspersed with media imagery and excerpts from the discourse of politics and history. Commenting on the absence of intelligible meaning in the power dynamics between the matricide Orestes, his accomplice sister Electra and the state of Argos, the play is filled with obsessive language, societal disruptions and trauma, carried through linguistically. Fragmentation and pastiche suggest a state of moral chaos, as is especially pronounced in Electra's hallucinatory speech. The excerpt below reflects her inner disintegration:

I think there are some things
that are close and distant at the same time:
Paradise for example.
The relations between a man and a woman.
The course a boat takes across the water.
When I travel I like the sort of luggage
where you can pack a metronome, or a piece of porcelain,
and know it will be safe.
And when it's snowing, I like to have a visitor.
A secret visitor.
And as you wait for him, you wonder: did he forget?

I don't know.
I don't remember.

16 Charles Mee, *Big Love* (2001).

So it's up to me to,
you know,
bring the family back together. [17]

Employing strategies of novelization, the collage technique superimposes one piece of verbal imagery on top of the other. For example, in the trial scene, simultaneous speech structures the play in a cinematic mode. As the stage directions indicate:

> During the Trial, there are two levels of text: one delivered in the foreground, one in the background, sometimes simultaneously. The foreground text, which is mostly what we hear, is all about private—indeed, intimate—life. The background text, which we mostly don't hear, is the text of public life, the trial—which is treated as so irrelevant that even those speaking it sometimes neglect to listen to it. In short, the judicial system is in ruins. [18]

Furthermore, the interplay between the archaic chorus convention and the displaced experience of today's politics creates a parodic effect, as is manifest in the nurses' descriptions of sex habits: "For me, I'm turned down 70% of the time I want sex now. It's been five years since I had as much sex as I want and I keep trying to adjust to less sex. Doing porno films really helps satisfy my appetite"—pitted against the heavy-handed lines of Menelaus, paradoxically receding to an inaudible background: "And I ask myself: shall parents never be safe in their own homes? Shall children be the judges, juries, and executioners of their parents?" [19] Language is a vehicle for portraying cultural disenchantment and, as Elinor Fuchs explains:

> ... plot and character are rhetorical surfaces in precisely the way that ethics and personhood function as emptied out simulacra in the world of [the] play. They are quoted, not objects of exploration; even less are Mee's characters subjects in whose suffering, inner conflicts, recognition, growth or resignation we are invited to take interest. [20]

At the same time, Mee's revised function of language, its representational *descriptiveness*, is also characterized by an element of *prescriptiveness*. In the words of Martin Puchner, "theatrical representation is not left to designers, actors and the

17 Charles Mee, *Orestes 2.0* (2002)
18 *Ibid.*
19 *Ibid.*
20 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character,* Bloomington, The University of Indiana Press, 1996, p. 105.

director but is placed, once again into the hands of the dramatic author." Puchner emphatically points out how descriptive language absorbs seminal functions of visual representation, such as stage props, lighting, and the organization of the space of the stage, as well as movement, choreography, and acting.[21] Suggestive of different representational possibilities, language claims a directorial role, often manifest as notes to actors, whose presence it does not hesitate to acknowledge. See Mee's fully detailed notes for Electra's hallucinatory speech, where his descriptive language combines stage directions, character analysis and *action-ing*; it is as though playwright, director and actor have blended into one single voice:

> Electra – (*Completely shattered and spent, having been awake for six days and nights drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes; long silence as she stares off into space then as though speaking for the hundredth time to a jury, and/or to homicide detectives in a room at the stationhouse, way beyond exhaustion and control, or without any affect at all, taking her time; her job is to explain, make sense of it, make it cohere, and escape blame while accepting it.*)[22]

Mee's work has over the years developed into an intermedial theatre, endorsing space and movement across the page. His language conveys a sound knowledge of the actor's processes and a strong sense of direction. Even the stage directions are performative, incorporating, among other things, notes on the acting and rhythm of each piece.[23] Concerned with how language can facilitate unadulterated communication, Mee employs mechanisms for poeticizing the text, but also for directing the actors in how to enunciate it. In his more recent works, *Hotel Cassiopeia* (premiered in 2006), *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007), or *Life* (2017), the collage of "images and music and other events" such as dance and song, vigorously *performizes* the text. It is as if writing, in the words of Patrice Pavis, "has absorbed a large proportion of the *mise-en-scène*, as if 'the author had already resolved numerous questions of staging: ambiguities that cannot be removed, character that cannot figure, constant changes of key in the acting, of conventions, and of the levels of reality."[24] In this sense, the dramatic score becomes a blueprint for

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21 Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

22 Charles Mee, *Orestes*, *op. cit.*

23 This is certainly the case with some of the stage directions after the trial scene in *Orestes 2.0*: "From here on, the piece takes on a slurred, dizzying speed" (*Ibid.*).

24 Pavis' neologism of *mise en jeu*—a term that he translates as "setting in motion" and "playing"—encourages such generous merging. Pavis explains that it is nearly impossible to "separate writing and *mise-en-scène*, even if the old division of labour continues to define the functions of author, actor, director (and spectator)" (Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scene*, trans. Joel Anderson, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p.98.)

performance and as such, is permeated with linguistic instances of marked visual but also aural value—a quality which is also apparent in Mac Wellman's *oeuvre*.

MAC WELLMAN'S POETRY OF THE (I)LLOGIC

Linguistic subversion and disengagement, together with a thorough obliteration of syntax and a seeming randomness of words, have disentangled theatrical experience from harmful illusionism and attacked preconceived ideas of dramatic linearity promulgated in the Aristotelian poetics. As drama balances between poetry and fiction, relying less and less on traditional dialogue structures, and instead manifesting lyrical rhythms as well as narrative arrangements, words become self-ruling, contemptuous of given grammatical structures. In the following dialogue from Wellman's *Mister Original Bugg* (2001), fragmentation and starkness reach their apogee. Intertextual references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* add to the mock-formulaic tone:

FIRST and SECOND Delight! Delight!
SECOND To be and then to not.
FIRST To vanish in the silence.
THIRD The silence after.
SECOND I am. You are not.
FIRST, SECOND and THIRD
What is clear is
what we hear and how
it's etched out of time
by what is not.[25]

Wellman argues that "it is not interesting at this point in human time to portray the real world as it seems to be in its own terms; but it is interesting to unfold, in human terms, the logic of its illogic and so get at the nut of our contemporary human experience."[26] He frequently mixes structures of poetry into his dramatic pieces to emphasize this absurdity. Some of his plays display a deliberate verbosity, as a statement on the poor quality of our communication. One is often struck by the characters' preoccupation with speaking themselves to the point of obsession. Here is an example

25 Mac Wellman, *Cellophane*, Baltimore and London, PAJ Books, 2001, p. 85.
26 Mac Wellman, "Poisonous Tomatoes: A Statement on Logic and the Theater", in *The Bad Infinity*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1994, p. ix.

from *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of WHITENESS* (2000). If anything, Fraser's soliloquy reveals a fascination with the musical aspects of language:

> FRASER – Can you believe it? I am surrounded by
> maniacs and idiots. It is hard to say
> which is worse, the maniacs or the idiots.
> It is hard to say which is worse, the
> mania of the maniacs, or the idiocy of the
> idiots. For if there is one thing I
> cannot abide it is the mania of maniacs;
> for if there is something I hate even more
> than that it is the idiocy of idiots.[27]

Thriving on repetition and alliteration, Wellman's speech feels washed clean of all the ornamental redundancies which distort the bare realities of the text, while also achieving a comedic effect. In the collection of plays *Cellophane*, the absurdity of human interaction is also embedded in the density of the language. Similarly to Mee, Wellman exploits the strategy of a pseudo-chorus, to act as the public voice, though the universal truths uttered are instances of self-reflexive speech delighting in its stratagems, rather than being endowed with the sagacity of the ancients. In the earlier play *Bad Penny* (1989), a site-specific piece about a bridge in Central Park, the chorus strings together a series of quasi-archaic universal truths, which parody everyday clichés.

> What you don't know can't hurt
> you; make hay while the sun
> shines; soon ripe, soon rotten;
> if every man would sweep his
> own doorstep the city would
> soon be clean; the dog returns
> to his own vomit; the exception
> proves the rule; do as I say,
> not as I do; dead men tell no
> tales; call no man happy
> till he dies;[28]

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27 Mac Wellman, *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of WHITENESS*, 2000, available on the playwright's website.

28 Mac Wellman, *Bad Penny*, in *Cellophane, op. cit.*, p. 147.

Or, again, it celebrates its mock-prophetic tone:

> Let the world be covered with cobwebs.
> Let the world be covered with shadows.
> Let the world be covered with dead leaves.
> Let the world be covered with rat fur.
> (Repeat)[29]

Here, repetition adds humorous emphasis, generating a circular impression; it also comes across as an attempt to extract meaning by trying out different, random variations on a theme. In Keith Appler's view:

> Wellman's bad-writing plays demonstrate or feint toward meaning repeatedly and even repeat the same gesture, but meaning is never fully produced. There is the intensity of recognition in the meaning that comes into view, and the intensity of its immediate withdrawal, what Wellman means in referring to the "pulled punch."[30]

Such "bad-writing" style is a suitable frame for accommodating Wellman's *penchant* for the popular and the trivial, revealing the satirical aspects of his work. Moreover, the unusual ways in which Wellman's texts are structured generate sensory effect, rendering tonality, inflection and repetition prevalent aspects of dramaturgy. To the readers / spectators, these plays offer an experience of immersion into the world of his language together with an intriguing exercise in decoding a basic plot-line through the rhythms and silences of the script. The underlying notion that rhythm is inseparable from meaning is prevalent also in Richard Maxwell.

RICHARD MAXWELL'S LINGUISTIC PRESENT

The desire to marry text and performance is particularly pronounced in plays of which the writer is also the director. New York City Players' director Richard Maxwell has produced what one could call "performance plays", namely, texts that are notionally directed as they are being written. His work pushes theatrical representation to its limits, stretching dramatic dialogue to incorporate the "realness" of everyday exchanges, in all their hesitation and disenchantment. At the same time, his plays disintegrate

29 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
30 Keith Appler, "Mac Wellman and the Language Poets: Chaos Writing and the General Economy of Language," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism,* vol. 24, no. 2, 2010, p. 80.

any clear distinction between character and performer. In effect, Maxwell's sense of embodied rhythm thoroughly informs his composition and one can hardly distinguish where the function of the writer ends and that of the director begins. On a structural and linguistic level, his texts are very much exercises in deadpan communication, featuring "idiosyncratic pauses and catchphrases, meaningless utterances, and false-starts", together with "hypernaturalist elements, the intrusion of the Real, and a-thetic performativity, to generate minimalist and highly elliptical configurations."[31]

In the context of hyper-naturalistic delivery, where no inflection is present in speech, the acting style often appears devoid of emotional nuance, and the rhythm is purposely one-tone. In *Drummer Wanted* (2003), the domesticity of the strained mother-son relationship is full of TV clichés and soap-opera references. The characters "seem to use gestures, phrases and vocal patterns as quotations, as fixed signs that, since they signify specific emotions, attitudes, etc., endow the characters with those qualities retroactively, but superficially, schematically."[32] The example of the karaoke scene where mother and son air their grievances through the lines of songs, underlines the performative aspect of Maxwell's writing. Moreover, effective pauses and interruptions in the writing allow us to perceive the actor as an entity devoid of the common representational attributes of a "dramatic character." They are part of Maxwell's "real time aesthetic," which adds to the hypernaturalism of his work. Often, as in the case of *Drummer Wanted*, a sensation of interminable duration to the play clashes against the impression of occasional location changes and significant changes in time, as suggested in the dialogue. This adds to the hyper-real aspect of the play. The mastery of the elliptical form, Maxwell's repetitions and silences, orchestrate a rhapsody of violence that functions as a means of predicting, but also of realizing the unraveling of the action. In an interview with Hilton Als, Maxwell elaborated on the process of creating characters through active listening:

> I try to listen to the room as much as possible. In writer terms, I know that can mean what other people think about the writing, but I mean how words are just like sounds and how they bounce around in the air. I also really care that things make sense, from a character point of view. Which doesn't mean I'm always justifying the words psychologically. I like the tonal differences in how people communicate.[33]

31 Markus Wessendorf, "The Postdramatic Theatre of Richard Maxwell", 2006.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Richard Maxwell and Hilton Als, "The Theatre: An Interview with Richard Maxwell", *The New Yorker*, April 21st, 2014.

Active "listening" appears to be a key concept in Maxwell, referencing both the work with the actors and the spectators' quality of engagement. Being a playwright-director, Maxwell stages his plays as he writes them, musicalizing them in the process, sometimes by adding the element of live music as well, as is the case with the play *The Evening* (2014), in which a live band plays rock music, while an actor sits silently on stage. This results in a mixed-media form of theatre, a kind of "concert drama", where aurality takes precedence over any visual considerations. At the same time, the mixture of the dialogic and the diegetic expands the scope of the work. In *Ode to the Man who Kneels* (2007), a play set in the Wild West, the novelistic element features in parts where the dialogue is interrupted by what would normally be placed amid the stage directions. This is the case with the character of The Standing Man, who delivers a confession, but distances himself from the possibility of emotional involvement, speaking about himself in the third person:

> The Standing Man is convinced that is is not a killer ("He cannot lie. He simply cannot. If he was to lie, he would become undone. So he simply does not"). That he never killed. The half-life and the sickness. A constant half-life. The Standing Man wants to be close to you. He does.[34]

In this particular speech, the character's present merges with the performer's critical distance from the action and the author-director's acting notes in parentheses. This fragile co-habitation produces tension in the way the audience perceives the story and could be part of Maxwell's strategy of "[de-naturalizing] performance 'contrivance' and the 'front' that trained actors possess,"[35] a strategy which is central to his work.

CONCLUSIONS

The above examples serve to illustrate, at least partially, the hyper-linguistic, self-reflexive emphasis of speech in contemporary American plays, reflecting on how language abandons its semantic communicative function in favor of its vocation as sound incantation. They highlight the politics of viewing the text as a work of art with autonomous value; a work in which discursive meaning is downplayed and where language is treated more as the body of a text that has become "sonic material, a sound

34 Richard Maxwell, *Ode to the Man Who Kneels*, New York, New York City Players, 2007, p. 9.

35 Sarah Gorman, *The Theatre of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players*, New York, Routledge, 2011, p.42.

without sense, a signifier without a signified."[36] Mee's, Wellman's and Maxwell's drama creates a multisensory experience, with all its musical and literary attributes, rendering interpretation a matter of sensory engagement as opposed to intellectual processing, for speech no longer services its agent. Rather than explain (interpret), the writer's desire is to cite (project / display). The quality of "novelisation" falls into a more general "tendency for dramatic dialogue to be contaminated by narrative features…the *dramatis personae* thus come to include all manners of narrators, reciters, monologists, storytellers, and reporters—all manner of mediators between the fiction and the public."[37] Language is exposed, bare in its (aural) sensorial beauty. Looking into the hydraulics of contemporary writing, Jean-Pierre Ryngaert points out that "the basic question is no longer 'What is the story?,' since the text exists 'for its own sake, for its own qualities, for its literariness perhaps, or even for its 'theatricality', while the story develops on the surface of the language only, in fits and starts, instead of being a deep and essential structure."[38] Contemplating how the incantatory aspect of language resonates with an audience, one can gradually begin to grasp the extreme demands that such texts place on performers and spectators alike, who need not only to absorb story-line and theme, but also to experience the new sensory associations that flow out of the very matter of speech.

Some words of caution might be in order here. In determining the relationship between literature and drama, Keir Elam articulates the possibility that "certain written texts attempt to foreground *themselves* as composed or quasi-literary artifacts."[39] He draws attention to the constraints that the written text imposes upon the performance to the effect that "the primary signified of every performance will be the connoted 'writtenness' of the play", and argues that this performance's success is subject to "the compliance of the performers."[40] This stimulating "writtenness" nonetheless requires of the playwright to consider the multiple functions of dramatic form both sensitively and sensibly. The hyperbolic, "purist" understanding of language as text, of drama as devoid of thematic reference, can potentially lead to reductionist experiments in stylization and thus incur the same risks induced by the suffocating *aestheticism* of an excessively conceptualized *mise-en-scène*.

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36 Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scene*, trans. Joel Anderson, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 303.

37 Jean Pierre Ryngaert, "Paroles en lambeaux et écritures d'entreparleurs", in Dona Mounsef and Josette Feral, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Keir Elam, "Language in the Theatre", *SubStance,* vol. 6/7, no. 18/19, 1977-8, p.159.

40 *Ibid.*

Performance structures can be tenacious, often contemptuous of literary principles. Recourse to wordiness and long-winded verbal equivocations bears the kind of narcissism that may condemn post-dramatic performance to sheer mannerism. This said, the challenges inherent in fine-tuning the particularities of drama, poetry, and fiction can produce exciting tensions that will expand theatre's literary and performative scope. Many of the principal hallmarks of experimental post-1980s dramaturgy—including the fragmentation of character, fracturing and distortion of narrative, and mistrust for conventional representation, but more importantly, the sensory emphasis on music, rhythm, and the playfulness of speech—suggest an inevitable evolution that promises an organic integration of performance within the dramatic form, drawing the multisensory aspect into the realm of the literary.

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Notice

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Abstract

Referencing Gertrude Stein's *landscape* aesthetic—a way of rendering alive human consciousness by means of physicalizing it through language—several American playwrights have been infusing performative (spatial and incantatory) forms into the very tissue of their writing, from the latter part of the 20th century to date. Present as sound poetry or principles of fiction, formal elements that undermine traditional structures of dramatic writing have generated a tradition of experimental voices as distinct as those of Charles Mee, Mac Wellman and Richard Maxwell, among others. In these playwrights' works, characters are often created and developed linguistically, their physical selves subordinated to their speech, while texts are frequently as elliptical and "oral" as poems and other times as narrational and cerebral as novels, breathing within liminal spaces that defy easy categorization, but also resonating with performative potential.

Key words

21st-century playwriting; American drama; contemporary dramaturgy; experimental theatre; Charles Mee; Mac Wellman; Richard Maxwell

Résumé

En se référant à « l'esthétique du paysage » de Gertrude Stein – façon de rendre la conscience humaine vivante en la matérialisant à travers le langage – plusieurs auteurs américains ont injecté des formes performatives (spatiales et incantatoires) dans le tissu même de leur écriture, de la fin du XX^e siècle à nos jours. Qu'ils soient poésie sonore ou principes de fiction, les éléments formels qui minent les structures traditionnelles de l'écriture dramatique ont généré une tradition de voix expérimentales aussi distinctes que celles de Charles Mee, de Mac Wellman ou de Richard Maxwell, entre autres. Dans les œuvres de ces dramaturges, les personnages naissent et se développent par le langage, leur physicalité étant subordonnée à leur discours, tandis que les textes, tantôt elliptiques et « oraux » comme des poèmes, tantôt narratifs et cérébraux comme des romans, investissent des espaces liminaux défiant toute catégorisation facile, et vibrent de potentiel performatif.

Mots-clés

Écriture du XXI^e siècle ; théâtre américain ; dramaturgie contemporaine ; théâtre expérimental ; Charles Mee ; Mac Wellman ; Richard Maxwell

"PLAYS AS SCULPTURES". RICHARD MAXWELL'S DRAMATURGY OR THE ART OF INVENTING NEW SHAPES

An interview with Richard Maxwell by Emeline Jouve

Playwright and stage director Richard Maxwell is the artistic director of New York City Players. Maxwell is one of the leading figures of the experimental scene in New York City. He is the recipient of three OBIE awards for House *(1999),* Drummer Wanted *(2002) and* Good Samaritans *(2005). He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2010, the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award in 2012—he was an invited artist in the Whitney Biennial in the same year—, and The Spalding Gray Award in 2014. His work has been commissioned by venues in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Ireland. He has written more than thirty plays which explore the American way of life. He is also the author of* Theater for Beginners *(2015), a guide "for the people who want to be on stage."*[1]

This interview was conducted through video chat on October 16th, 2018.

Emeline Jouve. – Richard Maxwell, first of all, thank you very much for having accepted this interview which will deal with the notion of dramaturgy. Let's get straight to the subject and let me ask you "what is your definition of dramaturgy?"

Richard Maxwell. – My approach to dramaturgy in my work is opposed to typical American dramaturgy, which is mainly realist and based on a plot line, on the building up of characters with psychological depths... When I write, I think about shapes. I think about plays as sculptures.

Emeline Jouve. – Since you are breaking away with realism, would you call your theatre "experimental theatre"?

Richard Maxwell. – I call it "non-traditional". The tradition in American theatre is realism. Imitation is the pattern but to me nothing happens when you are just trying to imitate. I want to get away from imitation to invent new shapes, and that is why I'm trying to make exciting sculptures.

Emeline Jouve. – A sculptor has clay to fashion his pieces: what are your sculptures made of?

1 Richard Maxwell, *Theater for Beginners*, New York, TCG, 2015, p. 2.

Richard Maxwell. – Words on the page, words as they come out, bodies, faces, figures. I'm lucky to work with Sasha van Riel in production design because, literally, the physical look of the show is part of that shape: where to draw the line between whatever fiction is being told and the room that you're in. The set is very important to me and to actors, which is also why I put that chapter in *Theater for Beginners* that is for actors to build a set. That kind of spatial awareness counts, as a performer. You will behave differently if you are ignoring the room that you're in—that you happen to be in—and so understanding, having like a physical relationship to the fiction, I think is something that really affects how you conduct yourself as a performer.

Emeline Jouve. – But does that mean that you write from the rehearsal room?

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah. There are always varying degrees, but usually some form of a script exists when we start the rehearsals, but I shape the text to the staging somehow like a three-dimensional sculpture with the words, the actors and the space around. I write, or re-write, on the spot. Sometimes I'll ask an actor to put it in their own words, and I'll incorporate that right into my writing. Sometimes I'll sketch out like placeholder lines just to get from A to B. Sometimes I'll ask the team to go away for half an hour, while I sort something out, and then they'll come back and we try. Sometimes I'll cancel rehearsal so that I can finish larger sections. Writing is a very active process.

Emeline Jouve. – If you write as you are working on the staging itself, does it mean that your creations require a lot of rehearsals? And if so, this must imply practical and economic negotiations, right?

Richard Maxwell. – You mean negotiations to finance? Right. Well, financing the arts is challenging, that is a fact but I actually work very fast. So there's a lot that happens in the rehearsal room. I feel like I'm condensing traditional play development—when you have, you know, readings, workshops, rehearsals, previews—into a few weeks as if all was happening at the same time. For me, the arbiter is the text, but not the text on the page: the text in the room. That is the text in the room that the audience will discover, and to which they will react, so the dramatic composition must take place in the room to me.

Emeline Jouve. – So your approach to dramaturgy is very theatrical, in that you need the stage to write. Is this method inherited from your own training as an actor?

Richard Maxwell. – Definitely! Thinking around acting informed the writing. I learned dramaturgy not as a writer but as an actor, and I became a writer and a director because I wanted more control.

Emeline Jouve. – More control over what? What were you dissatisfied about?

Richard Maxwell. – The only training I have in theatre is acting and that's what I tried to do when I got out of school, and, for whatever reasons, it didn't work out that way. It's interesting as an actor to get a part, to learn the part and try to understand the part in a play, but I couldn't deny all the elements around the production and, basically I wanted more control over what was made, more control over the whole theatrical process. I was also interested in how dialogues can move things along. If you want to talk about dramaturgy, that really was prominent. I remember thinking about how people are able to move something forward with words. So, I got interested in directing, and then from directing, I got interested in writing. Also, I don't want to deny the musical part of my background. I mean, as a musician, I write: I've written songs and that has informed a lot how I think about writing and how I think about theatre. Music helps me find the rhythm of the lines: I don't think I'm writing poetry per se and I don't think I'm writing even verses, but what I do know is when a line is finished, I feel it thanks to my practice as a musician. So, my points of reference are the acting and the musical experiences that I've had outside of theatre. These two elements have directly and indirectly informed my writing.

Emeline Jouve. – What do you mean by "indirectly"?

Richard Maxwell. – I mean that those elements informed my conversations with actors and designers for example, which in turns influenced my writing—as the text keeps evolving in the rehearsal room. So, that's an indirect influence in that respect, I would say. And the direct influence is when I write the first sketch and I write with my background as an actor and musician in mind.

Emeline Jouve. – The influence of acting transpires very much in your writing. It seems that what you refer to as your "non-traditional" dramatic approach is linked to your "non-traditional" acting approach, as a matter of fact. As you explained, you broke away from traditional American realist writing, and this seems to be linked to your mistrust in realist acting. Is that right?

Richard Maxwell. – Yes, absolutely. My departure from traditional acting comes from the idea of "not pretending". And that rule gets broken all the time but that's where I definitely start when I start directing people. The tendency of an actor is to get the script, look at the role, unpack the role, and start to answer these questions that come up.

Emeline Jouve. – That's part of the American heritage of Lee Strasberg's Method, based on Stanislavski's Technique, which has been so influential in the USA, isn't it?

Richard Maxwell. – Right! American actors are trained to imitate. I actually never really trusted that approach, because first of all trying to answer questions about the characters is very superficial, since as a matter of fact you know nothing about

the character. To me, it is important that actresses and actors acknowledge their ignorance. I try to put across, right from the beginning, that it's OK not to know. That's a really hard thing to accept, but that's the way it is. Again, the last thing I would want you to do as an actor is to pretend to know, you see? And so it takes a lot of courage to say "I don't know, I don't know what's going on". And that can be unnerving for actors, because actors who ask me what I think about this or that, I say "I don't know, I don't know". It would be foolish for me to say "I know what this play is, from top to bottom, A to Z", without having met my cast, without having worked with them in the room: that's not what I'm going to do. I have a long history with some actors that I've worked with—like Jim Fletcher—and so we're able to peel back more layers of what "not pretending" means I suppose. When I audition people, I like to give them non-theatrical texts, which helps to establish very quickly the kind of dialectic that I want to have with the actors: right away you're taking off the notion of character, although you'd be surprised to know how much actors try to make non-theatrical texts sound like a character, there's always that tendency. If I look back at the trajectory of my plays from 1998 until now, what has happened generally is that you have fewer and fewer scenes with people talking to each other as characters in a room. Instead, you have more and more speeches that are not really meant to be acted out. *Paradiso*, for example, is mostly long, really descriptive first-person narrative based. *The Evening* is like another exploration into characters as well, it's like pulling the face off of traditional characterization. I explore questions like "what is a character?", "how do we kill characters?", "how do we pull the face off of it?". And I was interested in trying to see what's left when you get rid of the characters: do we have ghosts? Is there a material aspect, or something otherwise tangible that we can identify?

Emeline Jouve. – Your insight into characterization being so different from what most actors are trained for, it must be complicated to find the "right" performers. Is that the reason why you like working with the same actresses and actors?

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah, you're right but it's interesting because with *Paradiso* and *Queens Row*, I worked with people I hadn't worked with before... I think about casting as a jazz musician would think about an ensemble: putting together players who go together. So it's risky, because not just anyone can drop into these plays, if someone—God forbid—somebody can't do a show, the show just really can't happen without that person. The relationship I have with the actors is intense. I don't know if actors realize how important they are to what I'm doing. And because I write for them a lot. The play is not finished when I start rehearsing, so I'm tailoring the script to them. It brings into the play the notion of collaboration.

I know from experience that some actors are better than others, and I suppose it has to do with a certain generosity. And meanwhile I'm trying to be generous by writing something for them. I guess all I'm saying is that there's a symbiotic aspect that can't be overlooked.

Emeline Jouve. – Theatre is the art of the "here and now". It seems that the script is a response to the present of the rehearsal room, to the presence of the people you are working with and for whom you tailor the lines.

Richard Maxwell. – Yeah, that's what theatre is, right? "Here and now"! It bothers me when theatre is a sign of the times, and it bothers me when theatres promote theatre with video, as though you're somehow getting what the experience would be. When I write, I'm really trying to respond to what's going on in my immediate surroundings; and by immediate surroundings, I mean the rehearsal room, but also life, and unfortunately that means a lot of deaths, you know, people close to me who've died, and so that's part of what I'm responding to, in addition to whatever is happening geopolitically, which feels like very much in floods. Writing plays is a moment to moment existence: it's just like I can't finish a play before rehearsal starts. And even after the play has opened, I'm still playing with the text and changing it, basing myself on the audience's response. So, yes, I write as a response to the present, we can say.

Emeline Jouve. – It's interesting to see that you started directing and writing because you wanted to have more control over the whole creative process, when in fact you emphasize the importance of responding to the present and collaborating with the actors and spectators to adapt your script. Could you elaborate on your vision of the audience? Are the readers of your plays and spectators of your shows part of the dramaturgical process?

Richard Maxwell. – Well, the whole point is for people to be able to read something into it and get their own image from what I've written ... that's the point, that's why I'm doing writing. But most people, in fact, want to understand what the author wants to say with his work and, at least in the States, I feel that most people would rather see something more articulated, more fleshed-out and more pronounced, so that they can know what I was going for. "What the author means with the work" is, I think, a driving force behind dramaturgy in America but again, I am not interested in that tradition. Whether I'm successful or not, my efforts are to make the experience as democratic as possible with the audience members. I am trying to construct my plays so that they'll allow for the individual to make the associations that they want.

Emeline Jouve. – So you distinguish yourself from the American theatrical tradition through your approach not only to dramatic composition and acting, but also to your audience. In spite of not being "traditional", would you say that your plays are "American" nonetheless?

Richard Maxwell. – Oh, Yeah!

Emeline Jouve. – Right; but why would you define them as American, then?

Richard Maxwell. – They're American because, well, first, I'm American and I think that what is central for my writing is to understand the mythic aspect of Americana. I get a lot of traction from what we know America to be and to have been in all its iconography, and I trade on that for sure. I trade on it, and I also I get into trouble because I'm more sympathetic than you would expect maybe towards that kind of myths.

Emeline Jouve. – What are the myths?

Richard Maxwell. –That we are free, that we are independent, that we are strong, that we are self-starting, that we care about each other, that we help each other out, that we care about our families, that we like fast cars, that we have a dream… These kinds of things.

Emeline Jouve. ––With *The Evening* and *Paradiso*, you are reviving other myths—the Christian myths as Dante fictionalized them. It seems that with *The Evening* you inaugurated in 2015 a new dramatic strategy by going back to classical texts.

Richard Maxwell. – It's true that I had not so deliberately gone back to the classics before. But I would say that it was a deliberate yet unwilling choice.

Emeline Jouve. – Interesting… what do you mean?

Richard Maxwell. –Well, you know, I wasn't a good student in school and I take my share of the blame. I wish I had read more when I was younger, and so one of the things I've been trying to do is work my way through the canon of literature. So, you know, I was reading things like *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, *The Aeneid*. And I happened to be reading *Inferno* when I got this commission to do a new play from a consortium of four theatres (Performance Space 122 in New York, the One the Boards in Seattle, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh). So I was thinking of what I would do, and I just thought of what I liked about *The Inferno*: the descriptions of the underworld which are really vivid, you know, going down into the underworld with Virgil as an escort and going to the circles; the topography and the geography that were indicated were interesting to me. It was interesting to see the corollaries to Milton in *Paradise Lost* and to Greek mythology, Roman mythology, and the underworld. I was interested in this physical place in which people believed and which, although supernatural,

was clearly represented in the descriptions, but also by the beautiful drawings of what was described. It was at that time, when I was immersed in Dante's underworld and trying to make a play from *Inferno*, that my father passed away. I was grappling with this source text, and I started to blame this source text for all the problems in my life, and yet I found that I couldn't really escape it, and I felt that the only way out was to go through it and so I really trudged through that text. I guess that it's a very, well, Catholic thing, this feeling that I had to trudge through this as a punishment or something. To go through it corresponds to purgatory of course. And then there was *Paradiso*... And then I was able to convince myself that I could substitute *Samara*, which was something that I'd written before, and get through it quicker that way hopefully. I think that I'm finally through it... But only after making not three plays but four and I think since *Queens Row*, a play that I just did in London, feels very close to *Paradiso*.

Emeline Jouve. – Do you write the plays to be staged by yourself or do you sometimes write plays for others to direct them?

Richard Maxwell. – I just write plays to write plays and I wish more people knew that, I wish more directors would stage them.

Emeline Jouve. –Marie-José Malis from La Commune-Aubervilliers in France worked on *The End of Reality*, so there are people who have staged your texts.

Richard Maxwell. – Yes, there was Sarah Benson at Soho Rep who did *Samara*, and Brian Mendes directed *People Without History* in 2009. There've been some productions in Brazil... It has happened in the past that people have directed my shows and I didn't find out about it till later, so I suppose there's that going on too... Yes, there's been a few scattered productions here and there, but it's not a regular thing, and I wish that more artists would make my work their own.

Emeline Jouve. – Well, that's an invitation to directors then! Richard Maxwell, it was a pleasure to talk about your approach to dramaturgy. Thank you very much!

Richard Maxwell. – Thank you, Emeline.

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Notice

Emeline Jouve is Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture at Champollion University and Toulouse Jean Jaurès University. She has published articles on Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein, Paula Vogel, the Wooster Group, Big Art Group and the Living Theatre in European and American journals and anthologies. She co-edited Susan *Glaspell's* Trifles *and "A Jury of Her Peers"* (2015), *Unspeakable Acts: Murder by Women* (2016) and *Chronique judiciaire et fictionnalisation du procès* (2017). *Susan Glaspell's Poetics and Politics of Rebellion* was published in 2017 by the University of Iowa Press. In 2018, Deuxième Epoque released her volume of interviews *Avignon 68 & le Living Theatre*. Jouve is the editor of "Ariel's Corner: theatre" for the peer-reviewed e-journal *Miranda*.

Abstract

In this interview, Richard Maxwell, writer, stage director and artistic director of New York City Players, discusses his approach to dramaturgy. Throughout the conversation, Maxwell attempts to define the nature of his writing and to pinpoint the specific features of his style, which differs from the traditional American realist trend.

Key words

Richard Maxwell; non-traditional theatre; playwriting; words / space; American myths

Résumé

Dans cet entretien, Richard Maxwell, auteur, metteur en scène et directeur artistique des New York City Players, revient sur sa façon de concevoir la dramaturgie. L'échange est l'occasion de définir la nature de l'écriture de Maxwell et de cerner ses spécificités, notamment par rapport à la dramaturgie réaliste traditionnelle étasunienne.

Mots-clés

Richard Maxwell ; théâtre non traditionnel ; écriture dramatique ; mots / espaces ; mythes américains

ON SARAH RUHL'S TRANSFORMATIVE THEATER OF LIGHTNESS

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SARAH RUHL'S EMBRACE OF ITALO CALVINO'S LESSONS ON LIGHTNESS

Lightness is a literary virtue that more often than not needs to be defended and made a case for.[1] This is, at least, what Sarah Ruhl claims in her short essay "Calvino and Lightness", where she suggests that a "suspicion that lightness is not deeply serious (but instead whimsical) still pervades aesthetic discourse."[2] As Scott Bede explains, both lightness and weight are slippery categories that reflect transhistorical and transcultural aesthetic values found in all forms of literature at all times, privileged at certain historical and cultural junctures and underprivileged at others.[3] Thus, while in the Western tradition lightness has often been undervalued "and the term itself used pejoratively or, at best, apologetically", this was not always the case. During the eighteenth century, Bede asserts, "the characteristics we tend to associate with light literature (spontaneity, superficiality, implausibility etc.) were all highly regarded within dominant culture."[4] Yet, with the rise of realism in the nineteenth century and its often serious and solemn treatment of everyday reality, we witness a return to the appreciation of gravity and weight whose influence can still be felt. In fact, despite the ludic pleasure and the banishment of the divide between high and popular culture enacted by postmodern literature, Bede, like Ruhl, believes that our contemporary understanding of what constitutes light literature is still generally associated with

1 Research for this chapter was conducted at Basel University with the financial aid of a travel grant funded by the Program *Estades curtes en altres universitats i centres d'investigació* (2019) of the *Universitat de València*.

2 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, New York, Faber and Faber, 2014, p. 36.

3 Scott Bede, *On Lightness in World Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 1.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

triviality, frivolity and the kind of pleasurable narratives "that require a minimal degree of effort to read" and do "whatever it takes to keep us turning the pages."[5]

It is, precisely, against this perception of lightness as a flawed quality related to inconsequentiality that Italo Calvino rebelled in the first of his posthumous *Lezioni Americane* (1988), later translated into English as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.[6] At the beginning of his essay, Calvino clarifies that, considering the opposition between lightness and weight as divergent literary values and tendencies that have competed over the centuries, he decided to uphold the former: not necessarily because the virtues of weight should be any less compelling, but because he had simply "more to say about lightness."[7] Nevertheless, were he to choose an auspicious sign for the approach of the new millennium, he would pick the following:

> [T]he sudden nimble leap of the poet / philosopher who lifts himself against the weight of the world, proving that its heaviness contains the secret of lightness, while what many believe to be the life force of the times—loud and aggressive, roaring and rumbling—belongs to the realm of death, like a graveyard of rusted automobiles.[8]

In this essay I want to argue that, since the turn of the century, the plays of Sarah Ruhl, who "wanted desperately to become a poet before [she] discovered playwriting"[9] might be regarded as the timely and felicitous creations of such a nimble poet philosopher envisioned by Calvino.[10] With a rare delicacy of spirit that is nonetheless brazenly affirmed, Ruhl summons worlds on stage that, for all their material actuality

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6 In June 1984, Calvino was invited by Harvard University to give the Charles Eliot Norton poetry lectures, scheduled for the academic year 1985-1986. By January 1985 he had already defined his topic and by September, the time of his scheduled departure for Massachusetts, he had written five of the lectures on the topics of Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity. As he passed away before travelling and writing the sixth talk on Constancy, the manuscripts for his completed talks were published posthumously.

7 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, London, Penguin, 2016, p. 3.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9 Sarah Ruhl and Max Ritvo, *Letters from Max: A Book of Friendship*, Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 2018, p. 20.

10 Ruhl is also a writer of poetry, but she has confessed to having seldom shared her poems with others, keeping them private for years. She had a now out-of-print booklet of early confessional poems published by a small Chicago press in 1995. Only recently, as a pleasant outcome of her friendship with the late poet Max Ritvo, some of her poems have been published as part of their four-year correspondence and in February 2020 Ruhl launched a new poetry book titled *44 Poems for You* published by Copper Canyon Press.

and consistency, create meaning through images, gestures and an economy of verbal fabric that feel both contemplative and weightless. In them, the characters' pursuit of momentary lack of gravity, far from being "an escape from the serious business of engaging with the world and being human" [11] generally associated with lightness, is intimately related, on the contrary, with a very serious engagement with what defines us as human beings: our own mortality.

While Ruhl has openly declared her admiration for Calvino's expanded concept of a "thoughtful lightness" [12] and embraced it as a "philosophical choice," [13] lightness remains a complex and challenging concept whose translation into a dramaturgical vision still deserves critical scrutiny. In 2008, as Ruhl showed theater critic John Lahr her copy of Calvino's book, she told him that: "Lightness isn't stupidity... It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom—stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even as you're experiencing them." [14] Since then, lightness has become a common trope in the critical vocabulary used to describe—yet no so much to analyze—Ruhl's dramatic *oeuvre* in the scholarly articles, book chapters and books that, in the second decade of the 21st century, have proclaimed her one of the most outstanding American playwrights of the new millennium. [15] Lahr suggested in his *New Yorker* essay that "Lightness—the distillation of things into a quick, terse, almost innocent directness—is a value on which Ruhl puts much weight" and that Ruhl's "stoical comic posture is a means of killing gravity, of taking the heaviness out of her words in order to better contend with life." [16] In their monographs, both James Al-Shamma (2011) and Amy Muse (2018) have subsequently resorted to lightness as described by Calvino to interpret Ruhl's unique style in the

11 Simon Murray, "Embracing Lightness: Dispositions, Corporealities and Metaphors in Contemporary Theatre and Performance," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2013, p. 207.

12 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

13 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

14 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008.

15 Leslie Atkins Durham, *Women's Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century: Sarah Ruhl and her Contemporaries*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 4. According to Durham, Sarah Ruhl dominated the American stage in the first decade of the 21st century, having twelve premiere productions in as many years. Ruhl was as prolific in the past decade as in the previous one but it is rather the increasing scholarship on her work that confirms her status as a leading contemporary playwright, with two monographs devoted to her work and a third volume (Durham 2013) structured around her plays.

16 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," art. cit.

theater.[17] However, James Butler's essay—included in Muse's book—is the only critical text to date that specifically addresses the subject at hand.[18]

For all its wide recognition, the concept of lightness as a fitting and relevant critical concept to approach the theatrical aesthetics of Sarah Ruhl across her career should be further investigated to shed light on: how it emerges on stage materially (visually, and aurally); and how it functions as a flexible poetic frame that interlaces with other motifs defining the playwright's theatrical style. I want to suggest, in fact, that lightness in Ruhl's dramatic worlds is inseparable from the notion of transformation and that it is thus, ultimately, a transformative quality. To do so, I will engage in dialogue with Calvino's text and other scholars who have studied lightness as a literary value; with scholarship on Ruhl's work; and with Ruhl's own essays. Making a gentle leap upward like a bird, I will then hover over scenes from selected plays with the aim of understanding and assessing how their theatrical nimbleness is created and conveyed.

THE LINGUISTIC SHAPING OF FLEETING LIGHTNESS

Calvino's seminal lecture on lightness is wide-ranging and eclectic: the author navigates swiftly from Greek mythology to Latin poetry, from medieval literature to eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers, in order to illustrate his ideal of lightness and locate this quality in the past and project it into the future. Several insights emerge through allusions to Perseus's killing of the Medusa; to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; to Boccaccio's portrayal of Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti in the *Decameron* and to the latter's poetry; to Cyrano de Bergerac, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Miguel de Cervantes among others. As film writer Richard Raskin has aptly summarized, for Calvino, lightness is identified "with such properties as mobility, agility of spirit, knowledge of the world, subtlety, the precariousness of things as they are, levitation and freedom" while, correspondingly, "heaviness is linked to inertia, opacity, petrification, sluggishness, density, solidity and the crushing of life."[19] What becomes clear from Calvino's essay, in any case, is that

17 James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of her Plays*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2011 (see especially p. 6, and pp. 81-83); Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, London, Methuen, 2018.

18 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan: Lightness in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl," in Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-163.

19 Richard Raskin, "Italo Calvino and Inevitability in Storytelling," *Danish Journal of Film Studies*, December 18, 2004, p. 104.

neither of these qualities emerges from the application of a fixed set of rules, strategies or instructions. Instead, they should be thought of as flexible dispositions that occupy the terrain of language, of thought and the emblematic nature of the visual. On the other hand, as Scott Murray notes, lightness is not necessarily generated by the content of the narrative "so much as [by] its attitude toward the content, its style of being, its tone."[20]

In Ruhl's dramatic writing, we can perceive a lightening of language that acquires a rarefied consistency; a fearlessness of intellectual ideas, of abstraction, even "of the soul;"[21] and the visual impress of weightlessness in scenically spare, stylized, and limpid sets with limited and often abstracted props. Given the complexity of the theatrical medium, which solicits more than one sense, distilled sensory impressions of lightness can emerge through the simultaneous combination and synesthetic perception of spatial, visual, aural and kinetic elements. Oftentimes, however, lightness emerges fleetingly and momentarily, and images of lightness mutate and transform: they are never static. In the dramatic dialogue of *Eurydice* (2003)—Ruhl's personal, re-focalized revision of the classic Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice—we find a revealing instance of a conceit, molded linguistically at first to delicately express lightness, only to be then transformed and made much heavier in the second movement. In the play's first scene, Orpheus, having told his lover he has made up a song in twelve parts for her, is asked by Eurydice where he is going to find the different instruments. So with a gentle, airy conceit, he transmutes his beloved into the perfect carrier for his music:

> Orpheus – I'm going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument. Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and become a hair orchestra. It will fly you up into the sky.
> Eurydice – I don't know if I want to be an instrument.
> Orpheus – Why?
> Eurydice – Won't I fall down when the song ends?
> Orpheus – That's true. But the clouds will be so moved by your music that they will fill up with water until they become heavy and you'll sit on one and fall gently down to earth. How about that?[22]

20 Scott Bede, *On Lightness in World Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
21 Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
22 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

As Vatain-Corfdir has pointed out, the "strange—and perhaps comical—beauty of the conceit Orpheus uses to unite his love for Eurydice with his love for music" is "highlighted by its very pronunciation."[23] Indeed, Orpheus's long musical sentences, patterned by the rising rhythm of iambic feet to convey the sense of a gentle musical ascension, contrast with Eurydice's short, sharp responses, which not only reveal her skepticism but also resonate as a gloomy foreboding of her imminent fall.

This passage shows how Ruhl seems to have learnt from Calvino that literary lightness is to a great extent derived from a way of seeing the world based on acute attentiveness. Lightness is related "to precision and definition, not the hazy and the haphazard"[24], and it then has to be *created* in the writing. In other words, the sense of weightlessness is not necessarily borne by words themselves: it has to be contrived instead through their specific combination and arrangement with other words. Calvino finds an accurate illustration of this by comparing the line "*e bianca neve scender senza venti*," from a sonnet by Guido Cavalcanti to its latter adaptation by Dante in the *Inferno* (XIV, 30) "*come di neve in alpe senza vento*." The two lines, though nearly identical because in both "the snow in the absence of wind suggests a gentle silent motion,"[25] nonetheless express radically different ways of thinking and conveying opposite qualities. In the first case, weightlessness (expressed by the use of a conjunction, a verb and adjective that together dissolve the landscape in an air of suspended abstraction); in the second, substance and stability (as the specification of place sets up a mountain landscape, and the word *come* encloses the entire scene within the framework of metaphor).[26] When, in a similar vein, Ruhl evokes the conceit of the hair orchestra in the second movement of *Eurydice* to transform it into a much denser trope, we soon understand that this mutation is a means to poetically respond to Eurydice's passing. Although there is no set change, in the second movement of the play the dramatic action moves to the underworld, where Eurydice has to come to terms with her new state of being dead. Meanwhile, Orpheus has to mourn the loss of his wife and he does so, at first, by writing letters to her. After the short love note: "Dear Eurydice, / Symphony for twelve instruments," in Scene 7, Orpheus describes in a new letter a nightmarish dream where the images (the hair, the clouds, water) used previously to create aerial lightness have been soaked and transmuted by aquatic gravity, now a symbol of death:

23 Julie Vatain-Corfdir, "Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play: Examples from Sarah Ruhl's Theater", *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 153, 2017/4, p. 123.

24 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

26 *Ibid.*

> Dear Eurydice,
> Last night I dreamed that we climbed Mount Olympus and we started to make love and all the strands of your hair were little faucets and water was streaming out of your hair and I said, why is water coming out of your hair? And you said gravity is very compelling. And then we jumped off Mount Olympus and flew through the clouds and you held your knee to your chest because you skinned it on a sharp cloud and then we fell into a salty lake. Then I woke up and the window frightened me and I thought: Eurydice is dead.[27]

The use of a paratactic structure and the avoidance of pauses are the main linguistic means Ruhl uses in this passage to convey the sense of heaviness felt in nightmares. Yet it is the recurrence of the transformed conceit that must be seen as an instance of the peculiar and complex way in which lightness can be created but also contested and transformed: in this case, when it intertwines with water, which, as James Al-Shamma has pointed out, "is frequently associated with grieving in the play."[28]

An awareness of Ruhl's clear-cut weaving of fluid tropes draws attention to the way in which lightness and heaviness are forged linguistically, and expressed in dramatic dialogue with precision and definition. Beyond this acute attentiveness, the visual arrangement of words on the page in the published editions of Ruhl's plays elicits an immediate sense of weightlessness. Dialogue, be it in prose or in verse, is always condensed, then distilled in Ruhl's works. After four decades of writing fiction, Italo Calvino understood that his method for achieving lightness had entailed the subtraction of weight from "human figures, from celestial bodies, from cities" although, above all, he had tried "to remove weight from the structure of the story and from language".[29] So seems to be the case in the drama of Sarah Ruhl, who removes weight from dramatic dialogue by having her characters speak short, straightforward, simple sentences; and provides audiences with minimum backstory and explanations. The beginning of scene two of *The Oldest Boy* (2014) illustrates these inclinations. Ruhl's use of Dickinsonian dashes is yet another typographic choice that bespeaks a clear poetic influence in the shaping of condensed dramatic speech:

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27 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, *op. cit.*, p. 371-372.

28 James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, p. 24. For an extended critical reading of Eurydice's mythic revision see also: Ana Fernández-Caparrós, "Otherworldly Transitions and Transformative Identities in Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* (2003)," in Laura Monrós (ed.), *(Re)Thinking Literary Identities: Great Britain, Europe And Beyond*, València, PUV, 2017, pp. 119-133.

29 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Mother – We met—

Father – How did we meet?

Mother – He was supposed to marry another woman.

Father – An arranged marriage.

Mother – I walked into this restaurant. I was in despair—coming from a funeral in the rain—my teacher had just died—I couldn't write, I couldn't read, I couldn't finish my thesis—

Father – A crisis of faith? She was beautiful. [30]

Unlike Annie Baker's meticulous and hyperrealist on-stage recreation of ordinary speech and small talk—which brings forth an uncommon awareness of how people speak their minds but also, crucially, of how they fail to do so, as all the hesitations, false starts and interjections show—Ruhl's opposite method is to eliminate all that true-to-life filler material. On the other hand, as she told John Lahr, she likes plays that have "revelations in the moment, where emotions transform almost inexplicably." [31] The sense of astonishment, strangeness, mystery, and surprise that arises from these momentary revelations depends greatly on rejecting the burdensome psychological exposition characteristic of realist plays and, in no less degree, on lightening the scenic load.

VISUAL LIGHTNESS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE

Lightening the world of the stage should be thought of as a multilayered process. Thus, for all the importance of the stark, precise and poetic linguistic minimalism of Ruhl's dramatic speech, the first sensory impression of lightness we get as spectators emerges spatially—through the confrontation with a stage stripped of weighty material density, and whose scenic writing is an invitation to contemplate theatrical worlds that are often more suggestive than mimetic. [32] In terms of scenic illusion, Ruhl's dramatic works clearly belong to the tradition of what Bert O. States calls the "postrealistic stage," [33] which

30 Sarah Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy: A Play in Three Ceremonies*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016, p. 7.

31 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," art. cit.

32 Arnold Aronson describes scenic writing, or scenography, as the "all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage." Arnold Aronson, *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays in Scenography*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005, p. 7.

33 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985, p. 71.

defiantly resists the "gravitational pull of naturalism,"[34] with its inevitable bonding of scenery and character, environment and psychology. Both visually and dramaturgically, Ruhl often avoids having the stage cluttered with objects characteristic of the realist tradition and the confinement of action to a single locale, as these create the effect of an unchangeable world and the impression that there is an inevitable connection "between the theatrically given, or allowable, space and the destinies to be worked out in it."[35] Her plays, whose set descriptions are very spare, call for minimalist and fluid scenic designs instead. Hence, they stand in clear visual opposition, for instance, to the spaces overloaded with objects, and populated by men paralyzed by identity crises, which a previous generation of playwrights devised in its fiery exploration of wounded American masculinities. Don Dubrow's junk shop in Mamet's *American Buffalo* (1974) or Lee and Austin's vandalization of their mother's suburban kitchen at the end of Shepard's *True West* (1980) can be seen as paradigmatic visual instances of a material density of theatrical settings where male characters, either driven by uncontrollable violence or paralyzed by powerlessness and inertia, remain trapped by the bulk of a junkscape of objects reflecting "the commercialized surfaces and fragmentary substances of an American culture weighted down with material icons."[36] For Ruhl, on the contrary, reducing the material density of the stage is paramount, thus clearing the way to a phenomenological perception of the stage world and altering, at a stroke, our customary orientation with regards to time and space. How to make room to make visible the invisible, how to open up the space to accommodate a search for the metaphysical, allowing for fluid movement between realms—life and the afterlife, the real and the imagined?

In Ruhl's plays, set descriptions are naturally, like dramatic speech, utterly minimalistic. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2007), for instance, the set is described as a list of four elements:

> *1) a moveable dining room table and chairs*
> *2) a moveable table café*
> *3) a cell phone*
> *4) light.*[37]

34 Christopher Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2017, p. 67.

35 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

36 Stanton Garner, "Staging 'Things': Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard's Theater," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1998, pp. 55-66.

37 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2008, p. 4.

The functionality of stage props, their mobility and diminutive size (a *cell* phone) are as telling as the starkness of their selection. The minimalist description on the page clearly reinforces the idea of lightness. However, sketching out a set reduced to its bare minimum and avoiding superfluous embellishment does not diminish the potential for imaginative and poetic design. As set designer Ola Kraszpulska suggests, "[what] is typical of Ruhl's plays is that the devices required do not call for money, they call for creativity."[38] The last element in this list, "light," prompts in fact several readings and potential uses, and it can certainly be interpreted as more than a lighting cue—it is in fact a statement of what the stage world should look like. In other plays, such as *Melancholy Play* (2002), Ruhl gives specific hints about how to suggest location creatively, with simple props: "Many scenes can be played on the same chaise, without creating confusion about where we are. The hair salon may be established with a stool; the tailor shop with a mannequin or the act of sewing;" as for the windows that actors use to gaze out, they "may be moveable or not; they may even be created with light. But they should be old-fashioned and beautiful. And they should frame, rather than obstruct, the actors."[39] Set descriptions, like stage directions, are explicit, yet, at the same time, as Vatain-Corfdir points out, "dreamily indeterminate [...]. The focus is on the achievement of an aesthetic effect, not on realistic ways to attain it."[40] Not that the playwright disregards scenic illusion, but as she clarifies in *The Clean House* (2004), a play set in that quintessentially realistic locale, the living room, "the space should transform and surprise."[41] Here, once again, the set is scantily delineated:

> *A white living room.*
> *White couch, white vase, white lamp, white rug.*
> *A balcony.*[42]

The luminous lightness that the whiteness of Lane's house projects in this dramatic comedy is essential to visually and symbolically project the ideas of purity, cleanness, immaculateness, safety, brilliance, sterility and perfection that are contested and seen to

38 Ola Kraszpulska, "Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Works of Sarah Ruhl," in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al. (eds), *Old Stories, New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2015, p. 217.

39 Sarah Ruhl, *Melancholy Play*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

40 Julie Vatain-Corfdir, "Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play," art. cit., p. 117.

41 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006, p. 8.

42 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

evolve throughout the play. And, equally importantly, to allow for the transformation of space indicated at the opening of Act 2:

> *The white living room has become a hospital.*
> *Or the idea of a hospital.*
> *There is a balcony above the white living room.* [43]

Ruhl has confessed to having been particularly impressed by the Goodman's theater production of *The Clean House* directed by Jessica Thebus in 2006. There, stage designer Todd Rosenthal's response to the author's indications was to have a beautiful blue sky above an architectural, spare living room in the first act, and then to have a balcony suddenly appear, supported by a cantilever. In Ruhl's words: "It was so shocking—you wouldn't think that it could just come out of the air like that. The designer completely understood abstraction and transformation of space." [44]

This sudden apparition of the balcony—locating the impetuous romance of Charles (Lane's husband) and Ana (the Argentinian woman he madly fell in love with while doing surgery on her) in reimagined Shakespearian fashion—is just one of many instances of Ruhl's bias for the sudden, imaginative transformation of theatrical space. The latter has often been labeled whimsical by reviewers of her plays. One might assume that these unexpected, lighthearted transformations are merely decorative, and thus dispensable. I want to suggest that they are, on the contrary, one of Ruhl's most effective strategies to visually and symbolically enhance the bond between lightness and transformation. Furniture and props *per se* do not enact transformations: characters are the ones who change, and pursue agency. Nonetheless, Ruhl often envisages a transformation of space to accommodate and to reflect these changes, visually and symbolically. In the case of the balcony, it places the new lovers above ground, thus underscoring the feeling of elevation of being head over heels in love. It also spatially forces Lane to have a relationship with them against her will and eventually to forgive them. In *Eurydice*, where live and dead characters coexist on stage throughout the play, the lightest of props, love letters, are made to travel in order to overcome the divide between worlds: thus, the letters that are dropped to the floor as if into (invisible) mail slots reach their addressee, Eurydice, across worlds and in both directions. [45]

43 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

44 Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl," *BOMB*, no. 99, Spring 2007.

45 In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, likewise, the phone is a transcendent prop that grants passage to another world. For an extended discussion, see Ana Fernández-Caparrós, "Death and the Community of Comic Romance: Sarah Ruhl's Poetics of Transformation in Dead Man's Cell Phone," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 488-501.

Even lighter than letters is falling snow, which Ruhl has turned into a recurrent image of lightness in her plays. At the very end of *In The Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)* (2009), a "*domestic space that seemed terribly permanent—a settee, a statuette—... suddenly disappears and we are in a sweet small winter garden. Snow covers trees that in the spring flower with pink flowers*."[46] In *The Clean House*, Charles leaves near the end of the play with the preposterous plan of chopping a yew tree that could cure his lover's breast cancer, later to be seen crossing the stage in the distance, wearing a heavy parka and carrying a pick axe, while snow is falling on the balcony. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, on the other hand, stage directions indicate that, when Jean and Dwight kiss for the first time at the end of the first act, "*embossed stationary moves through the air slowly, like a snow parade*," while light is falling on the slow-moving lanterns and houses made of embossed paper, and on Jean and Dwight, "*who are also falling*."[47] In all these scenes

the snow, or snow-like props, convey a wonderful sense of weightlessness that can pull the audience out of the fourth-wall reality in different ways. In *In the Next Room*, set transformation occurs when "the artificial construction of the home is revealed at the same time that the void love triangle that supported it is subverted."[48] In other words, it is only once the domestic space is deconstructed that it is gently transformed, in a visionary way, so as to enhance the naked beauty of an unprecedented, intimate encounter between Mr. and Mrs. Givings. As for the snow falling in the second act of *The Clean House*, as Kraszpulska notes, designers and directors alike will have to make the choice and define what snow is in this play: "Is it a collection of white flurries fluttering in the air? Is it a physical obstacle hindering Charles' journey? Or are they a visual representation of his reality in the state of hope, in the state of denial?"[49] There are no right or wrong answers.

I do however agree with Thomas Butler, who writes that these exquisitely realized moments, when space embraces characters in a stunningly unpredictable way, convey the "elusive joyful and playful vitality that distinguishes Ruhl's drama from the work of other contemporary writers.[50] They enhance a sudden feeling of lightness that is perceived as such, it must be stressed, not solely due to weightless stage crafting but also,

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46 Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2010, p. 142.

47 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

48 Noelia Hernando-Real, "Love Triangles and Triangular Loves: A Home for Three in Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*, in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al (eds.), *Old Stories, New Readings*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

49 Ola Kraszpulska, "Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Works of Sarah Ruhl," art. cit., p. 215.

50 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan," art. cit., p. 155.

and crucially, because these moments of lightness emerge amidst an ongoing process of change or because they follow the characters' previous confrontation with the burden of living, or with the burden of dying, as in *Eurydice*. In the second movement of this play, entirely set in Hades, a sense of lightness emerges through the domestication of the wide, hostile, foreign space of the world of the dead, which becomes more earthly and homely. The whole act dramatizes and explores Eurydice's process of coming to terms with her new ontological state, which she does with the help of a man, her unrecognized father, whom she at first believes to be a hotel porter. Eurydice is very disappointed when she hears that there are no rooms because people do not sleep in the strange place she suddenly finds herself in. The room made of string that the father then slowly builds for his upset daughter in scene 3 inevitably has fragile and precarious foundations. Yet, it is a visual and symbolic triumph of lightness on stage: for all its lightweight structure; its humbleness; its smallness; and the invisibility of walls that are just hinted at, it provides the sense of shelter that any place called home can bring. As a delicate attempt to mitigate the harshness of hostile surroundings, it gently enacts a small transformation that will ease the relationship between characters and increase their trust in each other.

One needs time to unmoor oneself from the burdens of the past or sudden pain, inasmuch as one needs time to change and be transformed. Lightness is a "difficulty," Ruhl stated, "you cannot, after all, get something airborne on a mere whim, no—it requires careful patience and some physics to get a plane in the air."[51] In her plays, the pursuit of moments of theatrical lightness thus functions as "an interpretation of the heaviness that seeks to free heaviness of its stasis and to present an opening whereby it could transform," according to Thomas Butler.[52] In other words, it is a tactic related to the willingness to confront and accept loss, pain, grief, melancholy or marriage problems, rather than to avoid them; and one making room for possibility.

TEMPERING REALITY WITH STRANGENESS, EMOTION AND HUMOR

An openness to possibility stands at the very core of Ruhl's understanding of lightness as a multifaceted process of *tempering*. In her 2014 essay, "Calvino and Lightness," she wrote:

51 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.* p. 36.
52 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan," art. cit., p. 157.

> But what if lightness is a philosophical choice to temper reality with strangeness, to temper the intellect with emotion, and to temper emotion with humor. Lightness is then a philosophical victory over heaviness. A reckoning with the humble and the small and the invisible.[53]

While Ruhl has adopted Calvino's lessons to remove weight from language, and extended them to the spatial and visual vocabulary of the stage, her distilled defense of lightness further proposes elements that contribute to its emergence, and that shape her signature style into the creation of a contemporary theater of lightness. The way Ruhl phrases her short definition is crucial: conceiving the search for lightness as a philosophical endeavor suggests an abstract, rational and methodical consideration of reality and existence, a path towards understanding, wisdom and truth. Moreover,

an inherent openness to possibility ("what if") turns it into a flexible conceptual and poetic frame, rather than a fixed and well-defined discipline. In spite of the typical openness of any philosophical pursuit, lightness is then associated with a very specific aesthetic project whose end is the tempering of reality, intellect and emotion. The author identifies three interwoven elements—strangeness, emotion and humor—that should guarantee the desired mitigation of the heaviness of experience. Interestingly enough, Ruhl does not refer to the process of weight subtraction she actually endorses: instead, she uses the verb "temper" no less than three times. To "temper" means to soften or to make less severe, "to reduce to the suitable or desirable (middle) degree or condition free from excess in either direction; to moderate, mitigate, assuage, tone down."[54] This linguistic choice might be a way of stressing the fact that the burdens of reality are not to be negated, but aesthetically "assuaged" to open up a gentler confrontation with them.

From her early plays on, Ruhl has showed an uncommon interest in exploring death, grief, mourning and loss. This was closely linked to personal events, for her father died of cancer when she was twenty. *Eurydice* is the play where the weight of Ruhl's personal bereavement emerges in the most conspicuous way, as she has declared that, beyond her interest in the classic myth itself, she was also motivated by the possibility of having, on stage, one more conversation with her deceased father. By adding the character of the Father in the underworld as a surrogate for her own, Ruhl could eulogize him. But hers was a sophisticated transmutation of personal loss into a theatrical form that reached broad audiences, due to its engagement with bereavement at a time when intimate grief

53 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
54 "temper, v.," *OED Online*, Oxford UP, December 2019.

was shunted aside as embarrassing, strange, or even pathological.[55] Ruhl would further engage with mortality in subsequent plays such as *The Clean House*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and, more recently, *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday* (2016)—or with other kinds of life-altering losses, such as having to renounce the conventional upbringing of a son whom one needs to let go, as in *The Oldest Boy*. All these plays explore, in diverse ways, the redefinition of self and community forged by the leaving of the Other, the need for the world to be re-made, or the willingness "to have a relationship with death" rather than a relationship with illness, as the character of Ana in *The Clean House* demands.[56] The representation of death should be understood as a complex cultural construct which "also remains beyond the limits of intelligibility."[57] Ruhl's plays show, nonetheless, a fierce desire to go beyond those invisible limits and to rely on the very liminality of theater to actually represent and cross boundaries. Even though the stark landscape of the afterlife is only visible in *Eurydice*, life after death is a common preoccupation for Ruhl: sometimes ordinary ghosts are seen engaging in mundane activities around the stage, such as George in *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*, who is seen with his dog, eating grapefruit and Chex party mix, unbeknownst to his daughters and sons. Or sometimes dead characters are given the chance to explain what being dead is like: "the atmosphere smells. And there are high-pitched noises—like a teakettle always boiling over. But it doesn't seem to bother anyone. And for the most part there is a pleasant atmosphere and you can work and socialize," says the Father in *Eurydice*.[58] In other plays, live characters express how they imagine heaven or the afterlife. In *The Clean House* for instance, Ana says she thought she would meet her husband in some kind of afterlife with fabulous green and blue rocks. In contrast, in *For Peter Pan…*, the

55 *Eurydice* was amongst the ten most-produced plays across the member theatres of TCG in the 2008-2009 season (American Theatre Editors, "The Top Ten Most-Produced Plays: 1994-2014," *American Theatre*, September 23, 2014). Its success challenges and problematizes the institutional call, after 9/11, to conceive grieving as something to be feared or to be quickly dispensed with in order to move on. Ten days after the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush announced that Americans had finished grieving and it was time for resolute action to take the place of grief. Yet, the need to cope with a terrible loss—and with the fact that US boundaries had been breached with unprecedented violence; that a terrible toll on human life was taken; and that a War on Terrorism was called forth—far from being over, would linger on for years to come. Grief and mourning would become eloquent, ubiquitous and complex tropes of resistance across American literature and the arts in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

56 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

57 Lisa Perdigao and Mark Pizzato (eds), *Death in American Texts and Performances: Corpses, Ghosts, and the Reanimated Dead*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 1-2.

58 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

characters' mother is reported not to believe in heaven at all, as it would be too heavy and "all the bodies would fall down," while Peter Pan, as performed by Ann, when asked what being dead was like and whether consciousness persisted, simply says: "It was flying! It was wonderful!"[59]

This recurrent grappling with and questioning of (im)permanence should be seen as having profoundly shaped Ruhl's singular embrace of a transformative lightness. The latter becomes, in the theatre, at once a philosophical search and a strategy to prevent the weight of matter from burdening the characters. It is fully enacted when lightness makes room, spatially, emotionally, epistemologically, and spiritually, for change and transformation. It could be argued, firstly, that an engagement with transformation might be intimately related to the process of mourning in the plays that overtly explore finitude and loss because, as Judith Butler propounds, "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance."[60] The playwright's commitment to a process of transformation that allows us to "recognize impermanence, to see self as an illusion, [and] to grapple with leave-taking" leads, she believes, to the restoration of a ritual function of the theater as a "preparation for death" in a secularized society.[61] This engagement does not, however, make Ruhl's drama necessarily downhearted, gloomy or fatalistic. The playwright claims that a complex blending of strangeness, emotion and humor can temper too intellectual or too emotional a representation of reality. But does Ruhl actually deploy such a technique in her pursuit of theatrical lightness?

A closer look at *Dead Man's Cell Phone*'s scenic and linguistic minimalism can be illuminating. The play is described as being "full of silence and empty space."[62] Along with with *Eurydice*, it is Ruhl's most intense and thorough exploration of death and mourning, since both of them follow their protagonists to the afterlife. Open, unobstructed theatrical spaces allow for the blurring of boundaries and the connection between realms. The sense of spatial eeriness and strangeness is more conspicuous in these plays than in others, perhaps because of their direct engagement with death and its aftermath. Skeletal scenic elements suggest places, yet with a feeble sense of solidity.

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59 Sarah Ruhl, *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2018, p. 44 and p. 90.

60 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, New York, Verso, 2004.

61 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

62 *Id.*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

This does not mean, however, that the on-stage world should not be grounded in everyday experience. Reality is (re)presented, only to be tempered: while spectators are allowed to perceive a recognizable material world, objects, characters, and the language spoken on stage are, in Shklovskian fashion, simultaneously released from the automatism of perception. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, this is perceptible from the very first scene. The play opens on an "almost empty café" where we see Jean, who is described as having "an insular quality, as though she doesn't want to take up space," and a man sitting with his back to the audience, whose cell phone annoyingly rings without being answered.[63] Much of the scene's strangeness derives not so much from the fact that Gordon has just passed away and his phone keeps ringing, but from the fact that he and Jean are utterly alone in a supposedly public space. When Jean uses the dead man's phone to dial 911, she says they are "on the corner of Green and Goethe. (*Pronounced Go-thee*)" though: "There seems to be no one working at this café."[64] In a play visually inspired by the solitary figures in Edward Hopper's paintings, Jean and Gordon's first encounter is lightened in terms of scenery and highly defamiliarized, to increase its quasi-liminality. This prefigures the characters' ensuing encounter in the afterlife in scene five of Part Two, where stage directions indicate precisely that Jean and Gordon are "*sitting at a café. As if we are at the top of the play*."[65] The whole construction of the scene shows that the search for spatial, visual and aural lightness is not a refusal to engage with such a grave matter as someone's death, but a conscious attempt to mitigate the force of the void left behind. Ruhl crafts it, beyond scenic design, through her peculiar blending of strangeness, emotion and humor: counterpointing the heaviness of a scene full of silence—so that even Jean wonders how Gordon died "so quietly"—with the insistent ringing of the phone that Jean keeps answering as if it were hers, or as if she knew the stranger in front of her. Because of their quirkiness, her bizarre, sentimental reaction and the promise made to the dead man (i.e. to stay with him) become unexpectedly humorous and tender. Ruhl has referred to the pleasure she gets from the deceptively simple defamiliarizing device of seeing people "speaking ordinary words in strange places, or people speaking extraordinary words in ordinary places."[66] Jean's words to the dead man at the end of the scene are both ordinary *and* extraordinary, given the situation and this woman's unforeseen determination to bond with an inanimate body:

63 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
64 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
65 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
66 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," art. cit.

Do you want me to keep talking until they get here?
Gordon, I'm Jean.
You don't know me.
But you're going to be just fine.
Well, actually—
Don't worry.[67]

The pursuit of lightness can be a strategy to assuage the heaviness of death as well as the emotional impact of other life-changing experiences. The beginning of the second act of *The Clean House* might provide a further, more cheerful illustration of the intertwining of strangeness, emotion, and humor as capable of eliciting a sense of dramatic lightness in the search for philosophical truth. The strangeness of the sudden switch in the perception of place—derived from transforming Lane's immaculate house into an operating theater—is greatly underscored by the way in which the action unfolds in this refashioned space. In Ruhlian style, the un-parenthetical stage directions that compose the first scene, where no dialogue is spoken, are carefully typeset, restrained, poetic, lyrical and visually imaginative:[68]

I. Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves
Ana lies under a sheet.
Beautiful music.
A subtitle projects: Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves.
Charles takes out surgical equipment.
He does surgery on Ana.
It is an act of love.
If the actor who plays Charles is a good singer,
it would be nice if he could sing a medieval love song in Latin
about being medically cured by love
as he does the surgery.
If the actress playing Ana is a good singer,
it would be nice if she recovered from the surgery and slowly sat up and sang a contrapuntal melody.

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67 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

68 Ruhl has acknowledged the importance stage directions have as visual language, which equals that of dialogues, in her essay "On standard dramatic formatting" (Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 199). That is the reason why she avoids treating and presenting them as parenthetical.

When the surgery is over, Charles takes off Ana's sheet.
Underneath the sheet,
she is dressed in a lovely dress.
They kiss. [69]

Suggestive formulations as to how to perform the scene can be read as displacing and mitigating the mechanical performance of medical surgery. It is to be performed instead as a series of simply choreographed actions, and to be perceived physically as an act of love, with specific suggestions for the use of songs which do not confine interpretation. [70] Surprisingly, however, this delicate scene is immediately followed by the startlingly mundane words of Ana to the audience; words she utters while sauntering across the stage "like a man:"

> I have avoided doctors my whole life.
> I don't like how they smell. I don't like how they talk. I don't admire their emotional lives. I don't like how they walk. They walk very fast to get somewhere—tac tac tac—I am walking somewhere important. [71]

This hilarious, absurdly incongruous juxtaposition and the interplay of ordinary words and extra-ordinary gestures, actions and music confirm the suitability of Ruhl's technique as a means to prevent perception from being buried into the grave of custom. And yet, in this example from *The Clean House*, defamiliarization also allows the playwright to have Ana obliquely address the intellectualization of profound emotions through humor—these emotions resulting from having fallen madly in love with her surgeon and from having to accept the gravity of her health condition, belittling it so as to make it more manageable:

> But with Charles, it was like—BLAM!
> My mind was going: you're a doctor, I hate you!
> But the rest of me was gone, walking out the door, with him.
> [...]
> There are stories of surgeons who leave things inside the body by

69 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

70 For an extended discussion and insightful analysis of Ruhl's unique system of emphasis by subdued suggestion and careful pacing through stage directions that tend to function through suggestion by shape, sound and image rather than direct demand, see Julie Vatain-Corfdir, "Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play," art. cit., pp. 115-119.

71 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

mistake:
rubber gloves, sponges, clamps—
But—you know—I think Charles left his soul inside me.
Into the missing place. [72]

The replacement of a cancerous tumor with a dose of spiritual matter instead of a rubber glove or a clamp should be read as an instance of Ruhl's "reckoning with the humble, the small and the invisible" that is, for her, a victory over the heaviness of pain. Later on in Act 2 of *The Clean House*, Charles claims that "there are things—big invisible things—that come unannounced—they walk in, and we have to give way." [73] In various ways, the recourse to lightness might be a means to gently help characters and audiences deal with those big invisible things that come unexpectedly—love, death, loss, birth—and prove emotionally overwhelming as they redefine one's place in the world and one's relationships with others. As Thomas Butler insists, the bonding of lightness and transformation leads to another aspect of Ruhl's work: its hopefulness. Hers is not, he claims, the work of an optimist or idealist person: by seeing it in light of Eagleton's definition of the concept of hope, Butler draws attention to Ruhl's method of incorporating reality as well as suffering—past and present—into her vision of the future: in this way hope is a commitment to the future and a concomitant acknowledgement of one's present reality. [74] Lightness, then, does not deny the givenness of things, but is a means to envisage and channel transformative possibility.

72 *Ibid.*
73 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
74 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan," art. cit., p. 158.

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Notice

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Abstract

Sarah Ruhl has declared her admiration for Calvino's defense of the literary quality of lightness and several critics have recognized this influence in her *œuvre*. However, a thorough investigation into the concept of lightness as a relevant critical concept to approach Ruhl's theatrical aesthetics is still needed. The present essay sheds light on how lightness functions in Ruhl's plays as a flexible poetic frame. Drawing from scenes from selected plays across Ruhl's career, it analyzes how lightness is conveyed aurally, through a dramatic speech of precise and poetic linguistic minimalism; materially, and visually, by lightening the scenic load and conceiving the stage as a transformational space. This essay also argues that the pursuit of lightness is closely related to Ruhl's interest in grappling with loss and finitude. Lightness is transformative because it prevents the weight of matter from burdening characters and makes room instead spatially, emotionally, epistemologically, and spiritually, for change and possibility.

Key words

Sarah Ruhl; Italo Calvino; lightness; scenography; post-realistic stage; mourning; transformation.

Résumé

Sarah Ruhl ne cache pas son admiration pour la façon dont Italo Calvino défend la légèreté en tant que qualité littéraire ; plusieurs critiques ont noté cette influence sur son œuvre théâtrale. Il n'existe pourtant aucune exploration approfondie du concept de légèreté comme outil critique de l'esthétique de Ruhl. Le présent chapitre éclaire la façon dont la légèreté fonctionne, au sein des pièces de Ruhl, comme un cadre poétique flexible. Au fil de scènes tirées d'un éventail de pièces, j'analyse la façon dont la légèreté s'incarne oralement (grâce à un discours poétique au minimalisme précis), matériellement et visuellement (en allégeant la matière scénique au profit du plateau conçu comme un espace transformationnel). Cet article suggère également que la quête de légèreté a partie liée avec le traitement du deuil et de la finitude chez Ruhl. La légèreté est transformative, car elle empêche le poids de la matière de peser sur les personnages, ouvrant un espace physique, émotionnel, épistémologique et spirituel au changement et aux possibles.

Mots-clés

Sarah Ruhl ; Italo Calvino ; légèreté ; scénographie ; scène post-réaliste ; deuil ; transformation

PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

"FULFILL YOUR OBLIGATIONS TO YOURSELF AESTHETICALLY" YOUNG JEAN LEE ON EXPERIMENTAL THEATER AND TEACHING PLAYWRITING

An interview with Young Jean Lee by Julie Vatain-Corfdir

An outstanding figure in contemporary experimental theater, Young Jean Lee is a subversive and intrepid playwright as well as a director, filmmaker and performer. Among other plays, she is the author of Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven *(first presented at the HERE Arts Center, 2006),* The Shipment *(The Kitchen, 2009),* We're Gonna Die *(Joe's Pub and Lincoln Center, 2011) and* Untitled Feminist Show *(Baryshnikov Arts Center, 2011). With Young Jean Lee's Theater Company, she toured her work across the US and in venues around the world—including in Paris, Berlin, Zagreb, Seoul or Sidney. In 2018, she became the first Asian-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway with* Straight White Men. *Young Jean Lee is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two OBIE Awards, a Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a PEN Literary Award and the 2019 Windham-Campbell Prize in Drama. She has edited the* New Downtown Now *anthology of plays with Mac Wellman. She is also an Associate Professor of Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University, and gave a Zoom playwriting workshop to encourage people to start writing full-length plays during the 2020 quarantine.*

This conversation took place at Stanford University on May 2nd, 2019.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It's wonderful to be able to meet with you, here at Stanford TAPS. Since we're on campus, I'd like to start by asking about your classes. What is your approach to teaching playwriting?

Young Jean Lee. – I use a version of the method I was taught in my MFA program. I studied with the wonderful Mac Wellman at Brooklyn College, where he would tailor the instructions to each student individually. For instance, I was coming out of six years of grad school studying Shakespeare, and I had read so much at that point that I read almost nothing during the MFA, whereas other students in the program were reading constantly. He gave each of us what we needed; different assignments based on what types of things we were writing. In my classes, I really push that method to the extreme, where the students are basically coming up with their own rules, assignments and artistic goals—and then I hold them to that.

They can change the goals if they wish, but they are held very strictly to whatever guidelines they set. And they're graded on how well they fulfil their own obligations to themselves aesthetically.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – So the idea is to get them to fully commit to their own writing, rather than teach them how to write a play. I've always wondered about this, since France doesn't have a tradition of postgraduate writing programs, though creative-writing classes are on the rise.

Young Jean Lee. – Well, France is on to something in some ways. I don't think playwriting can really be taught, in the sense that you can't say, "this is how you write the first act" or "this is how you structure the second act" in any kind of universal way. You can't provide a formula that works for everyone. But what you can provide is what the professional world provides, which is basically—a deadline that forces you to write. I myself would probably not write anything if I didn't have productions and rehearsals scheduled, or grants to apply for. The whole system of the business of playwriting forces you to keep generating material. In these classes, I'm setting up, as closely as possible, what the professional world would demand from the students, which is that they generate work on a schedule. And I encourage them to be very mindful, at all times, of what they want to do.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Do they apply to your class with a specific project?

Young Jean Lee. – No, they apply with a writing sample. Once they're accepted, my agenda is very clear: I want my students writing full-length plays, and I want them to get them produced. I have students who have taken four quarters in a row with me working on the same play, just trying to get it to the level where it can get produced.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – How many students do you take?

Young Jean Lee. – 10-11 is my maximum, although the ideal would be around 5-6.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – I'm guessing small numbers are more ideal because of how in-depth and detailed the conversation is?

Young Jean Lee. – Yes, and there's a lot of reading out loud and group feedback. One of the biggest parts of the class, in fact, is learning how to give useful feedback, and how to receive feedback, processing it in a helpful way. The feedback is very much driven by the writer, though. We'll read the play out loud, and the writer will ask us questions, and we'll answer them. One of the worst things you can do as a playwriting instructor, I think, is to set yourself up as the expert. I tell my students: "If you look at 90% of the world's greatest plays, I probably don't like them. So the chance that I won't like your play is pretty high. And the idea that you would be penalized for writing something I didn't like is ridiculous." Learning how to write to one random person's taste is not a useful thing. Besides, when we're giving feedback, the other

students shoot me down all the time! I'll say something, and they'll disagree, and I'll say: "Okay, I see it, I concede." And when the students see me concede, they learn to concede when it's their turn, so it's a healthy process.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It sounds like the framework of the class is both liberating and demanding.

Young Jean Lee. – It's kind of like a wolf in sheep's clothing. It looks all very free and liberal and you-guided...but, basically, they're being forced to write!

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Which is a virtue of the program, I'm sure! And when it comes to your own creative work, I'd like to hear about your writing processes and how connected they are to performance. First of all, how do you define yourself? Playwright? Performance-maker?

Young Jean Lee. – Playwright. Director. Filmmaker.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – In that order?

Young Jean Lee. – Right now, yes! I tend to write and direct at the same time. So I'll start with a bunch of conversations with the cast, and then I'll go home, and write, and bring it in. Then we'll have more conversations. Sometimes I'll even leave the room while my associate director works on staging, just to rewrite something before bringing it back in. For the stand-up act in *The Shipment*, for instance, I put a tape recorder in the middle of the room and asked them all to say what they were angry about; then I turned that into the stand-up act. There's also a lot of stuff that gets tweaked by the actors on their feet.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – At the risk of asking the obvious question: is being a woman a crucial factor, aesthetically and politically, in how you think about playwriting?

Young Jean Lee. – You know, it never was when I was doing downtown theater. It is much more now that I've started working on Broadway. I've been spoiled. For fifteen years, I never had to worry about that stuff. Even in 2002, when I started, there was a real demand for diversity, people were interested in an Asian female writer, so I was encouraged, it was truly welcoming. It's a very different vibe on Broadway. The more money is involved, the less diversity matters: that's sort of been my experience. Everybody's a white guy.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Which makes it all the more intriguing and ironic that your Broadway *début* should be a play about straight white men, framed by transgender people leading the audience through the show! Would you say there's room for optimism in the theater, though?

Young Jean Lee. – Definitely. Theater off-Broadway is championing women of color like never before, and women and people of color are starting to get forced on to Broadway. There are lots of talented playwrights right now.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Do you feel something has shifted, in recent years, in the representation of women on stage? Stephanie Hunt, who teaches acting here, was telling me that students are obsessively giving scenes the Bechdel test.

Young Jean Lee. –That's right; and the Bechdel test is such a pathetic measure! Which is the whole point, in fact. In terms of the representation of women, I think there's stuff that you just can't get away with anymore. If you have a woman in your play and she doesn't have any complexity, that would be noticed today. Whereas ten years ago, no way.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – One of the concepts I'm researching is the notion of resilience in the work of contemporary female playwrights. Does that speak to you?

Young Jean Lee. – Oh, yes! Resilience is the key. Early in my career, when I was touring with my company, I asked Tim Etchells, of Forced Entertainment: "How does my company get to be like yours?" And he told me: "You just have to survive. Everybody quits. We just stayed and stayed." And by surviving, you achieve a certain status.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – This reminds me of something your colleague and fellow playwright Amy Freed said when I met her. I was marveling at how many young female playwrights there were in the US today, and she said "Yes, but who is still a playwright in their sixties?"

Young Jean Lee. – Absolutely. And I've closed down my company, right? Resilience is the key, but it definitely becomes harder the older you get.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Why did you choose to close down your company?

Young Jean Lee. – Because it meant that I would never be able to do anything else, like teach or make a movie. When you have a company, you have to support a full-time staff, so you have to constantly be producing enough that they can eat, and feed their families. And since the US doesn't really care about experimental theater, it means all the money has to come from Europe, so you have to tour constantly. That just wasn't a sustainable model for me, since touring doesn't leave me enough room for making anything new creatively.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Since you mention touring, can I ask about your experience of European audiences? In Paris in particular, perhaps, since I know you took several shows to the Festival d'Automne.

Young Jean Lee. – The Paris audience is very similar to the New York audience—and these audiences are not that fun! They're really undiverse. Everybody's this college-educated, artistic-elite person, and people are very disconnected from the child-like side of themselves that can just, you know, go for a ride. Paris and New York are the worst cities for disconnect between yourself and your sense of childlike wonder. Everybody's just looking for shock value, for something to make them feel like

they're watching something new. But it's actually very very easy to do that. That's what I figured out after fifteen years in experimental theater—it's the easiest thing in the world to have the most talked-about show in town! You just bring a puppy on stage, have somebody come up with a meat cleaver and chop the puppy in half; then your show will be talked about all through the world. I became disenchanted with that audience because I realized how easy it was to impress them. Just do something aggressive, something hostile, something shocking and controversial. There's not a lot of nuance there. People are so jaded; it's like drug-addicts who need bigger and bigger dosages of the drug, to the point where you're just mainlining shock value to the audience.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Your (incredibly helpful) archive website, the Young Jean Lee's Theater Company Archive, presents the shows your company toured with. One of the productions I'm most curious about is *Untitled Feminist Show*, which features performers engaging with the audience through dance and mime and sheer joyful energy, without any clothes or any words. Could you tell me how the show developed?

Young Jean Lee. – Well, Dove soap had an ad campaign, many years ago, celebrating "real women". Basically, "real women" meant women who were not thin models, and they were there, lined up in mom jeans, and I was like: "This does not work. They're saying real women are awesome but they're not presenting them in any kind of an awesome way." When you see an ad, you expect some kind of fabulousness to be happening, you know. So the challenge I set for myself was to find these different people who didn't look like traditional models, who would be so charismatic, even without any clothes or hair-styling or makeup or anything, that they could just completely charm and dominate a room. That's basically the show. It's six performers of different races and sizes, either assigned female at birth or transgender, who are stars of their fields. It was a nightmare to work with them, because everybody is an alpha! There were six performers, me, an associate director and a choreographer: that's nine alpha people in a room, trying to collaborate. It's like working with nine directors! Though the performers were so much stronger and fiercer than us. Which is what I chose them for. They could command a room with six hundred people in it, so of course they could completely overshadow me and my team! It was such an amazing experience: they would just be on stage naked, moving to music, and they would dominate. So powerful. You were asking about audiences in Europe, well: they went bananas over them—in Berlin in particular, people went insane, they were screaming during the show. It was like a rock show.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – Sounds like Berlin was the place to be! You've taken all these shows abroad—do you think of your voice as inherently American?

Young Jean Lee. – Yes, I think so.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – And is that something that informs the way you write theater?

Young Jean Lee. – Not consciously in any way, but I feel especially American just because, as an immigrant, I tried so hard to assimilate. I'm probably more American than non-immigrant Americans, in the sense that I've absorbed stuff very effortfully all my life.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. –As a final question, I'd like to ask whether you're working on a play at the moment?

Young Jean Lee. – I am; I'm working on a play about class, which is very difficult to do in the US because we don't have the vocabulary for speaking about class. People don't know the identifiers for what constitutes middle class, or upper middle class, or rich. The good part about it is it allows for class mobility (although our government doesn't help with that). But also, people don't always know where they are, or what to aspire to. And when it's unspoken, power can exert itself much more effectively.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir. – It sounds quite intricate and relevant—I look forward to discovering the play. In the meantime, all that remains is for me to thank you for sharing your experience and your keen insights on experimental theater, as well as teaching. It's been enlightening!

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Abstract

In this interview, playwright, director and playwriting professor Young Jean Lee discusses her approach to writing and teaching, and reflects on some of her experiences touring and presenting her plays. Her views on downtown theater, diversity, audience reception and artistic resilience gradually outline the portrait of a leading force of the experimental theater scene.

Key words

Young Jean Lee; experimental theater; playwriting; teaching; diversity; resilience; audience reception; *Untitled Feminist Show*; nudity

Résumé

Dans cet entretien, l'autrice, metteuse en scène et professeure d'écriture théâtrale Young Jean Lee révèle sa façon d'aborder l'écriture et l'enseignement, tout en revenant sur certaines expériences de tournée avec ses pièces. Ses points de vue sur le théâtre Off-Broadway, sur la diversité, la réception et la résilience de l'artiste brossent peu à peu le portrait d'une force vive et centrale de la scène expérimentale étasunienne.

Mots-clés

Young Jean Lee ; théâtre expérimental ; écriture théâtrale ; enseignement ; diversité ; resilience ; réception ; *Untitled Feminist Show* ; nudité

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURG AT THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE, EUGENE O'NEILL THEATER CENTER[1]

Mary Davies
Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center has a rich legacy of developing over a thousand new works for the stage and is known as "The Launchpad of American Theater"[2] (**fig. 1**). Founded in 1964, it is a short distance away from the childhood home of Eugene O'Neill. The O'Neill is famous for its annual National Playwrights Conference, where up to eight playwrights are selected for a month-long residency and are offered the opportunity to develop their play. Located in Waterford, Connecticut, the O'Neill offers an artist's retreat away from the city where writers can work with a team of professional actors, designers, a director and a dramaturg to explore their work. The place was "founded upon the concept that critically important work exists between (1) when a work is written and (2) when it advances into production" and they call this step "The O'Neill process."[3]

The O'Neill has many desirable qualities, such as the dream design meeting, an open submission policy for new plays, and a campus that includes different artists all sharing the same facilities and creating new work together away from the city. Many new drama development organizations, such as the Scottish Society of Playwrights and the Sundance Theatre Lab, have adopted approaches over the years that were

1 This article has emerged out of a Masters thesis by the author (originally titled "Doing Dramaturgy: Investigating the Role of the Dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center") conducted at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and Birkbeck College, University of London in 2017.

2 "About" section, The O'Neill website. Famous new works include Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Fences* (1983), and *In the Heights* (2005) by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes. Notable dramaturgs that have worked at the National Playwrights Conference are Edith Oliver, Martin Esslin and John Lahr, to name a few. See Joel Schechter, "American Dramaturgs," *TDR*, vol. 20, no. 2, June 1976, p. 90.

3 "New Work by Decade: 55 Years of Plays and Musicals," The O'Neill website.

first practiced at the O'Neill.[4] For these reasons, the O'Neill process of generating new plays is worth investigating.

1. Aerial view of Eugene O'Neill Theater Center © Flying Fox Photography

The O'Neill was instrumental in placing the dramaturg within the new drama development process in America, yet few books on dramaturgy provide details about the Center.[5] The main source of literature on the O'Neill is Jeffrey Sweet's book, *The O'Neill: The Transformation of Modern American Theater* (2014), which is an anniversary edition celebrating fifty years of work. Ian Brown has written an article (2011) arguing that the O'Neill has inspired play development in the United Kingdom, yet Brown discusses elements that no longer occur in the Conference, such as the pre-Conference weekend. Another significant article on the O'Neill is

4 Ian Brown, "Playwrights' Workshops of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and their Long Term Impact in the UK," *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2011, p. 35; Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 96.

5 For books that mention the O'Neill, see Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70 and p. 96; and Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, London, Palgrave, 2016, p. 9.

Dan Isaac's "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center: A Place for Playwrights" (1972) which provides a first-hand account of the early years of the O'Neill.[6]

This article provides a new perspective on the National Playwrights Conference by analyzing the role that dramaturgs play at the O'Neill. The research is informed by my experience as a literary intern at the O'Neill during the summer of 2017. I also interviewed staff and playwrights to gain insight into their experiences of the National Playwrights Conference. Marianne Van Kerkhoven's concepts of "macro" and "micro dramaturgy" will inform the analysis of the work conducted by dramaturgs at the O'Neill. This article argues that institutional pressures are removed from the work of the dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference and utilizes Henri Lefebvre's concept of space as a social product to support these claims. The article then proceeds to argue the importance of creative freedom upon the dramaturgs at the O'Neill, before offering concluding thoughts on the overall process.

THE EUGENE O'NEILL THEATER CENTER

During the summer of 1962, George C. White, an alumnus of the Yale School of Drama, was sailing with his wife and his father along the coast of his hometown, Waterford, Connecticut. He asked what would become of the former Hammond Mansion; a large, dilapidated building on the coast that had recently been given to the town. It was planned that the fire department would acquire the land for training, but White felt that the area could be used for theatrical purposes. After a failed attempt to partner with the Yale School of Drama on an adjunct summer venue, combined with insufficient funds to build a theatre, a young playwright named Marc Smith suggested to White that he should hold a playwrights conference on this land.[7] At the time, structures or grants helping emerging writers were scarce in the U.S. As playwright and theater historian Jeffrey Sweet underscores, despite development programs such as New Dramatists being founded, young writers "yearned to find opportunities to

6 Similarly to Brown's article, some of the details that Isaac describes at the O'Neill are outdated. For example, playwrights are now very much a part of the rehearsal room and can talk freely with actors, as opposed to "the alienation of the playwright" that Isaac argued occurred at the O'Neill. See Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center: A Place for Playwrights," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, March 1972, pp. 24-25.

7 Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill: The Transformation of Modern American Theater*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2014, pp. 11-15; George C. White, "The First Five Years: 1964-69," The O'Neill website.

develop their skills."[8] A playwrights conference was seen as a cheaper alternative to building a new theatre, and would provide opportunities to engage with writers and offer them advice from established theatre professionals.[9]

During the first week of August 1965, White gathered a group of twenty writers to meet with professional directors, designers, critics, producers and actors to "discuss their needs and relationships to these various theatrical disciplines." However, the meeting "became a forum for the outpouring of the anger and frustration" from the young writers who felt "artistically restricted" and the result of that week was to hold a conference on the Conference itself.[10] There needed to be a call for action and playwrights felt the desire not only to develop plays, but to collaborate with professionals in the industry whilst doing so. White agreed to select two plays and hire a company of actors and designers, a director, and a producer to present them the following summer.

The autumn of 1965 and early 1966 were spent raising $350,000 to build an amphitheater and renovate the Mansion and the Barn on the former Hammond Estate.[11] White selected John Glennon's *The Bird, the Bear, and the Actress* and Joel Oliansky's *Bedford Forrest* as the two plays for the 1966 Conference. He was able to secure the funds for the necessary renovations and support for the productions from various loans and gifts, and the Amphitheatre was completed on the afternoon of the opening for *Bedford Forrest*. In order "to complete the mirror of the Broadway experience," White had enlisted prominent critics to come onto the stage after the performance and discuss the play, which, he recalls, was "extremely positive, entertaining for the audience, and possibly instructive for the playwright."[12] While this example was a seeming success of a post-show discussion at the O'Neill, problems began to arise.

The deployment of dramaturgs came as a result of the difficulties encountered by critics engaging with playwrights at the conferences. White was keen to offer professional

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8 Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

9 Isaac explains "the term Playwrights Conference does *not* mean lectures, eulogies, and textual interpretations in tribute to the memory of a dead playwright. Rather, the Conference consists of the reading and performance of new plays in an atmosphere that permits maximum benefit to young writers who are in the process of learning their craft." Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center," art. cit., p. 18.

10 George C. White, "The First Five Years," art. cit.

11 *Ibid.* Additionally, support from the federal government was sought to fund a National Theater of the Deaf with designer David Hays, who had attended the 1965 Playwrights Conference. For further information on the National Theater of the Deaf, see Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-72.

12 George C. White, "The First Five Years," art. cit.

criticism to playwrights, however, in 1967 a post-performance discussion "exploded" when critic Martin Gottfried, "totally disgusted with the work under consideration, angrily told the playwright to quit the theatre and try something else."[13] The play was *Summertree* by Ron Cowan. A solution to the 1967 post-performance critique was that these discussions became optional as well as private. However, problems still arose and, as a result of playwrights' complaints, the newly formed Critics Institute was re-located to New London in 1969. Only two playwrights chose to meet with them.[14] The challenge that the O'Neill faced was how to offer playwrights constructive advice about their work without shattering their ideas. Lloyd Richards, then Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference, did not want to lose the "excellent" theatre minds of the critics, and wondered whether they could help the playwrights in their development process in another way.[15] White mentioned to Richards how Bertolt Brecht was using the term "dramaturg" and, after some research, Richards decided that dramaturgs would be the solution.[16] Katalin Trencsényi notes that one of Brecht's "strongest legacies" was the "affirmation of the role of the production dramaturg, and their legitimacy in the rehearsal room." During the 1960s, the production dramaturg was understood as "a script-based creative consultant," an "artistic collaborator" who worked with the director to interpret and analyze a play.[17] In the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, the Dramaturg is away from his cold office where scripts lie in wait of being read and facilitates the conversation taking place on stage.[18] A person that could offer critical insights into playwriting and could also act as a mediator and creative collaborator amongst artists must have sounded ideal to Richards and White as they began to appoint dramaturgs at the National Playwrights Conference.

13 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center," art. cit., p. 20.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22. The National Critics Institute was founded in 1968 at the O'Neill and runs alongside the National Playwrights Conference. The Institute aims to provide critics with an insight into the theatre-making process and from its outset, anything that the critics write during their time at the O'Neill is not intended for other members of the summer conferences. For further information, see Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-90.

15 Lloyd Richards, quoted in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

16 George C. White, quoted in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

17 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

18 Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, London, Bloomsbury, 2002, p. 1. A single paragraph alone does not begin to cover Brecht's dramaturgical practice, which continued to evolve throughout his lifetime. In addition to reading Brecht's own writings, see also Mary Luckhurst "Revolutionising Theatre: Brecht's Reinvention of the Dramaturg," in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 193-208.

In 1969, critics Sam Hirsch, Henry Hewes and John Lahr were invited as dramaturgs to work with playwrights. Initially, Isaac reports that working with a dramaturg was unfavorable at the O'Neill because, at the time, dramaturgy was a vague and unclear phrase. Out of the three dramaturgs that worked on the 1970 National Playwrights Conference, only one attended rehearsals, but in 1971, Edith Oliver, Dale Wasserman and Martin Esslin attended all rehearsals for the plays and also met independently with their playwrights.[19] I suggest that the reason for the dramaturgs' success in relation to the critics at the O'Neill is because they would approach the play from the perspective of the playwright. The dramaturg can still have an outside eye whilst working on a play, but by attending rehearsals and talking to the playwright privately, they both established a relationship of trust.

2. A full house in the Amphitheater for Jeremy O Harris' *Slave Play* at the 2018 National Playwrights Conference © Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

The idea of a dramaturg working closely with a playwright may contrast other forms of dramaturgical practice depending on the institution or collaborative relationship between artists. Whilst some dramaturgs may work predominantly with directors

19 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center," art. cit., p. 22; Jay Ranelli, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 31.

(a notable example being dramaturg Mira Rafalowicz and her work with Joseph Chaikin), it is common for the ones working in new drama development in America to work with playwrights.[20] Various organizations of new drama development may differ in their operation (brief examples of which will be later mentioned), but the O'Neill focuses on the playwrights and enables them to revise their scripts. Director and dramaturg then center their work around how they can serve the playwright's needs through the rehearsal process and the public readings.

The O'Neill has continued to expand over the past five decades, and other conferences have emerged alongside its National Playwrights Conference. These include the National Music Theater Conference, National Puppetry Conference, National Critics Institute and the Cabaret and Performance Conference. The O'Neill currently includes indoor theatrical spaces such as the Rufus and Margo Rose Barn Theater and the Dina Merrill Theater, and outdoor spaces such as the Amphitheater and the Edith Oliver Theater (**fig. 2**). The O'Neill also established the National Theater Institute, a training program for students which offers a range of courses including the Theatermakers Summer Intensive.

THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE

The method of selecting plays for the National Playwrights Conference reflects the vision of the O'Neill to "discover and launch new work and artists."[21] In order to find new voices, the Conference has an open submission policy which ensures that early career playwrights have an opportunity to be considered alongside more established writers. As a result of this policy and the impressive reputation of the O'Neill, the selection process is competitive. Applications open in September for places the following summer, and Anne G. Morgan, former Literary Manager and Dramaturg at the O'Neill, stated that between "thirteen-hundred and fifteen-hundred plays" are received every year for consideration.[22] To tackle this enormous amount of script reading and assessing, the literary office rely on various pools of reader which, as Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, former Literary Associate at the O'Neill, explains,

20 See Mira Rafalowicz, "Dramaturgs in America: Eleven Statements," *Theater*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1978, pp. 27-29; Joel Schechter, "American Dramaturgs," art. cit., pp. 91-92.

21 "About" section, The O'Neill website.

22 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, July 1, 2017.

are composed of former playwrights, interns, and people who have previously been involved with the National Playwrights Conference.[23]

To guarantee fair judgment, anonymized scripts must be thoroughly read along with their playwrights' statement of objectives. The review panel then submit reader reports that assess whether the play should move forward to the next round of reading. The readers' reports allow space for both personal responses to the play (i.e. if readers were excited by the play and why) and more objective commentary, such as how the play functions in terms of plot and structure. While the first round of readers may include O'Neill staff or interns who are not necessarily specialized in dramaturgy, the next round is read by an artistic council comprised of literary managers, dramaturgs and professionals who have experience in new play development. As Bergeron-Clearwood explained, around ninety plays get shortlisted following their recommendations; then the literary manager and associate will review the final plays. At this point, the manager and associate remove the anonymity of the applications to ensure a diversity of finalists are selected, not only in terms of gender and race, but also in terms of where the playwrights are in their career. They consider the objectives of each playwright, shortlist sixty plays and create dossiers for the artistic director, who will select eight plays for the Conference. The finalist plays are "chosen for their artistic excellence, originality of voice, singularity of perspective, and developmental potential."[24] The "originality of voice" and "singularity of perspective" apply both to the content of the play and to the way in which the writer narrates the story in terms of language and style. Further, Bergeron-Clearwood acknowledged that the O'Neill searches for "plays that particularly need to be told right now."[25] This observation suggests that the O'Neill is aiming to provide a platform for new works that feel urgent and important to share with contemporary audiences. The O'Neill seeks to maintain relevance by showcasing new work that is able to speak directly to the outside world, thus keeping the Center at the forefront of launching new plays for the American stage.

The terms "artistic excellence" and "developmental potential" may seem contradictory, yet this brief description highlights the high standard at which O'Neill plays are assessed. There is a clear emphasis on "developmental potential" however, as the O'Neill will only select plays that are not ready for production and will benefit from being worked on at the Conference. The statement of objectives becomes

23 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, August 3, 2017.

24 Wendy C. Goldberg, "National Playwrights Conference," The O'Neill website.

25 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author.

important as this document specifically outlines why playwrights want to come to the O'Neill to develop their plays and suggests the support that they need. Along with an assessment of the play itself, the O'Neill can then deduce whether the National Playwrights Conference is the best place for this play and playwright.

The format of the National Playwrights Conference may raise questions as to whether the O'Neill risks running a "one-size-fits-all" method for their plays and playwrights. Carrie Chapter, a free-lance dramaturg who sits on the artistic council, suggests that the plays selected at the National Playwrights Conference "run an entire spectrum of representation of thought and theatricality." She confesses: "I never think that style is impeding any one work that gets chosen."[26] Not only is it important that the O'Neill remain as open and flexible as possible in not prescribing a certain style of playwriting, but Morgan reinforces the sense that the range in style and diversity of voices is an important aspect.[27] By placing writers of varying styles (from kitchen sink realism to more poetic forms) in community with one another, a rich learning experience can take place, in addition to ensuring that the repertory of plays remains reflective of diverse new innovations in American theater.

The emphasis on selecting plays that feel resonant in the contemporary moment does allow for certain thematic or formal trends to emerge, however. Morgan shares that when she started her role at the O'Neill in 2012, she read several plays about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then more recently (as of 2017), plays about gun violence. Formal trends that Morgan also noticed were plays that began with a monologue and / or a form of direct address to the audience, and plays that experimented with jumping backwards and forwards in time.[28] These trends may not however be specific to the O'Neill.

The development process begins with the dream design meeting, where the writer will meet with designers to talk about their play and how they would like to see their work staged without having to consider a budget. The director, dramaturg, and other campus members are present but are not allowed to say anything. The dream design gives the designers—scenic, sound and lighting—an opportunity to ask the playwright any questions they may have about the play. Set designer Rachel Hauck discussed the benefits of the dream design: "The writer is so used to looking at the play from the intense focus of character, motive, moment to moment. Designers look at the script from the back and the side, largely in terms of texture and color and mood

26 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author, April 22, 2020.
27 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author, April 23, 2020.
28 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, July 1, 2017.

and emotion."[29] Raquel Davis, a lighting designer who has worked several summers at the O'Neill, describes the main role for all designers working on campus as "visual dramaturgs."[30] While the writer, dramaturg and director focus predominantly on the page at the O'Neill, the designer investigates the play's concepts and envisions what its world may look like in a theatrical space. In an article entitled "The Designer: Decorator or Dramaturg?," Stephen Curtis argues that the designer "*can* be both, and I believe has long been so, making meaning in the production *by* exploring and exploiting the visual value of every element onstage."[31] Curtis reminds readers that meaning is not only created from the spoken word of the play but by the scenography of the world onstage, so that everything the audience sees contributes to the storytelling. While designers at the O'Neill work with minimal staging and production features, they present their visual conceptions on billboards at the public readings. The dream design is an invaluable addition to the National Playwrights Conference as it offers a rare opportunity to fully discuss the intentions of the playwright without any restrictions (**fig. 3**).

After the dream design comes a practical design meeting, where the artistic director and the creative team discuss staging options for the public readings. The creative team consists of the writer, director, assistant director, dramaturg, literary representative, stage managers and designers. Negotiations are made over what props or furniture can be acquired, or whether the playwright simply wants the actors to have music stands and stools in order to read the play. The next day, a first reading of the script is conducted and rehearsals follow. The play will receive around five days of rehearsal before the first public reading, and the writer is present in the rehearsal room with the cast and creative team. The writer can make as many or as little re-writes as they desire, and the literary representative will take responsibility for printing, formatting, and distributing them. There is no time limit, so the writers can continue to hone their plays up until the public readings. Following the first public reading, the company have another short rehearsal the next day, before the second reading, in case the writer wants to rehearse or add new material. Each playwright will have two public readings of their play over the course of the National Playwrights Conference. The audiences that attend the public readings are a mixture of people who are already present on site—staff, interns, theatre-makers, playwrights and actors who are working on different shows.

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29 Rachel Hauck interviewed in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

30 Raquel Davis in "Humans of the O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill Theater Center (accessed via the O'Neill's social media channel).

31 Stephen Curtis, "The Designer: Decorator or Dramaturg?," *Platform Papers: Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts from Currency House*, no. 46, February 2016.

The audience is also composed of people, typically from New York, who travel up to see a family member or a friend in a particular play, as well as local members of the community, from Waterford and New London, who are familiar with the O'Neill process and are excited to see the new work first. Selected industry contacts may be invited by the O'Neill, if appropriate, or by the artists. That said, contract negotiations are discouraged on the grounds of the O'Neill.[32]

3. Dream Design of Beth Henley's *Lightning* at the Edith Oliver Theater for the 2018 National Playwrights Conference © Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Aside from their week of rehearsals and public readings, playwrights are free to choose how they spend their time at the O'Neill. Their activity varies depending on their focus and on the timing of said week. Some writers choose to work on other plays, get involved in reading, and many playwrights choose to utilize the support of the literary office to conduct research for a new project. Depending on the relationships between the writers each year, communal activities may emerge. Chapter recollects that one summer, the writers would gather every week for impromptu readings of each other's work, using interns and students as actors.[33] Morgan also remembers one group

32 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
33 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

of playwrights gathering weekly to drink whisky and read Eugene O'Neill's plays.[34] Reflecting on his own personal experience, playwright Adam Esquenazi Douglas (National Playwrights Conference 2017), describes the initial pressure he felt when he arrived at the O'Neill and saw the other playwrights working on their plays. His play was being rehearsed towards the end of the month, and he confessed that until that rehearsal week, he only changed one line. Douglas knew that he needed to hear the play aloud in order to be able to make any further revisions.[35]

THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURG AT THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE

Dramaturgs, who may work on more than one play over the course of the Conference but will not be assigned to work on two at the same time, are selected by Wendy C. Goldberg, Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference. Morgan explains that the O'Neill has "a list of usual suspects:" dramaturgs who have previously worked at the Center or have emerged from Goldberg's connections.[36] Or sometimes, a dramaturg may already be attached to a certain play, in which case that particular dramaturg will come to the O'Neill to work on the play. As of 2017, there was a mixture of free-lance and institutional dramaturgs operating at the National Playwrights Conference. There is no strict rule about the hiring of dramaturgs at the O'Neill (they do not require advanced degrees for example) but the ones that are asked to work there are selected mainly due to their length of experience in the field.[37]

The dramaturg attends both dream and practical design meetings, as well as every reading and rehearsal of the play. Morgan states that the responsibilities of the dramaturg at the O'Neill "are primarily to work with the director and the playwright to offer feedback and advise on re-writes."[38] The relationship between the director, the playwright and the dramaturg varies with each project, depending on the collaborators' personalities and on how the role of the dramaturg is perceived. According to Chapter, who has worked at the National Playwrights Conference for many years, the "best case scenario" is when all three work collaboratively and have meetings together after every rehearsal, though a dramaturg cannot expect this type of immediate connection with each new working relationship. Sometimes Chapter

34 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
35 Adam Esquenazi Douglas, Skype interview with author, August 6, 2017.
36 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
37 *Ibid.*
38 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author.

will establish a rapport with the individual playwright and / or director, respectively, and on other occasions the writer and the director may prefer to work closely together instead.[39] This requires a sense of diplomacy and humility on the part of the dramaturg, to know when they are needed and how they can best serve the project. The dramaturg must avoid impinging on the director / playwright relationship and equally ensure that their creative input is received.

As a result, the dramaturg's involvement in the rehearsal room depends on the relationship between the artists. For example, during the 2019 National Playwrights Conference, Chapter would sit with playwright George Brant and discuss the play while the rehearsal was taking place. Brant was happy to receive notes and advice from Chapter while watching the actor and the director work on the text, and Brant was then able to share any new revisions with the company on the spot. Chapter also worked with playwright Tearrance Arvelle Chisholm during the same Conference, although on separate rehearsal weeks, so that Chapter did not have to split her time. In this instance, Chapter and Chisholm would find each other and work on material during breaks.[40] Each example is influenced by the playwright's preference and the atmosphere in the rehearsal room, and demonstrates the flexibility of the dramaturg in finding the appropriate moments to offer playwrights advice.

In terms of advice and support, Morgan states that the dramaturg at the O'Neill should have "really good listening skills" and "immense curiosity about how plays work and why plays work."[41] The term "curiosity" is important, because it denotes a "[c]areful attention to detail."[42] When "curiosity" is applied to the role of the dramaturgs, it implies that the latter are very meticulous with regards to identifying the form and structure of plays. Trencsényi similarly states that they should have a sound knowledge "of the processes of 'classical', text-based work" in order to either work against it, dismiss it or develop it "into a different type of dramaturgy."[43] If there are any problems or uncertainties about specific points in the play, the dramaturg may be able to offer suggestions by explaining how the play is operating structurally. Chapter pays attention to the story beat by beat when working on a play or musical.[44] Morgan sometimes makes lists or charts to deduce any patterns or trends. For example, one play that she worked on consisted of two different worlds, so she mapped out the play to

39 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.
40 *Ibid.*
41 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author.
42 "curiosity, n.," *OED Online*, Oxford UP, May 2021.
43 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.
44 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

acknowledge the different settings in order to gain a sense of the balance between these two worlds. This particular playwright then had a visual guide which outlined how their play was functioning as they progressed with rewrites.[45] Having a detailed understanding of the unique rules of the world of a play allows the writer to remain consistent with and faithful to their initial ideas. By working with a dramaturg and seeing how their play functions structurally, the playwright can deduce whether the current draft reflects their intentions in terms of how they want to tell their story.

Anne G. Morgan describes the role of the dramaturg as "working with the creative artists to clarify and refine whatever it is that they are working on," and explains how she tries not to impose her own judgments on what she feels the piece should be, but aims to understand what the artists want.[46] Other dramaturgs at the O'Neill may work differently, but Morgan tries not to offer advice for her own benefit of how she wants the play to develop. She actively listens to the playwrights and then quotes their language back to them, as a way of helping the writers solve problems, whilst also avoiding adding her own voice. She frequently references the playwright's statement of objectives in order to keep their aims at the center of the dramaturgical process. For example, Morgan would talk with a certain playwright about how they wanted their play to focus on generational conflict. Morgan can then point out that a particular scene she read felt as if climate change was driving the narrative, and she would ask the playwright which of these two themes they would want to pursue, and what changes they might want to make to support their decision.[47] In this way, Morgan does not state her preference, but questions the writer in order to allow them to identify for themselves the ways in which they want to refine their ideas. Douglas shares his experience of working with Morgan: "She was very patient and she invited me to come to her [...]. It was not a system of 'here's what's wrong with your play' which was very refreshing and helpful."[48] Morgan, as a dramaturg, allows the playwright freedom to talk their ideas aloud and find out what their play needs.

The above description of Morgan's dramaturgical practice is similar to Chapter's approach. Since Chapter also works on the National Music Theater Conference, she is present when the playwrights arrive at the launch of the National Playwrights Conference.[49] Chapter introduces herself stating that: "The playwrights know that

45 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
46 *Id.*, personal interview with author.
47 *Id.*, Skype interview with author.
48 Adam Esquenazi Douglas, Skype interview with author.
49 Dramaturgs who are working on plays that get workshopped later in the Conference are not usually present at this point.

if they want to meet with me, then they can. I don't force myself on any artist; this is their time, their retreat."[50] Some writers will either wait until the day of rehearsals to meet with her, others will seek to meet with her beforehand. During the summer of 2019 for example, Brant would meet with Chapter with his notepad ready weeks ahead of his rehearsal process, as he was keen to discuss his play with his dramaturg.[51] Such flexibility offers freedom to the writer to use their time and work with their dramaturg as they wish.

CREATIVE FREEDOM AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE O'NEILL

The O'Neill is an experimental environment where playwrights can try ideas and work on their plays free from production and commercial concerns. The space of the O'Neill can be investigated in terms of how theatrical space, both physically and conceptually, influences the work produced there, thus exemplifying Henri Lefebvre's concept of space as a social product.[52] Lefebvre writes that space is "an essential precondition for the reproduction of social relations."[53] It is important to highlight that space exists prior to specific social practice, but human activity reproduces and redefines it as a social product. Lefebvre was interested in "the multiplicity of dimensions that space holds."[54] Quite apart from its physical or geographical location, space is a "political instrument, part of the relations of production and property ownership, and a means of creative and aesthetic expression."[55] Space is not passive, but is utilized artistically, and the space at the O'Neill influences and contributes to the creative freedom felt by artists working there. Lefebvre continues:

> (Social) space is not a thing among other things; nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships. [...] It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures.[56]

50 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.
51 *Ibid.*
52 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Malden, Blackwell, 1974.
53 Quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 42.
54 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
55 Henri Lefebvre and Mark Gottdiener, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
56 Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

The term "social superstructures" points towards the hierarchical or political structures that govern and maintain the organization of a particular social space. A theatrical institution—and the space it occupies—is structured by a framework wherein its activity operates. At the O'Neill, one can experience what happens when the framework of an institutional or commercial theatre establishment is removed from the creative work of the dramaturg.

Dramaturgs at the O'Neill are relieved from institutional duties such as curating, programming, selecting plays and mediating between an institution and a creative team. Further, the O'Neill removes the pressure of considering how a singular creative project links to the wider aims of a theatre. Marianne Van Kerkhoven uses the terms "micro dramaturgy" to describe "the dramaturgical labour situated around an artistic production itself" and "macro dramaturgy" as "the dramaturgical labour through which theatre fulfills its role in society."[57] A symbiotic relationship exists between the "micro dramaturgy" and "macro dramaturgy" because the dramaturg, while working on the "micro" is always considering the larger factors such as how the performance will resonate with audiences and the community. With the exception of Morgan's former role as Literary Manager and Dramaturg (a permanent position at the O'Neill, which includes other responsibilities year-round), dramaturgs can focus on "micro dramaturgy" by concentrating on one play at a time, which Chapter describes as "the most desirable detail" of working at the O'Neill.[58] The dramaturg is supported by the literary office—whether the dramaturg needs any printing, research, or faces any problems. A literary representative (an intern responsible for tracking script revisions) is also assigned to each play.

As previously mentioned, the physical environment of the O'Neill interacts with and influences the sense of creative freedom that artists, including dramaturgs, feel when they work on the campus. Lefebvre pointed out that space is an "object of consumption," which the O'Neill perfectly illustrates as artists absorb the beauty of the natural environment, such as the beach and the long acres of grass, only adding to their sense of freedom (**fig. 4**).[59] Reflecting on the O'Neill, James Bundy states that no substitute exists "for the impact of beauty on the artist. The transformational

57 Marianne Van Kerkhoven, "Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie" (On Micro and Macro Dramaturgy), *Etcetera*, vol. 17, no. 68, 1999. I am grateful to Dr Lise Uytterhoeven for her help with the translation.

58 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

59 Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

experience of being in the setting has incalculable power."[60] A spiritual experience seems to occur and influence the work of the artist in an empowering way. A similar feeling is observed at the Sundance Theatre Lab set in the Utah mountains, as Robert Blacker, its former Artistic Director notes: "We usually make theatre in cities, but these rural retreats offered the opportunity to reflect on the immensity of the world and to ponder something outside of yourself. And that informed the breadth and depth of the work."[61] The idea that the environment can inform the perplexity and scope of the artist's creative practice, I argue, happens at the O'Neill, as artists are given space to breathe, pause, and reflect on their work and its connection with the world around them.

4. The National Theater Institute starts their morning with a warm up on the beach
© Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Both the O'Neill and the Sundance Theatre Lab can be linked with a wider Northern American trend of artist retreats away from urban life. As mentioned, there are obvious benefits to temporarily re-locating away from home, for artists are unhindered from

60 James Bundy interviewed in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

61 Robert Blacker in Jacob Gallagher-Ross and Robert Blacker, "Robert Blacker Looks at the Past and Future of American Dramaturgy," in Magda Romanska (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, New York, Peter Lang, 1995, p. 22.

distractions, but the importance of being in a beautiful natural setting is also clearly significant for the emergence of new work. The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, for example, was originally founded in the early 1900s by composer Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian because he was convinced that he created better music in this peaceful surrounding. The Colony was set up and led by Marian MacDowell as she fulfilled her dying husband's wish "to give other artists the same creative experience under which he had thrived."[62] Similar sentiments are also expressed by the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity based in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, since their aim is "to inspire everyone who attends our campus—artists, leaders, and thinkers—to unleash their creative potential."[63]

Whilst the above organizations share parallels with the O'Neill, their models of operation are different. The MacDowell Colony offers three hundred fellowships or residencies per year and is open for artists from various disciplines such as architecture, literature, theatre, visual arts and music composition. Artists are provided exclusive use of a private studio, accommodation and meals, but the program does not include classes or instruction.[64] Sundance Theatre Lab—established in 1984 in place of the Utah Playwrights Conference—was modeled on the O'Neill process and its founder, George C. White, sat on the board of the Theatre program. Initially, the Lab was known as Sundance Playwrights Lab, but when Blacker arrived in 1997 to become its Artistic Director, he modified this so that the Lab could accommodate a wider range of theatre artists. The original program consisted of up to eight plays being developed over a two-week residency that took place in the Utah mountains.[65] The results would traditionally be presented in a vein similar to the O'Neill's public rehearsed readings. Aware of the pressure of presenting new work, Blacker decided that presentations were private and optional—only staff and artists in residence were allowed to attend.[66] Dramaturgical support at the Theatre Lab has also evolved over the years—dramaturgs are no longer systematically assigned to a specific project, and there are opportunities for dramaturgical support before and after the residency in order to offer the best care for the projects at hand.[67]

62 "About" section, The MacDowell Colony website.

63 "About" section, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity website.

64 "Frequently Asked Questions" section, The MacDowell Colony website.

65 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97; Robert Blacker in Jacob Gallagher-Ross and Robert Blacker, "Robert Blacker Looks at the Past and Future of American Dramaturgy," art. cit., pp. 20-21.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 21. The one exception to this rule is if there was a producer already committed to a project at the lab then they were also allowed to attend.

67 Philip Himberg, quoted in Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

All institutions mentioned above (the MacDowell Colony, Sundance Theatre Lab, and the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity) are just a few examples similar to the O'Neill that provide artists with some space and support for their ideas in an area of natural beauty. While each organization operates differently, they share a common aim of offering artists freedom to pursue their creative ideas in a relaxing setting, away from any external pressure. As already mentioned, natural environment plays its part in the transforming and empowering of the artists' minds when creating new work.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE FREEDOM

I have established that, at the O'Neill, dramaturgs have the freedom to concentrate on the play they have been assigned to, but I have yet to argue why this is so important. Morgan admits that a challenge she faces working as a dramaturg at the O'Neill is its short time frame. The National Playwrights Conference lasts a month while each play is given around five days of rehearsal altogether. Morgan explains how "you're trying to build a relationship very quickly" with the playwright in order to grow familiar with each other as artists.[68] Given that they are not overloaded with additional tasks in relation to productions, dramaturgs at the O'Neill have more time to spend with the playwright, should they both desire to do so.

The advantage of having a dramaturg focusing on one play at a time, particularly given during the short timeframe of the O'Neill, is that they can constantly be at the playwright's service. Mark Bly supports the dramaturgs' presence in the rehearsal room: to him, they should regularly attend rehearsals in order to appreciate the source behind creative choices. Bly further suggests that such knowledge "will inspire 'doable' notes or staging solutions and not merely obvious diagnostic commentary."[69] What Bly implies is that the quality and practicability of the feedback they give is improved if they understand the decisions behind the creative choices that were made. Because the dramaturg is present at all times during rehearsals, the feedback provided is informed by watching the entire creative process.

Anne G. Morgan provides a perfect example to demonstrate the benefit of having a dramaturg present throughout the whole rehearsal process. She explains that when she was working on a particular musical at the O'Neill, she once gave a specific note to the creative team that "xyz" was not quite working. Morgan could tell immediately by

68 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, July 1, 2017.

69 Mark Bly (ed.), *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process*, Tome 1, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1996, p. xxiv.

their facial expressions that the team did not fully comprehend the note. As a result, the note was dropped, and the team began talking about another topic. The next day in rehearsal, an actor raised their hand to ask a question about why "xyz" was carrying out this particular action, and Morgan acknowledges that "there was something about the way in which the actor phrased this question, because it was a lightbulb for the writers."[70] She was then able to reiterate her note and asked the team whether they wanted to act on it, which they did. Morgan's example highlights the attention the dramaturg can pay, not only to the playwright, but also to the ways in which other collaborators in the rehearsal room are responding to the text. In that particular instance, it both informed the dramaturg's perspective of the play and the potential problems that may occur for the actors.

Importantly, the enjoyment and creativity of the art of dramaturgy can be fully realized at the O'Neill. Life pressures are removed, because the dramaturgs live on campus with other theatre artists. At the National Playwrights Conference, the playwright and the dramaturg are not pushed to be ready for production or to even finish the play. For example, during the 2017 Conference, only acts one and two of Martyna Majok's play, *queens*, were presented in the public readings. Majok then continued to work on the third act following the readings. When not in rehearsals, dramaturgs are free to reflect and have time to relax during their stay at the O'Neill.

The O'Neill provides a unique framework for the dramaturgs that work there over the summer. Institutional pressures are subtracted from their responsibilities, giving them creative freedom to pursue the "micro dramaturgy" of the play that they have been appointed to work on. The significance of the freedom the O'Neill provides means that dramaturgs have more time to build a relationship with the playwright, and importantly, increased allowance to discover the dramaturgy of the play. Dramaturgs can entirely focus on their current play, meaning they are able to give fully informed and constructive feedback.

While the O'Neill has an indisputable reputation for play development, it is apparent that dramaturgy at the National Playwrights Conference remains profoundly text-based. The requirement that artists must submit a written text in order to be selected for the Conference, and the format of rehearsed readings favors a text-led process focused on giving the playwright opportunities for re-writing their play. Staging or movement is not a priority for the rehearsed readings, and minimal props or choreography are employed. The O'Neill is limited in terms of what sort of play it can develop. Bergeron-Clearwood stated that unfortunately, the O'Neill

70 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author, April 23, 2020.

could not provide support for devised works and plays that involve a substantial use of technology. She explains, "I've read some plays that rely so heavily on production value like projections or sound that we wouldn't be the best place for it." [71] The O'Neill is beneficial for playwrights looking to develop a better script, if the plays do not rely too largely on using other mediums such as film, technology or non-verbal methods to narrate the story.

The format of rehearsed readings and the text-centered approach of the O'Neill excludes writers and creative artists that are developing plays from movement or non-literary bases. Isaac, writing about the O'Neill in the seventies, criticizes the Center for its commitment to what is "very distinctly [...] a verbal tradition": "As Grotowski, Chaikin, and Schechner among others have demonstrated with their own work, the literary playwright is no longer a necessary factor in the process of performance." [72] He reflects on the evolution and emergence of various kinds of performance art that demonstrated new ways of theatre-making. It is striking that since Isaac's time of writing, the O'Neill has not changed its approach to plays at the National Playwrights Conference. Perhaps, if the institution opens up its submission policy and allows further flexibility to the rehearsed readings, new plays with new forms will be supported at the Conference. This could allow for a new variety of theatre-makers to work at the O'Neill during the National Playwrights Conference, and for the expansion of its approach to developing new plays. By adjusting the program in this way, the O'Neill would minimize any sense that new plays at the O'Neill are all developed in the same way and would refute any concern of a standard format to O'Neill plays. With such expansion, new dramaturgies could be adopted at the O'Neill, in keeping with its rich legacy of new play development.

71 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author.

72 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center," art. cit., p. 29 and p. 32.

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of the dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. The O'Neill is renowned for placing the dramaturg within the new drama development process in America, yet little is written about the Center. Henri Lefebvre and *The Production of Space* is consulted to discuss how the operational framework of other theatres is lightened at the O'Neill. Institutional pressures are removed from the dramaturgs working at the Conference, giving them a sense of creative freedom. An exploration on the significance of this freedom follows, and its benefit within new play development. The limitations of the National Playwrights Conference are reflected upon, and how their focus on text-based work is restrictive to certain writers. By adapting its model to accommodate the changing nature of theatrical presentation, the O'Neill can continue its rich legacy of working on new plays.

Key words

Dramaturgy; Dramaturg; Eugene O'Neill Theater Center; National Playwrights Conference; Regional Theatre Movement; Micro dramaturgy; Macro dramaturgy

Résumé

Cet article a pour objectif d'éclairer le rôle du dramaturge dans la « National Playwrights Conference » tenue annuellement par le Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Quoique le O'Neill soit pionnier dans le rôle qu'il donne aux dramaturges au sein de la création théâtrale, peu de recherches ont été menées sur le centre lui-même. Cet article invoque *La Production de l'espace* d'Henri Lefebvre pour examiner la façon dont le O'Neill supprime le cadre mis en place dans d'autres théâtres. Ainsi, le dramaturge intervenant à la « NPC », non contraint par des pressions institutionnelles, jouit d'une certaine liberté créative, dont j'explore ici l'importance, et les bienfaits sur le développement de nouvelles œuvres. J'examine également les limites de ce modèle de fonctionnement, tout comme la restriction créée par l'accent mis sur le théâtre « à texte ». Je conclus que le centre O'Neill doit s'adapter à la nature changeante des représentations théâtrales pour poursuivre sa riche tradition de création théâtrale.

Mots-Clés

dramaturgie ; dramaturge; Eugene O'Neill Theater Center; National Playwrights Conference; théâtre régional américain ; micro dramaturgie; macro dramaturgie

THE INDUSTRY: OPERAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Antonia Rigaud
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, CNRS visiting fellow Larca, Université de Paris

OPERA AS "AN IDEAL PLATFORM FOR 21ST-CENTURY EXPLORATION"?[1]

The Industry was created in Los Angeles in 2012, with the ambition to pioneer new forms for 21st-century opera according to its artistic director, Yuval Sharon:

> I view opera as an audacious and contemporary genre: as the first interdisciplinary art form, opera is an ideal platform for 21st-century exploration. My work is fueled by this belief and characterized by instability and the pleasure in complexity at the heart of opera.[2]

Taking this statement as a starting point for this paper, I would like to explore the ways in which this company redefines opera in direct opposition to the common perception of opera as an essentially static form, one whose heyday has passed. It is a provocation to define the genre as the most suitable art form of our times—Sharon is not only making a statement here: he is making a dare. To realize that dare, The Industry has not necessarily discounted the narrative and operatic features of traditional opera, but it has consistently sought to expand them beyond the limits of linearity in order to destabilize opera, in keeping with Sharon's definition of opera as "characterized instability". The Industry has defined itself by acting as a player in today's cultural landscape, rejecting the rigid forms into which opera has settled in order to transform the operatic experience into one that echoes with contemporary art practices. In its mission to make opera the platform for 21st-century aesthetic experiment, this young company has been especially keen to explore the possibilities of off-site opera. Its productions mark a shift from the stage to site-specific performances and the backdrop

1 Yuval Sharon, "Artist Statement", Foundation for Contemporary Arts' website, December 2016.

2 *Ibid.*

of this shift is the city of Los Angeles, which plays a role as an accomplice and an actor in The Industry's operatic productions.[3]

Since its creation in 2012, this young company has emerged to challenge conventions within the network of historical and traditional institutions, including the Bayreuth festival, perhaps opera's most watched and venerated venue, where The Industry's artistic director, Yuval Sharon, presented *Lohengrin* in 2018 and 2019; or the MacArthur Foundation, which presented Sharon with a Genius Grant in 2017. The Industry's repertoire belongs to the canon of the avant-garde with composers such as John Cage, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, John Adams or Meredith Monk—names which have established it as a key institution in the promotion of American new music and avant-garde aesthetics. The company has also received praise from critics in the mainstream press, with glowing reviews in the *Los Angeles Times*,[4] but also, across the continent, in the *New York Times*[5] and *The New Yorker*.[6] The press has recognized the pioneering dimension of the company's work, turning it almost into a media phenomenon and certainly emphasizing a dimension of "cool" which the company seeks out and fosters. But beyond the self-created aura of hipness which is evident in its state-of-the-art website and extremely active social media presence,[7] I believe it offers a very interesting take on the state of opera in the United States today.[8]

3 The city of Los Angeles has been a literal accomplice of the company through its Department of Cultural Affairs. A quick glance at its website shows how the company exists out of a mixture of public agencies, private foundations and civil society. In an *LA Times* article entitled "The 2008 economic crash hit LA's cultural institutions hard. 10 years later many are bouncing back – and thriving" (Nov. 2, 2018), Scott Timberg gives an overview of Los Angeles County's specific openness to the arts which has helped make LA a thriving arts capital despite the 2008 recession.

4 Reed Johnson, "Yuval Sharon's the Industry Makes Own Track with 'Invisible Cities'", *LA Times*, October 12, 2013; Christopher Hawthorne, "Opera-on-wheels 'Hopscotch' drives home the complicated pull of downtown LA", *LA Times*, November 21, 2015; Mark Swed, "'War of the Worlds': Delirious opera rises from the death and destruction of LA", *LA Times*, November 13, 2017.

5 David Allen, "Opera's Disrupter in Residence, Heading to Bayreuth", *New York Times*, July 20, 2017; Seth Colter Walls, "Review: A 'Fake News' Opera on the Streets of Los Angeles", *The New York Times*, November 13, 2017; William Robin, "'Hopscotch' Takes Opera Into the Streets", *The New York Times*, October 30, 2015.

6 Alex Ross, "Opera on Location", *The New Yorker*, November 16, 2015.

7 See The Industry's pages on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

8 This article seeks to show the great creativity of the current American stage through the study of The Industry's productions. It should nonetheless be noted that this wave of creativity is mostly funded and promoted in Europe, as *LA Times* classical music critic Mark Swed suggests when he opposes the great creativity of American opera to

Opera, with its canonical excess and its roots in the nineteenth century, seems, under The Industry's impulse, to be renewing itself in American terms, crossing a West Coast sensibility with the operatic energy of European high culture[9]. In doing so, it pulls against the feeling of decline in high cultural music charted by Alex Ross in *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*:

> From a distance, it might appear that classical music itself is veering toward oblivion. The situation looks especially bleak in America, where scenes from prior decades—Strauss conducting for thousands in Wanamaker's department store, Toscanini playing to millions on NBC radio, the Kennedys hosting Stravinsky at the White House—seem mythically distant. To the cynical onlooker, orchestras and opera houses are stuck in a museum culture, playing to a dwindling cohort of aging subscribers and would-be elitists who take satisfaction from technically expert if soulless renditions of Hitler's favorite works. Magazines that once put Bernstein and Britten on their covers now have time only for Bono and Beyoncé. Classical music is widely mocked as a stuck-up, sissified, intrinsically un-American pursuit.[10]

Ross, who is an enthusiast for high cultural music, is describing an unlikely scene for any revolution in our aesthetic sensibility. His indictment of a "museum culture" and the idea that opera today could be viewed as an "intrinsically un-American pursuit" is particularly relevant when trying to situate The Industry's take on opera. Indeed, Yuval Sharon puts forward a deep spirit of innovation into a genre that is too often considered ossified and European, by insisting on the company's West Coast and American identity.[11] The Industry's dare is compounded by the way it articulates "an American and West Coast aesthetic built off the innovations of great countercultural composers

what he considers an American disinterest for new forms ("Want the West Coast's best in opera? You have to go to Europe", *LA Times*, April 19, 2019).

9 In April, 2018, the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University organized a conference and symposium on the topic of "Experiments in Opera Today" which engaged with this question. Among the topics mentioned in its online presentation statement, one finds a questioning of the validity of experimentation for such a codified form as opera: "is the emphasis on novelty particularly ill-suited to a form that, even in its most radical guise, continues to connote a host of conventions and traditions (ways of singing, a simultaneously extravagant and rarefied aesthetic, a canonical repertory, a bourgeois base, and so on)?"

10 Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 560.

11 It is important to remember that the history of American opera has been marked by the spirit of innovation—one central example is Virgil Thomson's and Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints: Opera in 3 Acts* which defied the codes of traditional opera as early as 1928.

who thrived in California"[12] and its choice of Los Angeles as a home city—a city that has long established itself as a frontrunner in scientific and cultural innovations. Also, the company's name pays perhaps ironic heed to the context of Los Angeles, where "industry" is used as a shorthand for the entertainment industry. One could argue that Los Angeles is a city where opera, unlike in other world metropolises, lagged far behind movies as a venue for the mix of high and popular culture. LA's growth and position among the world cities came too late for it to be affected by the craze for opera that swept across Europe and the world in the 19th century. As Jurgen Osterhammel has shown in *The Transformation of the World: the Global History of the 19th Century*, opera houses were built as an inextricable part of the economic and global expansion of the 19th century, first in Europe, then in North America, and then in the Middle East, with Istanbul in the 1860s and Asia with Tokyo in the early 20th century—thus, to claim that opera is being reinvented in LA is a bold assertion from the point of view of any lover of traditional opera. Video games and 3-D films might come through LA—but opera?

The first resident opera company in Los Angeles was established in the 1980s in the wake of the 1984 Olympics, which many in LA saw as a recognition of its status as world city. Its actual opera house, the iconic Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by the city's star architect Frank Gehry, was completed in 2003. The history of Los Angeles opera is mostly a history of touring companies hosted in theatres, the very places which gave its prominence to film. This attention to opera houses is rooted in the historic fact that opera as an aesthetic form has always relied on the double experience of its site (the opera house) and its content (the various operas staged inside)—the Wagnerian dream of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* which rose in the late 19th century is the supreme example of this double experience: a whole place devoted to opera. Opera and the opera house were a unity, but as the 19th century ended and film technology advanced, opera lost its dominating position as the ultimate aesthetic expression of its time. Opera houses retained their popularity as destinations for cultured individuals, but it was movie houses that started to set the tone for cultural discourse, fashion and celebrity. In the 1930s, after talkies had grounded film as the 20th century's art form, premiere movie theatres even took on the architectural look of the opera house. This gives a sense of the semantic overdetermination of a name like "The Industry" for an opera company in Los Angeles.

Thus, if The Industry was to remake opera in a non-operatic city like Los Angeles, it first had to deal with that history. It would have to decide on how, exactly, it was

12 The Industry, "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", p. 4.

going to represent opera. It did so by liberating opera from the opera house, following a principle articulated by Pierre Boulez, who called in 1967 to "blow the opera houses up".[13] Boulez's statement is particularly relevant in the context of this experimental Southern Californian opera institution, since he came to be a very important figure on the avant-garde scene of the area through his involvement with the Ojai Music Festival, for which he was music director seven times, from 1967 to 2003. The Ojai Music Festival's commitment to experimentation and to contemporary creation has transformed this small-town retreat—almost an LA suburb—into a breeding ground for experimentation, exemplifying Southern California's tradition of artistic innovation. In his 2015 review of that year's Ojai festival, Alex Ross aptly summarized Southern California's specific blend of American and European modernism for the *New Yorker*:

> ... no one should be surprised that such an institution took root in Southern California. The esoteric sects that proliferated in the state at the turn of the last century had myriad connections to modernism in the arts. The lineage of experimental composers who grew up on the West Coast or were based there for part of their careers—Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage, Lou Harrison, La Monte Young, James Tenney, and Pauline Oliveros, among others—is central to contemporary music history. And the mighty exodus of composers from Nazi-occupied Europe to Los Angeles, led by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, prepared the conditions in which the festival flowered.[14]

The Industry positions itself very clearly within a scene that has long blended together native creation and European modernism. It is therefore no surprise that it would claim John Cage as its most important influence, since the Los Angeles-born composer has not only redefined our conception of music, silence, spectatorship and community, but also commented on opera as a genre in desperate need of renewal. As a celebration of Cage's essential influence on its work, The Industry staged Cage's *Europeras 1 & 2* in the fall of 2018. Sharon explains: "I believe that no influence has been more strongly felt on this company than Cage".[15] It is indeed striking that Cage turned opera, at the end of his career, into an American proposition flung against Europe, making it a chance collage and kaleidoscope of extracts from previous canonical operas. Cage, in a characteristically *koan*-like comment, explained: "For 200 years the

13 Boulez, quoted in David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, Chicago and London, Chicago UP, 2007, p. 18.

14 Alex Ross, "Outsiders: the Ojai Music Festival", *The New Yorker*, July 6 & 13, 2015.

15 The Industry, "Yuval Sharon Reflects on The Industry's Production of John Cage's Europeras 1 & 2", December 19, 2018.

Europeans have sent us their operas. Now I am returning them all to them".[16] The kinship with John Cage is obvious, but it is also intriguing that the company would mention the role played by a larger array of influences presented thus: "Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Jacques Rancière and Guy Debord's philosophy of spectatorship, and Los Angeles itself".[17] One might wonder at such a diverse list of interests, yet this list of influences illustrates the central tension at the heart of The Industry's project. Indeed, the company seeks to create operas following the grand Wagnerian tradition of the total work of art, yet comes to this tradition from a 21st-century perspective and reads opera through the lens of thinkers who all seek to decenter the work of art. One could argue that The Industry opposes two visions of opera: that of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and that of Cage's ironic responses to the total work of art, in the shape of happenings and the advent of performance.

I will first look at the way the company explores what its director calls "the possibilities of the streets" which is exemplified in the 2015-piece *Hopscotch*, a piece which introduces Guy Debord's notion of psychogeography to opera. This leads to unexpected encounters and an aesthetics of fragmentation which I will explore by focusing on the 2014 production *Invisible Cities*. And I will conclude by looking at how opera, when separated from its signifier, the opera house, becomes something different and out of place, generating a reflection linking urban, social and aesthetic discourses, making opera a vehicle in which a consciousness of our contemporary condition might be forged, echoing Jacques Rancière's reflections on art and the "distribution of the sensible".

HOPSCOTCH: OPERA AS PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

Since its creation, The Industry has emphasized its desire to free opera from traditional staging modes, as with its first piece in 2012, *Crescent City*, which was staged in a warehouse where the audience was encouraged to walk around the performers. More recently, in November 2017, it has staged an adaptation of *War of the Worlds* taking place both within the LA Phil, a traditional opera house, and on the streets of Downtown Los Angeles, where the city's decommissioned World War II sirens broadcast the performance occurring inside the theater onto the streets. The Industry's adaptation of Brecht's Galileo was created to be performed on Cabrillo Beach in

16 *Ibid.*
17 *Ibid.*

San Pedro, right next to the place where Brecht landed in his exile to California [18]. Los Angeles and its history thus play a major role in the very definition of these pieces which, because they spread out onto the city's contours, operate at a crossroads between the intentionality of urban planning and the unexpected possibilities of live performance.

By the simple but decisive gesture of taking opera out of the opera house, The Industry turns it into a sort of ghost of opera, a dreamlike route through the landscape of the city. The Industry's most emblematic piece is *Hopscotch, a Mobile Opera in 24 Cars*, which took the "audience" through downtown Los Angeles, essentially making its freeways, buildings, parking lots, parks and urban wastelands the opera's set—though we could argue the piece displaces the very notion of a set, or set-up, inverting the relationship between reality and the stage. Thus, the very scenography created a spectacle that dispensed utterly with the opera house, or any conventional stage. Instead of being performed in an urban monument, in conformity with traditional opera, it made the entire city streetscape—that which opera traditionally and ritually kept outside—into a space to be enacted *by* the performance.

This is of course not a new gesture, and situates the opera company within the context of *in-situ* art which grew out of the artistic explorations of the 1950s and 60s in the United States. It evokes for example Trisha Brown's 1971 *Roof Piece*, where the performance is defined by the relationship it institutes with its environment, while also challenging the notion of a choreography as a unified work seen in the same way by all audience members. Merce Cunningham's 1994 production of *Ocean* performed in a quarry near Minneapolis [19] also comes to mind as a forerunner of the way The Industry challenges traditional performance spaces—especially the way *Ocean* sought to fully immerse the audience, which surrounded the dancers while being itself surrounded by the musicians. In other words, The Industry follows up on a tradition which integrates within the artwork a reflection on its relationship with its environment and suggests that any chosen site will bear meaning important to the reception of the work.

These site-specific performances are usually associated with the New-York avant-garde scene rather than Los Angeles, but The Industry choosing to take its

18 At the time of this article's publication, the full production has not yet taken place, but the company's website states: "The Industry presented two concert workshop performances of GALILEO at Angels Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro. This live concert version brought together the orchestra, cast, and set elements to give a preview of the full production."

19 The piece was first performed at the Cirque Royal Brussels before being performed at the Lincoln Center in New York and finally, at the invitation of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in a quarry outside the city.

performances outside of the opera house can also be considered as a nod to Hollywood films, which chose to go outside the studio to create films in real locations, leading to the "locative" realism that R. Barton Palmer explores in *Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place*. The Industry thus brings together two very different traditions: the high modernist avant-garde explorations of *in-situ* aesthetics, and Hollywood's take on the "real". The site-specificity juxtaposed against the highly ritualistic performance of song within a narrative evokes the Situationists' psychogeographic explorations of the city, and it is probably the notion of movement within the cityscape that marks out The Industry as an opera company. It this respect, one must note *Hopscotch's* close kinship to works such as Robert Wilson's 2012 *Walking* in Norfolk, in which audiences were asked to undertake a three-and-a-half-hour aestheticized walk across a nature reserve—though the difference lies in the opposition between urban and natural contexts, as well as between driving and walking.

The *LA Times* critic Mark Swed has also explained that a mobile piece is not new since, as early as 1969, Robert Moran transformed the city of San Francisco into a performance site with 100,000 performers in a piece called *39 Minutes for 39 Autos*, but the difference with The Industry is that the latter creates closeness between the audience and the work, shaking the foundations of the fourth wall. The audience is indeed taken from place to place as the piece progresses, in a context which comments on the notion of urban mobility, thus making the aesthetic experience of attending a performance very close to the daily experience of the city. The binary between the opera as place and the opera as performance is displaced, uncovering the opposition between the spaces that are subconsciously "skipped" by the drivers or commuters and those that attract their attention. In that displacement, the opera takes on the form of a Situationist *dérive*, a drift—an adventure with the possibilities of the city—and this formal transformation creates an operatic psychogeography. That this program is initiated in cars in Los Angeles brings together the city's by now obsolete image as a utopian synergy of urban life and the automobile—as it was celebrated for instance by Joan Didion: "The freeways become a special way of being alive [...] the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical"[20]—and a more ambivalent but realistic account of the city's car culture today as it is ironically presented by Chris Burden's kinetic sculpture *Metropolis II*.[21]

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20 Joan Didion, "Bureaucrats", *The White Album Essays*, New York, Open Road Media, 2017.

21 The Industry's take on place seen from the perspective of mobility takes Doreen Massey's definition of place as "an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories" (Doreen Massey, *For Space*, LA and London, Sage, 2005, p. 151). It also constitutes a relevant

The Industry calls its audience to participate in a psychogeography of both aesthetic and economic activity, an exploration of relics, leading its audience to a *dérive* as it was defined by Guy Debord:

> In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.[22]

The "psychogeographical relics" Debord mentions further in the same text constitute the unifying thread of the work and define its form and narrative.

Hopscotch is a nod to Cortazar's 1963 novel of the same name, a novel that is organized like a children's book game, in which various adventures can be realized by moving from one page to the next or to various other possibilities, each one leading to different adventures. The opera enacts this hypertextual dimension of the novel by performing it on the freeways and surface roads of the city, using the roads as a connecting thread between the different parts of the opera while also, probably, pointing to the way freeways have operated economic and racial segregation in the city, suggesting fragmentation. The piece pays homage to the novel's mutability but, because the company could not secure the rights to an adaptation, the work is an original creation by a team of 12 LA-based composers and writers,[23] who outlined an overall structure before working individually on specific scenes. The plot, though, is probably the least important element of the opera, which seeks to present itself as a series of micro-narratives. The central character—the heart of the narrative, in other words—Lucha, is performed by 18 different actors, musicians and dancers, performing different stages of her life, enhancing the sense of a work with no center. This centerless form evokes the way the Situationists sought to create new connections between separated parts of the city, as Henri Lefebvre recounted:

example of what Fiona Wilkie calls "the mobility turn" of performance as it would fit particularly well in the "set of conversations about transport and mobility" that she defines as currently "happening in and around performance" (Fiona Wilkie, *Performance, Transport and Mobility*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.7).

22 Guy Debord, "Definitions", *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, p. 52.

23 Six LA-based composers—Andrew McIntosh, Veronika Krausas, Andrew Norman, David Rosenboom, Ellen Reid, and Marc Lowenstein—and six LA-based writers—Tom Jacobson, Mandy Kahn, Sarah LaBrie, Jane Stephens Rosenthal, Janine Salinas Schoenberg, and Erin Young.

> Their idea [...] was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the *dérive.* It was done first in Amsterdam, using walkie-talkies. There was one group that went to one part of the city and could communicate with people in another area.[24]

This description also brings to the fore the technological and logistical feat of *Hopscotch*, following a tradition of opera as technological prowess. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is here perhaps pushed to its ultimate logistical limits, each route carrying four audience members around eight of the chapters. The cars also transported actors or musicians and the simultaneous actions were broadcast live at a hub in the arts district where people could watch the show for free and where all routes converged for the final chapter.

The use of the city's landscapes adds layers of external meaning to the work which rests thus between its determined score and performance, and its changing urban backdrop as well as, perhaps most importantly, the individual audience members' subjective perceptions of these places. The cityscape of Los Angeles is indeed to be considered not only as the backdrop of the audience's everyday life but also, following Baudrillard, as a "screenscape"[25] of shared cinematographic memory. Los Angeles, its streets, iconic freeway landscapes, historic buildings such as the Bradbury Building where scenes from *Hopscotch* are performed, imprint infinite layers of meaning on the work, evoking the many films shot there, most famously perhaps *Blade Runner*. The landscapes on which the operas unfold bring an added, personal and subjective layer of meaning marked by memory, as it would in any city, but this is particularly significant in the city of Los Angeles which exists predominantly as the shared memory of Hollywood films. Yet the simple opposition between the subjective and the objective can be misleading inasmuch as this work, in line with modernist texts such as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Paterson*, endows the city with a collective subjectivity: the audience members are presented with a city as a network of *dejà vus*, a fictionalized reality and the real context of their everyday lives. It therefore follows the definition of the *dérive* as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society:

24 Kristin Ross and Henri Lefebvre, "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview", *October*, vol. 79, 1997, pp. 69-83. Lefebvre continues: "The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city" (p. 80).

25 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner, London, Verso, 1988.

a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences"[26] and, as such, it questions the very possibility of a definite meaning.

All accounts of the opera insist on the sense of loss and the dizzying effects of a piece that takes its audience through different locations and experiences: cars, buildings, parks. It is made of a series of vignettes that take place along three distinct routes, all simultaneous, creating an operatic mode based on fragmentation. Fragmentation is essential to the Industry's redefinition of opera and disruption of the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, particularly in its 2014 production *Invisible Cities*.

INVISIBLE CITIES: FRAGMENTING THE *GESAMTKUNSTWERK*

One could argue that The Industry takes Boulez's call to blow up the opera house almost literally by creating an opera experience that exists as an infinite number of fragments, turning our experience of opera into an ever-changing, mutable one, working very much like a hypertext, where any experience branches out into different paths for each audience-member. The total work of art is blown up and pulverized into a number of fragments so that the idea of a master narrative no longer holds. The works presented by The Industry seem to all have in common a similar break from the notion of a master-narrative, or a masterwork, that would be a unique object of perception for audiences. *Invisible Cities*, "a headphone opera",[27] was made to be experienced by wandering through Los Angeles' historic Union Station, the performance taking place in the middle of the train station's habitual activities, people leaving and arriving, homeless people finding shelter—the station is therefore part of the work, bringing forward the socio-economic conditions of everyday life in Los Angeles. Through their headphones, audience members heard the same thing at the same time but did not see the same scene at all.[28] Based on Italo

26 Guy Debord, "Definitions", in *Situationist International Anthology. op. cit.*

27 Christopher Cerrone, the opera's composer, explains on his personal website: "I imagined the sound of an unearthly resonant and gong-like prepared piano, the ringing of bells, and wind players gently blowing air through their instruments. All of this would support a lyrical and deep-voiced Kublai Khan who is slow-moving and sings with gravitas. I imagined there would be two women, two high sopranos, singing together in harmony: they would be the musical personification of the cities in the novel. And of course, our Italian explorer would be a tenor, light and quick-moving, melismatic, and deft."

28 Yuval Sharon explains: "Beyond the ways headphones have changed our everyday engagement with music, I've had some unforgettable experiences with headphones as an artistic tool—Janet Cardiff's haunting walk around Central Park, where pre-recorded memories co-existed with the present-day life of the park; Merce Cunningham's

Calvino's imaginary dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, it draws a map of imaginary cities which are made real by the teller's words here enhanced by the singers and Christopher Cerrone's music.

The opera is made to be experienced as a myriad of broken moments: it follows Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, narrated in several chapters where Marco Polo describes to Kublai Kahn all the imaginary cities of his kingdom. The viewers get partial visions of the whole, thus underlining non-linearity and instability as a defining aesthetic model. This aesthetic model comes directly from Calvino's words: "Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased," Polo said. "Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little".[29] The narrator expresses his fear of fixity: Venice might lose its identity and be absorbed into its legend. The viewers navigate the station, headphones on, in a way that is very similar to the way most people go through a train station. They become aware of the station while at the same time losing the sense of reality behind their thoughts, here a dreamlike atmosphere set by the music—by interrupting the station as a utilitarian place, a place of departure and arrival, the piece creates a puzzle. It becomes, literally, an invisible city. The tension between visibility and invisibility, or between the materiality and disappearance of the city illustrates the tension at the heart of all of The Industry's productions, which is the tension between a total work of art and its destruction into fragments, or between the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its modern fragmented form.

This open work of art unfolds as a palimpsest, adding visual, aural and symbolic layers one over the other. Christopher Cerrone explains:

> To borrow a term from one of Calvino's favorite writers, Jorge Luis Borges, *Invisible Cities* is a garden of forking paths. As the work progresses, you might find yourself wandering back to the same place in Union Station again and again, to find new things happening there each time. In the same way, the same few musical ideas of Invisible Cities are revisited again and again, but from vastly different perspectives.[30]

EyeSpace, where each audience member was given an iPod shuffle to hear a random selection of Mikel Rouse pieces while watching the same choreography; and Back to Back Theatre's play "Small Metal Objects," where a drug deal takes place among unwitting commuters. When you factor in the "silent disco" phenomenon, headphones have been disrupting trends in a wide spectrum of artistic genres for some time" (Yuval Sharon, "The Dematerialization of the Opera", KCET website, October 10, 2013.)

29 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974, p. 87

30 Christopher Cerrone's website, *op. cit.*

Linearity of plot is here replaced by a vortex of possibilities, in a fragmented form enhanced by the disjointed aspect of a piece that takes place in different places at the same time, and that must be pieced together by the audience. The *in-situ* presentation of fragmentation gives a plastic reality to Calvino's poetry of fragments:

> At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire.[31]

The Isidora chapter opens with the voice of the train station's operator calling the names of the cities the next train will serve. Upon these names the chapter begins, with a dance solo that accompanies the music's metronomic urgency, opposed by the intrusion of a dream-like atmosphere with the slow tempo of the woman—whom Cerrone explained is a musical personification of the cities—chanting a wordless aria. The opening thus rests on two tempos, the tension between which structures the Isidora sequence. As we learn from Marco Polo's description of the most invisible of cities, the ideal city, this is a sequence about the ideal city brought back to reality by the contrast between youth and age, and, visually, between the business of Union Station, Marco Polo's casual clothing, and the dreamlike detachment of the dancers and muse-like singers. The performer's voice gives existence to the city, bringing to mind a city that is very much like Los Angeles in many ways: its buildings, its prominent science industries, and more generally a city that is fascinated with its own image.

The epilogue continues to mirror the very situation of the viewers: the reference to our reception ("I feel your voice is reaching me from far away") enhances the way the work calls on the audience's self-awareness in a piece that both immerses its audience in its dreamlike sequences and at the same times leads them to look at themselves as viewers in a highly unusual reception situation. The epilogue also evokes the role of the audience in completing the piece: "it is not the voice but the ear that commands the story"[32]. We see here the fate of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* after modernism and, for instance, Duchamp's reflection on audience participation. In its awareness, the

31 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

audience is not a passive component, nor should it be lulled into thinking it is, and the viewers complete, not the painting as Duchamp said[33], but the opera.

The Industry insists on the audience's freedom to attend to some things and to connect them to other things, without the sense that we will ever solve the puzzle or find a master-narrative, since the piece can only be completed by being read and listened to over and over again. In this sense, it opposes the traditional notion of opera masterpieces which it replaces with a work that suggests possibilities—opera existing here only as a score presenting possible narrative threads, rather than a unified whole. In opposition to traditional opera houses where the audience's gaze is directed and defined according to a unique and controlled perspective on the world, here the fragmentation of the piece is also to be understood as a way of giving agency to audiences. This fragmented aesthetics runs against the fetishizing dimension of opera and participates to making it an open and ever-changing experience.[34]

The Industry's creations question the validity of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the 21st century. The notion is at the heart of the company's references and yet all its creations seem to push the total work of art on the side of fragmentation. The reference to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, associated with that of John Cage, shows how much The Industry is indeed a proposition force for 21st-century opera, as it continues a tradition that it both acknowledges and opens for future experimentations. Fragmentation is indeed inherited via John Cage and his notion that "anything that engages the eye and the ear [is theatrical]",[35] or that "theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case".[36] Cage's experiments with performance at Black Mountain College and his 1952 "event", which has come to be considered as the first happening, paved the way for a movement away from the stage, while at the same time convoking the necessity for all the arts involved in performance to co-exist as a total, anarchic work of art. Cage's re-writing of the Wagnerian concept

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33 Marcel Duchamp: "Ce sont les REGARDEURS qui font les tableaux", *Duchamp Du Signe*, p. 247. "It is the viewers who make the painting", *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp,* vol. 1, p. 258.

34 In this respect, The Industry's de-centered and fragmented aesthetics evokes the figure of Adorno whose presence in Los Angeles has marked the city's intellectual heritage. Adorno defined opera as "a bourgeois vacation spot", a commodified and socially predetermined artform, something which The Industry is actively trying to erase and replace by a socially diverse open artform (Theodor Adorno, "Bourgeois Opera", in David Levin (ed.), *Opera Through Other Eyes*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1994, p. 25).

35 John Cage in Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, *« An Interview with John Cage »*, *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 50-72, p. 50.

36 John Cage, *Silence*, Wesleyan, Wesleyan UP, 1961, p. 174.

of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* led to his circus-like, anarchic *Europeras 1 & 2*. They pay heed to the scale of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and deconstruct traditional operas while retaining the notion of its great scale—as the website of The Industry lists for its production of Cage's opera:

> SINGERS: 19
> DANCERS: 6
> LA PHIL INSTRUMENTALISTS: 27
> ARIAS: 95
> MUSIC: 6 Hours (49 minutes of arias, performed in 115 minutes)
> OPERAS: 52
> COMPOSERS REPRESENTED: 33
> COSTUMES: 95
> PROPS: 254
> DROPS: 64 (including an Austrian curtain!)[37]

The Industry staged Cage's operas in the fall of 2018, at the very heart of the film industry: Sony Studios. Cage's original 1987 opera is a collage of canonical European arias which the American composer mixed in order to re-discover a genre that had been historicized and had lost its disruptive potentialities as Cage's aforementioned formula for American operas suggests. Setting this 21st-century version of these operas in one of Hollywood's most prominent studios, Sharon collages the notion of avant-garde experimentation and classical Hollywood film. As is explained on the company's website: "This new production was anchored in our local environs and LA history with hand-painted backdrops, props, and costumes from the classic Hollywood era."[38] This in turn makes the opera a tongue-in-cheek reference to another Los Angeles thinker, namely Adorno whose exile on the shores of the Pacific led him to reflect and lament on the effects of the "culture industry". The Industry indeed takes Cage's humorous play with high and low culture to the very heart of the culture industry. In doing so, it questions our relationship to culture and entertainment, making opera no longer the codified genre of the cultural elite but rather the very place where to explore our cultural expectations. In doing this, it opens the way for a 21st-century reassessment of culture and entertainment.

37 "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", *op. cit.*, p. 7.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

"AN UNPREDICTABLE DIALOGUE OF MANY VOICES":[39] OPERAS AS PROMISE

It is striking that this company, which is so concerned with innovation, insists a lot on the genre of *opera* as a central aspect of its creations. Yuval Sharon explains: "Opera has historically been accused of cultivating a 'passive' audience. I see this as a critical fault of operatic productions but not the genre itself."[40] Naming *Crescent City* a "hyperopera", *Invisible Cities* a "headphone opera", *Hopscotch* a "mobile opera", the company redefines and confronts the genre by modulating its scale from the intimacy of headphones to the panoramas of a "hyper" or "mobile" opera. This is perhaps due to the revitalized culture of opera, as discussed by opera critic David Levin, but it is probably above all part of The Industry's commitment to situate opera at the very heart of a discussion on the possibilities offered by performance today. One might think that a phrase like "music theatre" or the term "performance"[41] would perhaps better fit an aesthetic endeavor that is so clearly derived from the changes in performance art that have marked the second half of the 20th century, and that continue to happen today. I believe that the company's uncompromising use of the term "opera" serves to show its commitment to turn the very heart of high culture into the locus of a reflection on the potentialities of an experimental yet democratic and inclusive artform. The operas are committed to the vocal style of opera, its arias and recitatives are not replaced by more modern cadences as one could have expected given the company's freedom in playing with codes. The company blends together the high art of operatic music and the quotidian or non-operatic contexts of its performances, blending high and low in order to give new life to the genre. By disseminating opera on multiple platforms and by opening it to larger audiences—especially as it tries to capture unwitting audiences, immersed in their everyday life, as in *Invisible Cities*—the company calls for this genre to become the place for an aesthetic and socio-political discussion questioning our relationship to our urban and lived environment. It raises the question of how experimentation can accommodate itself in the context of the entertainment industry while also commenting on, and counteracting, the entertainment industry's tendency to transform audiences into passive receivers.

39 Yuval Sharon, "I Pledge Allegiance to Art", KCET website, January 24, 2017.

40 Yuval Sharon, "Artist Statement", *op. cit.*

41 Or what RoseLee Goldberg calls "the development of live visual art" in *Now: Live Art for the 21st Century* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 7.).

The "cities" that are at the heart of The Industry's productions: *Crescent City*, *Invisible Cities*, Los Angeles in *Hopscotch*, are deeply grounded in the specific reality of Los Angeles, which is to be understood as a socio-political space. This is where one understands the company's website mention of Jacques Rancière as a key reference—the notion of the "distribution of the sensible" calls on us to reflect on the space of a community, our shared space as opposed to individual spaces. The Industry's explorations of urban space and communities, as well as its reappraisals of our ways of being in the city, which we could also call our ways of sharing communal space, pay heed to Rancière's philosophy of aesthetics as politics. *Hopscotch* is an interesting case in point as the piece enacts on the one hand an extreme version of the opera box prestige, with 4 people only being able to be in the cars and with tickets starting at $125, but it is also the very opposite of an elite closed-circle form of entertainment as its central hub allowed anyone to see for free the entirety of the opera on videos, as well as the piece's finale. The piece thus questions our experience of the city as shared communal space.

Aesthetically interesting, these pieces are in contact with some of the great tendencies of American avant-garde work, while also participating into the larger culture of entertainment. Elise K. Kirk has shown how film has been the most powerful influence on modern American opera and The Industry's many nods to Hollywood seem to prove her right.[42] But beyond these aesthetic questions, the pieces, in their interest in globalization, bear on a social and political discourse. The company pays great attention to its social inclusiveness, as is suggested by the recurring reflections on immigration in *Hopscotch*, or by Marco Polo's figuring the beginnings of a global world in *Invisible Cities*. The early 2020 opera *Sweet Land* was advertised as a production which "takes on a broad range of issues surrounding the founding of America and explores unresolved trauma. The artistic team's work and backgrounds are deeply connected to questioning narrative hierarchy and cultural identity through a social justice lens,"[43] featuring the work of composers Du Yun, a Chinese immigrant, Raven Chacon from the Navajo Nation, and African-American and Native American librettists Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan. This project which seeks to present "a multi-perspectival tour through American history"[44] confirms the company's concerns with separating opera from old-world canons, and offering its audiences a renewed form of opera that not only pushes the boundaries of traditional opera aesthetics, but that is also politically

42 Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p. 4.

43 "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", *op. cit.*, p. 2.

44 *Ibid.*

engaged and socially conscious of the challenges facing the United States in the new century.

These operas all call for a reflection linking urban, social and aesthetic discourses, something which Yuval Sharon defined, in the wake of the 2016 elections, in the following words: "I pledge allegiance to the art form of opera not because of what it was but because of what it can be: the promise of its platform as an unpredictable dialogue of many voices".[45] Opera is thus conceived of as a possibility ("what it can be") and a "platform for a dialogue of many voices" which formulates a discourse on our living conditions and on the future. This idea is what gives *Invisible Cities* its majestic ending with Marco Polo's call for "vigilance and apprehension" to avoid the inferno:

> Marco polo – The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.[46]

The last sentence "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" lingers in a 6-minute long monologue which becomes a chorus engaging all the performers, making the audience hear the call from all directions. The opera underlines Calvino's call for action, for "[giving] space to" a society that is "not an inferno", calling on the individual viewers who were separated by their headphones into a communal listening experience. The space for "who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno" is perhaps to be understood as the space of opera—not the space of the opera house, but rather of the whole city, which the Industry seeks to make us see as a space of promises for a future and more inclusive community. It reclaims spaces of absent-mindedness (cars, train stations, beaches...) for an opera that is intended as a 21st-century take on the theater as utopian communal experience. Enacting what Lefebvre called, at the time of the first experiments with opening performance to the streets, "the right to the city" or what, closer to us, Doreen Massey called our "throwntogetherness,"[47] it calls on its

45 Yuval Sharon, "I Pledge Allegiance to Art", *op. cit.*
46 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, *op. cit.*, p.165.
47 Doreen Massey, *For Space. op. cit.*, pp. 149-62.

audience's engagement with the city as locus of civic life. The Industry indeed engages its audiences with dreams of the ideal city, calling attention to the city as social space to be imagined for all. The fragments of these pieces, the communities enacted in the very act of putting together such technically-demanding works as well as the communities formed with the audiences or with the neighborhoods where the pieces unfold—all these elements point in the direction of a definition of opera as an aesthetic moment directly connected with life and its socio-political context. The company indeed pays close attention to the way its productions affect communities and neighborhoods, involving local communities and thus associating opera creation with communal living.

CONCLUSION

The Industry heeds Boulez's call to destroy the opera house in each of its creations. But this destruction of traditional opera and its aura of elitism, its complicity with old hierarchies, participates to the reconstruction of opera as a fully contemporary and socially relevant artistic form. The company is fully conscious of the history of opera which it celebrates in continuing with, very importantly, the musical language of opera and the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; but it also seeks to establish a counter-narrative to the traditional history of opera, by claiming a certain number of contemporary philosophical and theoretical references through which it decenters and desacralizes opera. From Guy Debord and the notion of psychogeography, it takes opera into the city, decentering the very notion of opera houses and destroying the fourth wall. From John Cage, it takes a desire for fragmentation and a continuous aesthetic experience. And from Jacques Rancière, it takes the notion that art, embedded as it is in its urban environment, can be a proposition force in our civic everyday life. The Industry calls for a practice of opera as a civic activity outside of the space commonly controlled by established power, and it is probably not by chance that Los Angeles plays such an important role as the place where opera can be reborn: it is perhaps from this culturally marginalized and multi-ethnic city that opera could be more radically reconfigured.

In a recent article about the two Los Angeles opera directors Peter Sellars and Yuval Sharon, Mark Swed has posited the notion of an "LA School of opera" which he defines as combining aesthetic innovations and socio-political power:

> Sellars and Sharon practice a new progressive approach to opera as an agent for societal transformation and environmental activism that goes far beyond the usual directorial updating of opera beloved in Europe, too often for little more than show-business

> pizzazz. Can we go so far as to call this a Los Angeles school of opera? From this side of the Atlantic, that's where the big ideas seem to be coming from.[48]

The Industry's double perspective on aesthetics and politics offers a potentially radical perspective on how aesthetic innovations can impact our styles of perceiving and inhabiting these communities. The notion of a Los Angeles school of opera suggests that the form of opera might be renewed for the 21st century from Los Angeles, perhaps the least operatic city—and yet, as a world capital in innovation, entertainment and diversity, the best stomping ground for the aesthetic and political renewal of opera.

48 Mark Swed, "How two top directors are teaching Europe the LA School of Opera", *LA Times*, August 23, 2019.

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Notice

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Abstract

The Industry is a young Los Angeles opera company which seeks to redefine opera by opening it up to 21st-century aesthetics. This strong interest in making opera into a contemporary genre can be seen in the way this company rejects traditional opera's reliance on a certain kind of theatrical *mise-en-scène*, notably through its experimentation with *in-situ* performances. This article looks at some of the company's most notable performances, which are analyzed in the context of American avant-garde performance as well as in the specific context of Los Angeles. In so doing, it reconsiders the significance of the company's references to varied concepts and thinkers such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Guy Debord, John Cage or Jacques Rancière, and suggests that behind this eclectic array of references lies a very careful reflection on the possibilities of opera today. The Industry works to create a new aesthetic experience of opera that shifts the boundaries between art and the politics of everyday life, thus making opera the place for a reflection on art's political potential.

Key words

opera; performance; avant-garde; *Gesamtkunstwerk*; The Industry; Los Angeles; Guy Debord; John Cage; Jacques Rancière.

Résumé

The Industry est une jeune compagnie d'opéra de Los Angeles qui cherche à redéfinir l'opéra pour l'adapter au XXIe siècle. Cet intérêt très marqué pour un opéra du contemporain passe d'abord par un rejet des codes traditionnels de l'opéra à travers notamment des mises en scène *in-situ*. Cet article s'intéresse aux performances les plus emblématiques de cette compagnie, qui sont analysées dans un premier temps dans le double contexte de la performance d'avant-garde américaine et dans le cadre spécifique de Los Angeles. La compagnie définit son projet esthétique en rapport à un large éventail de références, du *Gesamtkunstwerk*, à Guy Debord, John Cage ou Jacques Rancière – références diverses qui témoignent en réalité d'une pensée très articulée sur les possibilités qu'offre le genre de l'opéra aujourd'hui. Cet article revient sur l'importance de ce corpus intellectuel et théorique dans la démarche de cette compagnie qui vise à définir une nouvelle esthétique pour l'opéra au XXIe siècle, faisant bouger les lignes de séparation entre art et politique.

Mots clés

opéra ; performance ; avant-garde ; *Gesamtkunstwerk* ; The Industry ; Los Angeles ; Guy Debord ; John Cage ; Jacques Rancière.

METAMODERN AESTHETICS OF SELFIENESS AND SURVEILLANCE IN *YOUARENOWHERE* AND *I'LL NEVER LOVE AGAIN*

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This article considers the impact of selfie culture on constructions of dramatic subjectivity by discussing two works: Andrew Schneider's "solo" performance, *YOUARENOWHERE*,[1] a high-tech exploration of the fragility of human subjectivity that surprises the audience halfway through with a doppelganger from a parallel universe, and Clare Barron's *I'll Never Love Again*,[2] which takes an eleven-person choir of different ages, genders and ethnicities to narrate excerpts from her teenage diaries. I suggest that the dramaturgy of these "solo" semi-autobiographical performances reflects the impact of both social media paradigms and the surveillances that attend them. In one sense, the treatment of dramatic subjectivity by the artists reflects the postmodern fragmentation of stable selfhood and postdramatic breakdown of dramatic unity—what Elinor Fuchs calls the "death of character" when she writes of the impact of poststructural thinking on theatre practices, observing that the "disappearance"[3] of stable character reflects "the unoccupied occupant of the subject position."[4] Extending this paradigm, both Schneider and Barron's works reflect the post-postmodern position of subjectivity in the 21st century; their dramaturgies suggest the sense in which contemporary selves, via social media and other technologies, are available for endless re-presentation and re-configuration. Indeed, Andy Horwitz has described Schneider's work as being about "the dissolution of the self in the digital age."[5] The attitude towards disaggregated selfhood in these works is deeply ambivalent, however; marked by a sense of profound loneliness and disconnection and a nostalgic yearning for a self more unified and contained, or at the very least more materially reliable. I wish to frame this ambivalence as "metamodern" in character.

1 Excerpts of the play are available on the platform *Vimeo*.
2 A trailer is available on the platform *Vimeo*.
3 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1996, p. 7.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5 Andy Horwitz, "*YOUARENOWHERE*: New Frontiers of Performance," *Theatre Forum*, no. 47, 2015, p. 55.

Jesse Weaver Shipley's description of "selfieness" provides a helpful starting point for this discussion. He writes:

> ... the selfie, rather than a singular form of technologically driven self-portraiture, is a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition. Selfieness is an emotional and semiotic field that emerges through the potential ever-presence of the selfie.[6]

Shipley extends our understanding of the selfie from discrete material object to immanent affectivity. Moreover, he explains that the selfie's storytelling capacity extends across multiple mediums. Whilst Shipley's definition is stretched by its application to the dramatic context, I nonetheless suggest that the concept of selfieness helps to tease out the formulation of selfhood in both Schneider and Barron's dramaturgies. Both works in part mimic or suggest certain aspects of selfie culture. Schneider's scenography, for example, uses a frame large enough to enclose the actor's head and shoulders—like a close-up shot—as a central scenic device and motif. Particularly in the first part of the performance, the character, only known as "A," constantly moves in and out of this frame. Less obviously, Barron's play mimics what Bernie Hogan describes as the "exhibition structure" of online curations of the self, and her presentation to the audience of a series of personal artifacts for display—namely excerpts and drawings from her journals—can be described as an elaborate act of over-sharing.[7] The templates for identity construction that social media provides are both alluded to and critiqued in each work by way of their dramaturgical construction.

For selfies are not simply an act of transmission, a digital iteration of selfhood shaped and controlled by the producer of the image. Rather, selfies exists within complex networked digital and social structures governed by both external and internal surveillance mechanisms. Thus, any dramaturgical analysis that takes selfieness as an analytical lens needs also to consider how surveillance impacts upon the construction and projection of selfhood. In his analysis of what he calls "artveillance," Andrea Mubi Brighenti writes that:

> Surveillance does not simply produce substantive social control and social triage, it also contributes to the formation of an ideoscape and a collective imagery about what

6 Jesse Weaver Shipley, "Selfie Love: Public Lives in an Era of Celebrity Pleasure, Violence, and Social Media," *American anthropologist*, vol. 117, no. 2, 2015, p. 404.

7 Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 30, no. 6, 2010, p. 377.

> security, insecurity, and control are ultimately about, as well as the landscape of moods and affects a surveillance society like ours expresses.[8]

Brighenti's point is that surveillance mechanisms have a profound social impact beyond their remit of controlling behavior, shaping both individual subjectivities and collective identities. Seen from the perspective of the intersection of selfieness and surveillance, the dramaturgical structures of Schneider and Barron's works reflect the distinctly ambivalent "moods and affects" of early twenty-first century digital cultures wherein what Shipley calls selfieness' "potential ever presence" produces equal amounts of exhilaration and exhaustion, confidence and anxiety.

As suggested above, I wish to consider this ambivalence as metamodern in character. In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker proposed the term "metamodernism" to describe the structure of feeling they suggest marks the post-postmodern era. Metamodernism, they write, "is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment."[9] This oscillation plays out between a series of dualities: enthusiasm and irony, hope and melancholy, naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.[10] While the interrelation of selfieness and surveillance helps to account for the social context in which Schneider and Barron's works have been created, and the subsequent impact of this upon their dramaturgies, the notion of the metamodern enables a closer scrutiny of the feeling or affectivity of each work, in particular the sense of yearning described earlier. Moreover, if postmodernity displaced the stable self, then selfie culture has staged a return of sorts. Metamodernism therefore provides a useful paradigmatic framework through which to consider the seemingly contradictory impulses and affects in each of the pieces. In what follows, I provide an analysis of each piece with reference to selfieness and surveillance before finally returning to the concept of the metamodern by way of conclusion.

YOUARENOWHERE

YOUARENOWHERE presents us with an image of selfhood on the verge of catastrophic collapse. In my analysis of the work I wish to focus on three areas:

8 Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance: At the Crossroads of Art and Surveillance," *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, p. 175.

9 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, p. 2.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

I firstly consider the manner in which the protagonist's experience of selfhood is technologically mediated and propose that a fruitful comparison may be drawn between multimediality of selfieness and the ontological "multiverse" with which the character grapples. Secondly, I take up the theme of isolation, which I suggest is a result of the "potential ever-presence" of mediated selfhood. Lastly, I discuss the self-reflexivity of the performance whereby the act of *staging* becomes an image for the experience of *being*. I suggest that the metatheatrical components of the work demonstrate how theatre is particularly well positioned to take account of the affectivities of selfieness. Before proceeding, the complex non-narrative structure of *YOUARENOWHERE* necessitates a brief description of the work.

The performance is divided into two distinct halves. The first presents as a solo featuring an unnamed protagonist known in the script as "A"—maybe a version of (Andrew) Schneider himself, maybe not—who speaks directly to the audience, delivering a rapid-fire monologue that combines scientific explanation and personal disclosure. The text mainly revolves around the proposals of quantum physics, the possibility of multiple universes and what this might mean for personal identity. The anecdotal material reveals A's prevailing anxieties, developing a picture of the character as someone unable to sensibly integrate himself into the world as it is.

The textual components of the performance move between varying registers, a linguistic choreography not unlike using a computer and flicking between multiple open tabs. Indeed, Schneider describes how this kind of kinetic and technologically-informed process was used to create the work:

> The show has been created mostly in a digital fashion. I've spent varied and sporadic work periods in my apartment and the rehearsal room surrounded by books, computers, lights, and microphones. Instead of writing down dialogue, I record the dialogue ideas in short bits, fits and starts. Instead of transcribing an idea from a book or a YouTube video, I record my voice reading or mimicking the source. Instead of editing and copying and pasting words and sentences in a word processor, I edit and copy and paste waveforms in an audio editing software. These are my tools for creating text. [11]

This multiple tab-like structure is reflected both in the movement between different registers of speech and even within blocks of text. For example, when A begins to speak, the language is almost nonsensical:

11 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE, Theatre*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2016, p. 87.

> Hi thank you for coming! I have things to say. I think. I think I remembered my notes. Not so quite sure why I'm not wearing a shirt, but let's get to things, shall we? The life is an object that has many similar qualities to lying in a cold patch of grass on a hot autumn day. The leaves are rising. You've got a thermos of hot lemonade. You haven't showered in days and you've forgotten what your sense of smell tastes like. The birds are shouting, "we love to sing!" and you can see your house from here as the paramedics begin to pick the gravel out of your face... ok I'm not so quite sure that I have the right notes sorry. [12]

The language is scored through with a sense of panic—short sentences leaping from one idea to the next—while the character seems uncertain and disoriented: he can't remember his notes, he doesn't know where his shirt is. The imagery is unsettling—leaves rise rather than fall, the lemonade is hot instead of cold. Moreover, there is an uneasy slippage between "I" and "you." The effect is to convey a lack of command or mastery from the performer, a vulnerability that is reinforced throughout the performance as various technological interruptions "undermine" the actor.

The extensive citation from scientific texts provides a contrasting "tab" that is more authoritative in character. For example, A quotes the author of *From Eternity to Here*, scientist Sean Carroll:

> We're now suggesting that we can think of the whole shebang, the entire history of the world, as a single four-dimensional thing, where the additional dimension is time. In this sense, time serves to slice up the four-dimensional universe into copies of space at each moment in time—the whole universe at 10:00 A.M. on January 20, 2010; the whole universe at 10:01 A.M. on January 20, 2010; and so on. There are an infinite number of such slices, together making up the universe. [13]

This movement between registers is significant, as the performance flips and turns between evidence-driven scientific hypothesis, and the messy, irreconcilable affectivity of trying to hold it together in a world that is, as A describes below, fundamentally splintered:

> Do you guys ever think that anytime you happen to think about or get scared of or have a really close call with dying, that just right there in that moment you actually already

12 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

13 Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time*, Oxford, Oneworld Books, 2010, p. 5. This quotation is not printed in full in the published script for copyright reasons, however it is possible to deduce it from the excerpts provided. I have provided the details for Carroll's book itself the bibliography.

> have died? And now are already dead. And that time just—there—just now—split off into a new universe—and that, this has probably happened dozens and dozens and perhaps even hundreds of times in your life considering just how much time you spend thinking about death and time not to mention the many near misses we all have. And that there's all these alternate yous and alternate times spinning off and splintering and moving forward concurrently. [14]

The dramaturgy of the performance itself captures this spinning, splintering quality, seemingly haphazardly moving its audience between different modes of engagement, including the deeply personal. For example, A shares the story of being at a friend's house as a boy when his friend's father died. The kind of emotional empathy or identification that is elicited in these moments is significant, as it heightens the sense of panic and loss in other scenes. Taken together these different modes, helpfully conceived as alternating tabs, build an environment of deep uncertainty driven by relentless questioning.

The relentlessness of the first half culminates in the reveal that comes halfway through the performance, when the back wall of the set drops down to reveal another audience and another actor who is costumed exactly like A and in all regards his doppelganger (played by Peter Mustante); after hypothesizing alternate selves, Schneider is now confronted with another Schneider. A frantically tries to prove his uniqueness, desperately trying to unmask character B as a pretender. What follows is long self-examination that is deeply personal and an accounting of what makes Schneider unique (or not). At this juncture, it is worth pausing to make note of how Schneider's use of a doppelganger reflects what Matthew Causey describes as the significance of the figure of the "double" in contemporary mediatized performance. According to Causey, the "presence of the *double* takes places through mediated duplication" in "the simple moment when a live actor confronts her mediated other through the technologies of reproduction." [15] Schneider recognizes and responds to this technoculture context (and in this sense it is worth acknowledging his history of working with the Wooster Group), [16] but at the same time complicates it through presenting not simply a *mediated* double, but a real, fleshy double. Schneider's use

14 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

15 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 17.

16 Schneider, formerly a member of the Wooster Group, is well known for his interest and innovation in this area.

of technology to "extend" subjectivity[17] is therefore highly ambivalent, ultimately showing the material body—and the sense of selfhood that attaches to this body—as stubbornly resistant.

Indeed, in the last section of the work, B takes control. He asks the audience to change places with the B audience, and for A to change sides with him (the B audience is an actual audience, composed of people who have already seen the show, and have been invited back to perform the role of "audience." I received an email invitation after seeing the show the first time, and subsequently returned to see it a second time from the B perspective). Once the changeover is completed, the lights go down on our side of the stage and up on the other in a reversal of the original set up. B begins performing in the early section of the show, repeating what was performed to us almost an hour earlier. Schneider stands and watches: stunned, appalled, horrified, amazed? Then, there is a violent rumbling and the stage becomes dark. When the lights return, B and the B audience are gone. A series of sound cables hang from the ceiling. Schneider slowly speaks backwards, the speech is then replayed forwards. A single light bulb drops to the floor and shatters and the lights go out.

> *(nothing)*
> *(rumble. key of A)*
> *(a singularity)*
> *(a single point of light. Eyes adjust. A single white led)*
> *(another point of light some distance away. Then another)*
> *(slowly the space transforms into a star field as hundreds of tiny single white leds illuminate)*
> *(we are out here among the stars)*
> *(end)*[18]

As I hope my brief description of the performance has made evident, Schneider's dramaturgy challenges a number of normative dramatic principles related to both character and structure. His interest is in an affective dramaturgy that works on its audience at a visceral as well as an intellectual level. The combination of light, sound, image and action are designed to "mak[e] you feel with your body what the show attempts to make you understand with your mind."[19] This "feeling with the body" is important in that it bypasses a more conventional dramatic identificatory model, whilst at the same time drawing the audience into a parallel experience of disorientation.

17 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
18 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

That is, the affective dramaturgy shapes an experience for the audience akin to the very multiplied and simultaneous complex realities that are described by the scientific tracts. Repetition, circularity, multiplication, simultaneity and reversal characterize the work's construction. Or, as Emeline Jouve remarks:

> With the support of technology, Schneider offers the spectators a quantic multi-representation of time and space—which appear as times and spaces—instead of a traditional linear representation. This break from tradition gives the false impression of a defective representation of reality when in fact this approach brings us closer to the essence of reality.[20]

Jouve's remarks point to the complexity of the performance in its suturing together of the material and the virtual. As she writes, the effect is to dramatize the instability of reality itself. Moreover, the emphasis on viscerality suggests the knowingness or intelligence of the body itself—an intelligence that is sometimes at war with intellectual perception. Indeed, Schneider is engaged in an intense physical as well as conceptual struggle throughout the work.

While the dramaturgy is characterized by what Jouve calls the "reality D-fect,"[21] there is at the same time a steady progressive character arc of sorts, which follows A through an escalating ontological crisis that ends with the suggested end of A himself. In this way, the performance incorporates linearity within its multi-directional framework, testing the limits at which stable self-image begins to pull apart. In this sense, the relationship between technology and the self is shown to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, the performance celebrates technological possibility through Schneider-the-actor's use of wearable technology which integrates performance and technical operation and in so doing foregrounds him as a very active composer of his own self-images in the sense meant by Shipley. On the other, A is often shown to be captive to forces outside of his control, which continually interrupt his performance. For example, in the opening minutes of the performance A struggles to get a word out while lights flash on and off, and what are described variously in the script as "unrendered beeps," "clicks" and "word salad" dominate the sound scape.[22] There is a sense, particularly in the first half of the performance, of A being plugged in to forces that shape and direct his behavior. Reviewer Jennifer Krasinski, for example, describes A as a "fractured self

20 Emeline Jouve, "Doubleness on the New York Contemporary: Experimental Stage: Bodies and Technology," *Transatlantica*, 1| 2017, p. 8.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

22 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[...] that's jacked into invisible networks."[23] This description certainly articulates the fear that Causey describes when he writes of the common assertion in media studies that "there exists an unavoidable convergence of the human and machine wherein the *slave* machine dominates the *master* human subject."[24] Significantly, the "master" in the dramaturgy of *YOUARENOWHERE* is both embodied material *and* reproduction. That is, it is not a simple case of the human slave versus the machine master, rather it is the proliferation of the human—and the indistinguishability of different iterations of the self—that is both the dramatic problem and the most compelling aspect of the performance.

In the same way that such indistinction immediately complicates the master / slave dialectic, the directionality of the surveillance culture that the seemingly all-knowing double embodies is uncertain. Schneider's work cleverly dramatizes the struggle between images that a subject produces of themselves—the selfie—and the reproduction of images of the subject as a means of "social control that disempowers the subject" where "being visible means being under control by the agency that looks at us—even when that agency presents itself as 'looking after' us."[25] The performance's dominant scenographic image of the frame demonstrates this tension. The frame captures and contains the self in ways that provide coherence—for both the character and the audience—but that also entraps A. That is, the frame is not only a device for self-presentation, it is also a means of surveillance and capture wherein selfieness is shown as always already captive and compromised.

The hypothesis of the multiverse offers one way of thinking through the implication of the endless reproduction of images of the self in multiple parallel contexts and I suggest that there is a concord between the imagery of the "multiverse" in the play—most marked when the wall drops to reveal a parallel universe—and the nature of selfieness as a multimedia form. That is, the ever-branching self in the performance is structurally analogous to the proliferation of the self across digital networks. Indeed, the crisis that occurs when A is faced with B is very much a crisis of reproduction and identicality. The effect of this reproductive identicality is a kind of abjection; the non-differentiated instantiation of the self across multiple dimensions—the multiverse—is fundamentally alienating and isolating. Loneliness is therefore one of the most pronounced affects of the performance and is suggested from the outset when, amidst

23 Jennifer Krasinski, "Mortal Coil," *Art Forum*, January 31, 2015.

24 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

25 Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance," art. cit., p. 176.

the early series of false starts, the song *Lonesome Town* plays at half speed while A lip-syncs along.

> ...Goin' down to Lonesometown
> where the broken hearts s<frame drop>tay.
> Goin' down to Lonesometown
> to cry my troubles away.
> In the town of broken dreams
> the streets are filled with regret.
> Maybe down in Lonesometown
> I can learn to forget...[26]

Elsewhere A remarks:

> It makes me sad that I won't be close to more people in my life. It makes me sad that I can't be inside of other people and experience things like they do. It makes me sad that I am alone. It makes me sad that I am turning into a person who prefers to be alone.[27]

Aloneness is an effect of self-division. Seen from the perspective of quantum physics, the more one is sliced into multiple versions, the less one is able to manifest the presence of being that makes intimate connection possible. Hence, the desire to understand and be understood by others is over and over proved impossible.

Schneider frames the problem of the self-divided subject in a theatrical context. Indeed, the virtuality of theatre—its boundless pliability, its characteristic *emptiness*—makes it an image or analogue of the universe itself. Near the end of the work, A remarks:

> I've been here before, I've been at a show where I've realized that this was all set up for me and that even everyone in the audience was in on it, and I was the only one who didn't know, but it was a way it was the easiest way to let me know or to let my brain know or something that...it had died...and the easiest way to let me know about that was while I was watching something and my brain was outside of itself and, well, it was a little different because I was in the audience, and not the one who was on stage, which, come to think of it I don't totally remember how I got here, but this is kind of how I thought it would happen. Kind of like this. Where nothing really changed, but it happened...[28]

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26 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

A describes a kind of *déjà vu*—I've been in this audience before, I've been on this stage before. This disorientation arises from a collision of the states of looking and being-looked-at when the object that is being looked at is oneself. That is, through the use of the double—B—the performance explores what Causey calls the "uncanniness" of staring too long at one's own image,[29] a process whereby the self seems to become other. As suggested earlier, the metatheatrical components of *YOUARENOWHERE* demonstrate how theatre is well placed to take account of the affectivities or ontologies of selfieness, particularly in this case self-division and self-alienation. The explicit metatheatricality of Schneider's performance effectively depicts the inherent performativity of how contemporary subjectivity is distributed through the intertwined structures of selfieness and surveillance. Moreover, it points to the complex and contradictory aspects of self-staging, particularly when one retains very little agency within this process. While there is a profound exhilaration that comes from speeding through a network of multiple potentialities in Schneider's work, at the same time alienation and anxiety are produced by the relentlessness of this multi-directional movement. *You are now here, you are nowhere.*

I'LL NEVER LOVE AGAIN

Inspired by the writer's own teenage journals, Clare Barron's deeply personal play about first love, equal parts intoxication and devastation, cleverly defamiliarizes the autobiographical material. The play unfolds a range of dramaturgical transformations that take us from a diverse eleven-person choir of "Clares" in the first half—opening with the line "I no longer think it's disgusting to think about kissing," delivered at Bushwick Starr in New York by a middle-aged Asian woman (Mia Katigbak)—to dramatic realism in the second. My analysis of the play focuses on two areas. Firstly, returning to Shipley's definition of selfieness as "a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition," I wish to frame Barron's play as a dramaturgy of selfieness that stages the self through the production of multiple interconnected iterations of Barron's own experiences. Unlike the smoothness that Hogan attributes to normative presentations of the online self, Barron works with an aesthetic of rough disjunction and in this sense complicates our perceptions of selfieness. Secondly, and following, the play not only reflects or mimics selfieness, it also wryly critiques it. This is largely done through its emphasis on self-surveillance, and indeed the play itself may be understood as an act of

29 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

intense self-scrutiny. The exploration of self-surveillance takes on an especially feminist character in its focus on body-image and self-image, and on sexual and affective power relations between women and men. As such, I position the play's dramaturgy as located within the paradigm of fourth-wave feminism in as much, as Ruxandra Looft suggests, "a distinctive trait of the fourth wave movement is it reliance and usage of technology and social media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders."[30] Ultimately, I will argue, the play deploys a strategy of evasion and disguise to mitigate and complicate its personal "over-sharing." As with Schneider, I begin my discussion with a brief description of the work.

The object of the narrator's affection is Josh. The choir, in alternating first person address that includes sung and spoken material, relate Barron's story of falling in love with and becoming Josh's girlfriend, then the complete emotional devastation when he ends the relationship. The writing is filled with the emotional energy of teenage girlhood—from infatuation to deep despair—and in this sense is very funny. The music (by composer and music director Stephanie Johnstone) reflects this energy, and is perhaps best described as emotionally astute indie pop, skewering the baroque aspect of an author scoring her own teenage trauma, whilst at the same time using the simple arrangements of voice to striking effect—my own heart soared and plummeted along with the singers. With the musical accompaniment underpinning the storytelling, we see Clare go from the highs of her first kisses with Josh—"when he touched me like that on my side it was like roots sprung up out of the ground and grew up both my legs and through my whole body and then a tree came out of my head and exploded into a lightning bolt"[31]—to preliminary disappointments when there is no follow through: "Romance is dead. Romance is dead for me FOREVER."[32] Barron's play does more than simply divide her teenage chronicles into a choric score, however. Just when the audience is comfortably settled into the conceit of the choir, the dramaturgy shifts and the choral presentation segues into an uncomfortably raw and hyper-realistic dramatic scene that shows Clare in a disturbing early sexual encounter. At Bushwick Starr, Barron herself played the role of Clare. This dramaturgical shift from the wry ironic choir carrying the full weight of the storytelling to the author literally exposing herself on stage was a sharp jolt, as if a traumatic memory had insisted itself upon the play.

30 Ruxandra Looft, "#girlgaze: Photography, Fourth Wave Feminism, and Social Media Advocacy," *Continuum*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2017, p. 894.

31 Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, 2016, unpublished playscript, p. 4.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

After Barron's scene, which comes at the end of Act II, the dramaturgy shifts once more. The final setting is an office break room in a law firm, with Clare, now a young lawyer, played at Bushwick Starr by a Black actress, Nana Mensah. The last act plays out, for the most part, in a fairly conventional realist mode, as various office workers come in and out of the break room. A twelve-year-old female character, Oona is introduced (played by child actor Oona Montandon). She appears to be a version of who Clare might have been had she taken the advice that she now offers to the younger woman. And there is yet another Clare, played by a choir member near the end of the third act, who describes a broken Clare:

> ...I stopped washing my body
> I stopped brushing my hair
> I could smell my pussy everywhere I went
> Layer upon layer of secretions and sweat
> I masked it all with perfume
> And big box-sack dresses that I stopped washing
> I slept on the floor in a nest with my cats
> I only loved people who gave me food
> And the love only lasted as long as the eating...[33]

In contrast with the staccato frantic anxiety of Schneider's text, there is a much deeper sense of melancholy at play here, as well as focus on the materiality of the body, as the disintegrating self is given a deeply visceral quality in Barron's poetic text. Moreover, where Schneider's world explodes outwards, Barron's collapses inward.

The play finally draws together a collision of possible Clares: not only do we have the eleven versions of Clare from choric sections, and then the real Clare herself, but also the young speculative and fictional Clare in the form of Oona, the hypothesis of a professional Clare, the lament for a Clare completely consumed by failure and grief. The final language of the play goes to young Oona who, at a concert anticipating the Mayan apocalypse (a recurring image in the play), exuberantly declares her beliefs:

> The ONLY THING I KNOW
> Is that I love soccer!
> And softball!
> And swimming!
> And volleyball!

33 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

And color!
And passion!
And risks!
And devouring life!
And dreaming and really believing with every
ounce it could come true!
And crying!
And wild fantasies!
And the strength of the human spirit!
And something so great we can't understand it!
And love!
And sacrifice!
And sports!
And sports!
And sports!!!!![34]

This sense of exaltation in Oona's speech lifts the play from the melancholic (albeit darkly funny) affect previously described, providing a sense of hope for the future.

Significantly, as suggested at the outset, there is a metamodern both/and quality to *I'll Never Love Again*; it is at the same time ironic and sincere, deeply knowing and deeply vulnerable. I suggest that this oscillatory quality allows Barron to provide a feminist critique of selfieness through a nuanced dramaturgical approach that acknowledges both the gains and trade-offs of female visibility in contemporary culture. In more theatrically-specific terms, the play's oscillation may be described as between Brechtian alienation, which effects a critique of "selfieness," and realism which takes us inside how this cultural paradigm *feels* as lived-in-the-body, and it is in this oscillation that I am principally interested. It *is* possible to characterize the play's movement between different dramatic modes as a strategy of alienation in itself, that is, a way of concurrently historicizing the dramaturgy, the writer *and* her self-subject. However, I suggest that Barron's concurrent employment of different dramatic modes reveals the need to revisit or at least more contemporarily nuance the deployment of Brechtian paradigms in discourses of feminist theatre practice.[35] In her landmark 1988

34 Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 60-61. In the original unpublished script, the font size increases exponentially in this excerpt from 12 point to 47 point.

35 Examples of feminist engagement with Brecht include: Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1988, p. 82-94; Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Handbook*, London, Routledge,

essay, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism", Elin Diamond proposed a "re-radicalization" of Brecht's theories that challenge what she describes as a "typical Marxian blindness toward gender relations."[36] Whilst there is not scope in this essay to "re-re-radicalize" this significant feminist scholarship in a way that brings it fully into the 21st-century context, it is worth remarking on the relationship between some of the distinctive features of fourth-wave feminism and their contextual (historical) situation, and the dramaturgy that Barron employs. My principal point of interest is, as noted, in the ways in which Barron (in a metamodern sense) pivots between "offering the illusion of lived experience"[37] in such a way that we are encouraged to substitutively *feel* that experience in all its uncomfortability, and its deconstructive opposite.

In the same way that fourth-wave feminism is strongly associated with its digital and transnational dimensions, the most distinctive dramaturgical feature of the play is indeed its transitivity, which is both structural and embodied: not only does Clare's story move between bodies, but Barron herself (in 2016 at least) also involved her own body on stage. In a press interview, Barron explained the choice to use the choir to narrate the first section of the play as being about "letting the language [of the play] live in the bodies of many different actors so it didn't become about this singular person's experience."[38] Unlike the imitative or exacting repetition in the case of Schneider's piece, here repetition is highly differentiated. Indeed, this is a tactical move on Barron's part that protects the author by constructing a virtual private network of sorts that masks her identity; self-image is opaque, evasive, changeable. That is, Barron's self-story is dissected for public viewing and is in this regard recognizably selfie-like, yet at the same time the intimate history is delivered as capable of embodiment by seemingly anybody, and the linear narrative established in the first half, even if delivered by multiple actors (the various choir members), displaced by a series of dramatic alternates. The through-line of the work, therefore, is not principally established through the narrative or even characters, but through the transmission of an economy of feeling from one dramatic mode to the next.

This economy of feeling, which is conveyed through the careful arrangement of song, image and story fragments, is structured in such a way that it echoes elements

1999; J. Ellen Gainor, "Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavsky and Performance," *Theatre Topics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2002, p. 163-175.

36 Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory," art. cit., p. 84 and p. 83.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

38 Clare Barron quoted by Allegra Hobbs, "The Singing Journal-ist: Musical Draws on Teenage Diary," *Brooklyn Paper*, February 24, 2016.

of what Bernie Hogan calls the "exhibitional" dimension to online presentations of the self.[39] The play curates (or over-shares) the artifacts of Barron's teenage years, and the effect is not unlike scrolling through a personal newsfeed, dredging through the timeline to the oldest most embarrassing posts. In his analysis of online sites, Hogan describes the role of content curators—sites such as Facebook, for example—whose job it is to filter, order and make searchable the events posted by users. These curators cover over the chaos and fundamental impersonality of the digital universe. Hogan writes that in contrast to these effective operators, "Bad curation is either overwhelming or unexpectedly irrelevant."[40] Barron, acting as her own curator, performs what I playfully call an act of deliberately "bad" curation. Her play takes the contemporary concept of the exhibited self—the self as virtual commodity—but strips away the smooth veneer of digital display. We see this stripping away (which might perhaps be usefully contrasted with Schneider's splintering) in the monologue cited above from the broken Clare (now once again delivered impersonally by a choir member), which opens by focusing on the disintegration of the body itself: "My dopey nipples / The rogue, random hairs / The way my skin was already falling down and becoming / less elastic..." Bad curation in Barron's play translates as a dramaturgy of messy feelings, and misperforming bodies.

The disintegration described above is the inverse of the desire that fuels the first part of the play, which is full of the nervous joy of discovering new feelings and sensations, and at the same time, a sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of these feelings. Clare describes wanting to disappear from the world and find a place inside another person, a sentiment similar to that expressed by Schneider's A, though much more sexualized in its expression of longing.

> I want to see you tomorrow. I want to talk to you. I want to be with you tonight. I want to feel open next to you and naked next to you. I want to be exposed in your presence. Raw in your presence. I want you to hold a knife to my throat. I want to reach inside you. Crawl inside you. Sleep inside your flesh. Breathe through your mouth, your nostrils, feel your chest rise and fall as you sigh.[41]

Her desire for Josh finally empties her out; that is, it unseats her subjectivity. Shortly before the breakup, the choir intones: "Why am I so still tonight? Why am I so sad tonight? Why am I so depleted tonight?" This dullness follows shortly before the

39 Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media," art. cit., p. 378.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
41 Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

breakup, where desire is replaced by "overwhelming sadness,"[42] the body falls apart, personhood falls apart. The song that follows Josh's rejection of Clare, which occurs shortly after the passage just cited, is given great urgency in the stage directions: "The choir sings their bruised, bloody hearts out," with the lyrics: "I am uprooted. I am beaten. I am bruised. I am dying."[43] Clare later states that "I'm so quiet it's like I don't exist at all."[44] The play is characterized throughout by Clare's affective yearning not just for another body but moreover to fully feel—and own—her own body. That is, there is a dialectical (oscillatory) tension in the work between releasing individuated experience across a collective of bodies and selves, and the desire to constitute a self that has clear and certain borders.

If the multi-iterative choir of the first part of the play evokes an ironic social networking of the self, albeit by anachronistically analogue means, then the shift to dramatic realism that follows exposes the bare, raw and painful experience that underlies this. The scene that features Barron focuses on a sexual encounter within which consent is uncertain.

GUY – I said, I want to fuck you. I find you very sexy.
CLARE – (*mumbles, stumbles, etc.*) Oh. Yeah, um I want to, too.
GUY – We don't have to if you don't want to.
CLARE – No, I want to. (*They return to furiously making out.*)
Just so you know, I haven't really done…that much…
GUY – Really?
CLARE – Yeah.
GUY – I don't believe you.
CLARE – It's true. I mean, I've done a lot, but not like…stuff.
GUY – I feel like you're very experienced.
[…]
(He starts to go down on her.)
GUY – Is this okay?
CLARE – Yes
GUY – Does it feel good? *(She makes a face like what the fuck.)*
CLARE – Yes
GUY *(coming back up for air)* – What'd you say?

42 This phrase is seen in the image on page 18 in Barron's script. Also visible in images projected during the 2016 season at Bushwick Starr.
43 Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
44 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Clare – I said, it feels good.

(*Clare squeezes him with her legs. They start to wrestle. He hits her really hard across the face. He hits her really hard across the face again.*) [45]

The discomfort of the scene extends from the sequence that preceded it where members of the choir "project grotesque drawings from Clare's journal onto the walls." [46] These drawings, which crudely sketch out the author, are the opposite of the airbrushed selfie. Completely un-ironic and painful to look at, with the repeated phrase "sadness overwhelming" appearing image after image, they draw attention to the distinction between the self as experienced and the self as presented or perceived by others.

As suggested earlier, part of what makes the play so compelling is how it evinces not only the melancholy affectivity of selfieness, but, moreover, how it relates this to what Paula van Beek calls the "self-surveillance" component of selfie culture. [47] Self-surveillance in the play is realized on both the macro and micro level: the entire play is an elaborate act of self-examination, and contained within this are various forms of such reflection. The play grows out of the diary and its accompanying drawings and self-portraits, but extends to include paradoxically fictionalized autobiographical reflection. Read from a feminist perspective, selfie culture may be understood to offer enhanced opportunities for female visibility and indeed fourth-wave feminism capitalizes on these opportunities. Derek Murray, for example, suggests that selfies constitute a "radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body." [48] Yet, at the same time, this visibility is highly culturally regulated. Selfie culture is not simply constitutive of individual selves—it is a realm that is both constructed and populated by corporate and other interests as much as it is a peer-to-peer "social network." In "real-life," visibility as a mode of social exchange relies, as Brighenti explains, on reciprocity—I see you and you, in return, see me. However in the virtual or networked realm, visibility is not only separate—we are not together in our seeing of one another—it is also often asymmetrical in terms of power. [49] Consequently, as Sarah Burke points out, "we've arrived at a moment in which commercial tactics

45 *Ibid.*, p. 23-27.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

47 Paula van Beek, *Self-surveillance: Performing the Plurality of my Feminine Experience of Self*, Master's Thesis, RMIT University, 2018.

48 Derek Murray quoted in Paula van Beek, *Self-surveillance*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

49 Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance," art. cit., p. 176.

can easily be made to look like a form of feminist resistance."[50] That is, selfie culture as much controls behavior as it promotes self-expression—there are pre-prescribed scripts for female self-expression to follow.

Barron's play presents a challenge to such scripting through its mirroring of the tension described above, oscillating dialectically between hyper-visibility and invisibility, sharing and disguise, recognition and misrecognition. Reflecting on the rise of "selfie feminism," Burke remarks:

> [P]erhaps we've reached a point at which young women's idea of female empowerment can be achieved through an aesthetic formula—one that champions feelings, insecurity, social media, selfies, and all things typically used to prove that young women are irrational, unintelligent, and self-obsessed.[51]

The implication of Burke's statement is that these "fourth-wave" feminists embrace and reclaim the characteristics that have been formerly attributed to them—"irrational, unintelligent, and self-obsessed." Certainly, the affectivity of Barron's play and its emotional rather than narrative dramaturgy reflects this disposition. Significantly, the rawness of the play adds depth to the approach, exposing the real trauma of insecurity and acknowledging the very real limits to and constraints on empowerment within selfie culture.

To return to Brecht, it is perhaps then in the historicity of self-surveillance that we find what is so particularly contemporary about Barron's dramaturgy in this play and also central to its feminist approach. On the face of it, the play exposes the deep anxieties that underlie a culture so fixated on self-presentation; the "over-sharing" is part of the joke—and the pleasure—of the play. But this kind of knowing critique is equally met, as I have suggested, by deep feeling—a mode that is closer to the "weeping with" of "dramatic theatre" that Brecht criticizes. The scene in which Barron herself played the role of the sexually coerced "Clare," for example, was like a punch to the gut, taking me back to similarly queasy encounters from my own youth. It is precisely the way in which the play brushes so closely up against the real through a realist dramatic mode in this scene that gives it its charge. Then, from these two dialectical extremes (the choir-as-multiple-self and the writer-as-originary-self), we take an oblique turn to recognizable dramatic realism but with unrecognized characters. Barron's dramaturgy seems to suggest the political necessity of both deeply felt identification

50 Sarah Burke, "Crying on Camera: 'Fourth Wave Feminism' and the Threat of Commodification," *Open Space*, May 17, 2016.

51 *Ibid.*

and intellectual critique, and indeed for a "jamming" of the system that takes place when these differential dramaturgical operating systems are uncomfortably sutured together. Certainly, theatrical feminist scholarship has recently begun to reappraise realism, Elaine Aston, for example, has recently written about the political potential of *realisms*.[52] Nonetheless, Barron's fourth-wave feminist dramaturgy of selfieness is notable for the sense in which it seeks to enhance the visibility and complexity of the female "irrational" at the same time as it deploys mechanisms of evasion and disguise.

And at the center of this is the female body itself, in its beauty, its pain, its awkwardness, its vulnerability, its strength and commitment. Barron's text is much more concerned with bodily matter than Schneider's, with smell, with touch, with sensation and *feeling*. Feelings are fierce and formidable forces in Barron's play, they are variously out of control and self-devouring. But they are also the place from which hope springs. Through privileging the sensational life of the female body Barron does more than offer a critique of cultural representations and expectations of young women in the twenty-first century. Rather, the dramaturgy produces a powerful chimera that evades easy capture.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FOR A SELF WITHOUT EXPECTING TO FIND IT

In their discussion of metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker describe the paradoxicality of its oscillatory character: "Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find."[53] Galerie Tanja Wagner has elsewhere described this "looking for a truth without expecting to find it."[54] In the case of Schneider and Barron's works, I suggest that they are looking for a *self* without expecting to find it. The disaggregated selves in these works reflect our contemporary networked environments of selfies and surveillance, and oscillate between the emancipatory potential of shaking off fixed identity, and the desire for the material and the singular in the face of virtual multiplicities. The affectivity of this process integrates both the drive and optimism

52 Elaine Aston, "Room for Realisms?," in Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (eds), *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 20.

53 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," art. cit., p. 5.

54 Galerie Tanja Wagner quoted in Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," art. cit., p. 7.

that comes from the possibility of gaining self-understanding, and the melancholic despair of realizing that such knowledge is always out of reach.

The oscillation that marks the metamodern does not aim for reconciliation. As Vermeulen and van den Akker remark, metamodern "practices set out to fulfill a mission or task they know they will not, can never, and should never accomplish: the unification of two opposed poles."[55] While Schneider and Barron's works do concern themselves with how one might be both singular and multiple at the same time, more importantly, they seek agency within the constitutive networks in which they operate. This agency may profit from the dispersal of selfhood in the sense that this allows for the kind of subterfuge that Barron's play performs, a creative evasion that responds to the surveillances that dominate selfie culture. That is, the very act of "looking for a self" is itself a strategic move, a cover story that allows for agency by paradoxically asserting the self through acts of foreclosure and denial.

Lastly, as noted earlier, when Matthew Causey writes of the double in contemporary mediatized performance, he relates this double for the most part to virtual / screen iterations of the actor, which the actor is then confronted with. It is through this confrontation that their subjectivity (and, by extension, the audience's) is challenged. Significant to both Schneider and Barron's works is the fact that their double/s are material rather than screen-based; the doppelganger in the former, and the choir in the latter. As I have argued, both works can be firmly located within a 21st-century mediated and mediatized paradigm, and both are attentive to the ways in which such technoculture places pressure on the subjective certainty of individuals. However, by using real bodies as doubles in this context, a certain claim is made for the agential authority of embodied selves. Indeed, it is especially significant that the artists' own bodies feature in these works. The appearance of Barron in *I'll Never Love Again* points to a reversal of sorts of the paradigm Causey articulates. That is, it is the appearance of the real that upsets the double so that in this instance, what he identifies as "uncanniness"[56] lies not with the simulation, the sign, but the simulated, the referent. The dramaturgical pivots in each of the works—the reveal of the B-side in Schneider's piece, and the replacement of the choir with dramatic realism in Barron's—help to effect this shift in perception, and at the same time illustrate the oscillatory dynamic that underpins the plays, and which I have suggested is helpfully understood to be metamodern in character.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

56 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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Notice

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Abstract

This article considers the impact of selfie culture on constructions of dramatic subjectivity in two works by young American theatre makers: Andrew Schneider's *WEARENOWHERE* and Clare Barron's *I'll Never Love Again*. I suggest that the nature of solo dramatic storytelling in each of these works is profoundly affected both by social media paradigms and by the surveillances that attend them. I explain how their dramaturgies reflect the sense in which contemporary selves, via social media and other technologies, are available for endless re-presentation and reconfiguration. The attitude towards disaggregated selfhood in these works is deeply ambivalent, however, and I wish to frame this ambivalence as "metamodern" in character.

Key words

meta-theatricality; meta-modernism; dramatic subjectivity; autobiographical theatre; solo theatre; new media dramaturgy; social media; Clare Barron; Andrew Schneider

Résumé

Cet article explore l'impact de la culture du selfie sur la construction de la subjectivité dramatique dans deux œuvres de jeunes artistes américains : *WEARENOWHERE* d'Andrew Schneider et *I'll Never Love Again* de Clare Barron. Dans chacune de ces œuvres, la nature de la narration dramatique en solo est profondément affectée par les paradigmes des réseaux sociaux, et par la surveillance qui en découle. Ces dramaturgies reflètent le sentiment d'un moi contemporain susceptible d'être re-présenté et reconfiguré à l'infini, en vertu des réseaux sociaux et autres technologies. La façon dont ces œuvres abordent ce moi désagrégé reste, cependant, profondément ambiguë : une ambivalence que je propose d'analyser comme « métamoderne ».

Mots-clés

métathéâtralité ; métamodernisme ; subjectivité dramatique ; théâtre autobiographique ; théâtre solo ; dramaturgie des nouveaux médias ; réseaux sociaux ; Clare Barron ; Andrew Schneider

"BLOND, BLUE-EYED BOY" TURNED "DARK AND DUSKY": WHY CAN'T EDWARD ALBEE'S NICK BE BLACK?

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On May 17, 2017, a short *Facebook post* issued by Portland director Michael Streeter on his wall sparked a vehement controversy among American theatre circles. It went as follows:

> I am furious and dumbfounded. The Edward Albee Estate needs to join the 21st Century. I cast a black actor in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? [sic]. The Albee Estate called and said I need to fire the black actor and replace him with a white one. I refused, of course. They have withheld the rights.

Consequently, the production that was to be performed at the Shoebox theatre in Portland was cancelled. Arguably Edward Albee's most famous play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stages the often-violent verbal invectives of two couples of inebriated academics during a late night gathering after a faculty party. According to Streeter, Damien Geter, the African-American actor, had been cast as the young, ambitious professor in a deliberate attempt to subvert the race politics of the play, as he explained in an email addressed to a journalist working for the website *Jezebel* and reproduced in an article devoted to the controversy:

> This was a color conscious choice, not a colorblind choice. I believe casting Nick as black adds depth to the play. The character is an up and comer. He is ambitious and tolerates a lot of abuse in order to get ahead. I see this as emblematic of African Americans in 1962, the time the play was written. The play is filled with invective from Martha and particularly George towards Nick. With each insult that happens in the play, the audience will wonder, 'Are George and Martha going to go there re. racial slurs?'[1]

Yet, it is specifically the way the decision would reverberate on the audience's perception of the iconic couple that prompted the estate's refusal to support the non-traditional casting of the play. Indeed, a couple of months after the cancellation

1 Hazel Cills, "Did the Edward Albee Foundation Deny Rights to a Play Because the Production Cast a Black Actor?," *Jezebel*, May 18, 2017 (updated May 19, 2017).

of the show, another production featuring black actors cast for the parts of George and Martha was approved. It provided Jonathan Lomma, the agent representing the estate, with an opportunity to clarify both decisions and to prove that they were not necessarily inconsistent. An excerpt from the statement he issued was reproduced on the page of the online version of *Playbill* devoted to the debates:

> While it has been established that non-Caucasian actors in different combinations have played all the roles in the play at various times with Edward's approval, he was consistently wary of directors attempting to use his work to provide their own commentary by, for instance, casting only Nick as non-white, which essentially transforms George and Martha into older white racists, which is not what Edward's play is about.[2]

Lomma's clarification explicitly posits the casting choice as a misinterpretation of the text against which copyright provides a legal safeguard. If we follow Lomma's logic, the agent's duty would be to protect Albee's work against the ghastly evil of "directors attempting to use his work to provide their own commentary." Therefore, on grounds of artistic integrity, the decision very pointedly seeks to restrain the expression of the director's subjectivity, here depicted as coming in the way of the audience's engagement with the play as literary text. Besides, Nick's characterization as black is not dismissed *per se* (because it misrepresents Nick as a character) but rather shunned because of the light it sheds on other characters (embodied by white actors). The mere presence of a black body onstage would therefore completely reshuffle the power dynamics of the play, as if the skin color of the young academic ethically smeared the middle-aged couple by endowing their violent language with an added layer of racial meaning. Additionally, this declaration signals a wish to endorse productions in which the ethnicity of the characters would not change the meaning of the play, but just be a parameter among many others. By standing by non-traditional casting choices only to the extent that they don't affect "what the play is about," the estate professes itself open to colorblind casting but opposed to a color-conscious production, in which the discourse about race may supersede other theatrical stakes of the play. This article aims to examine the interpretative potential of both the casting choice and its legal response, in an attempt to uncover their political significance and study how they resonate with the literary potency of one of the most famous plays of American theatre. In order to see how this controversy allows us to locate race on the twenty-first century American stage, several threads have to be unraveled, including Twitter threads and

2 Adam Hetrick, "Albee Estate Clarifies Position on Casting Controversy Surrounding Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," *Playbill*, August 24, 2017.

strings of Facebook comments. These scathing digital exchanges protract online the contractual negotiations at the heart of theatre making. This paper seeks to examine the legal and esthetic consequences of this virtual dramaturgy whose bellicose rhetoric and emotional intensity are part and parcel of the theatrical experience.

"WHOSE" AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? THEATRICAL AUTHORSHIP IN QUESTION

The many online articles, comments and blog posts that took a stand on the Edward Albee estate's decision to block the production testify to the vitality of the debates surrounding theatrical authorship. If the immemorial question: "To whom does theatre belong?" is of course not to be solved in a few posts and pages, the terms and claims of the stakeholders of the conflict shed new light on the intellectual and economic context in which theatre is made and on the relations of power that tie together all the participants in this collaborative art form. Therefore, this study will first focus on the issue of ownership of the literary text both from a legal and artistic perspective insofar as it offers an insight into the conditions of production of twenty-first century American theatre.

DELINEATING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

One first striking aspect of the dispute sparked by the decision is the fact that no one questioned the legal legitimacy of the estate's choice. Indeed, withholding the rights to a play by arguing that it disrespects the author's intentions is something that Albee's estate was absolutely entitled to do. Before a production is approved, the cast legally has to be submitted to the playwright or his legal representatives. This requirement is to be understood within the context of the legal counseling provided by the Dramatists Guild, a professional organization created in 1912 (then called the Author's League of America) that gathers more than 7,000 playwrights. Sometimes described as the closest thing to a union that dramatists have, the Guild provides support to authors when it comes to negotiating contracts or advocating their work. According to its mission statement, the Guild "assists dramatists in developing both their artistic and business skills."[3] This includes providing contracts that "embody the Guild's overarching objectives of protecting the dramatist's control over the content of their work, and

3 "About" tab on the website of the *Dramatists Guild*, "Our Mission" and "Our History" sections.

ensuring that the dramatist is compensated for each use of their work in a way which will encourage them to continue writing for the living stage."[4] Consequently, within the terms of Albee's contracts, the estate's decision is perfectly legal, a fact that has been plainly acknowledged by both the director of the production Michael Streeter and the performer Damien Geter. Therefore, in an article published on the website *BuzzFeed*, the latter foregrounds his criticism of the estate's choice on moral responsibility rather than on legal subtleties: "'Legally they have every right to do what they did.' Most experts agree that playwrights and their estates can approve or reject casting for any reason, including race. However [...], 'It's the ethics of it that I'm concerned with.'"[5]

Even if copyright laws in the United States traditionally tended to focus more on the rights of the producer of a performance than the moral rights associated with the French author's rights,[6] it has nonetheless become more and more customary for

American playwrights to maintain a tight control over the production of their work. Dramatists Play Service, the publishing company of the Guild, which holds the rights to the amateur productions of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (professional productions are handled by Samuel French) issues a warning at the beginning of each published play, this acknowledgement represents a good indicator of the status of the author of the theatrical work. It takes typographical disposition to ensure that the author's name will be advertised "as sole and exclusive author of the play"[7] and that "[t]he name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately prior to the title and in size of type equal to the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the play." The capitalization of the noun "Author," a legal convention, sets the author apart making them more visible, in a competitive environment where only a handful of dramatists can live solely off of their royalties. The typography reflects the will to assert that the Author is the most crucial participant in the theatrical process and the text specifies that: "No person, firm or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent that that accorded the author."

These requirements—warranted by the Dramatists Guild—mainly entail constraints associated with publicity and communication. However, all Albee plays include the addition of a further capitalized note on the same page:

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4 *Ibid.*

5 Louis Peitzman, "This Actor Is At The Heart Of A Casting Controversy Over Race," *BuzzFeed*, May 23, 2017.

6 See Jules-Marc Baudel, "Le droit d'auteur français et le copyright américain : les enjeux", *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 78, Oct. 1998, pp. 48-59.

7 The excerpts reproduced here are to be found on the first page of every play published by Dramatist Play Service.

> ALL EDWARD ALBEE PLAYS MUST BE PERFORMED IN THEIR ENTIRETY. NO CUTTINGS OR EXCERPTS MAY BE PERFORMED, AND NO CHANGES MAY BE MADE TO THE CHARACTER, CHARACTERIZATIONS OR LOCALES.

This addendum, that does not appear in plays written by other playwrights, is meant to defend the textual integrity of the play but the references to characters and characterization provide the Albee estate with the opportunity to have a say on all the casting choices. When transposed to a French stage these legal dispositions give way to some trans-linguistic visual oddities in the communication strategies, as exemplified by the following screenshot of the website of the Théâtre du Rond-Point, which advertises a production of *At Home at the Zoo* (**fig. 1**). The disquieting presence of the mark of the English possessive seems grammatically irrelevant and out of place when inserted within the foreign linguistic fabric of the translated communication materials.

1. Screenshot of the website of the Théâtre du Rond-Point advertising a production of *At Home at the Zoo*

Indeed, along with playwrights like Samuel Beckett or Arthur Miller, Albee was famous for maintaining a very tight control over how his plays were produced. In 1984, he refused to have *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* performed with an all-male cast and he could not stand his play *Three Tall Women* being interpreted by short actresses, as Abbie Van Nostrand, the director of corporate communications at Samuel French reports for the website *American Theatre*:

> "The Albee estate requires professional producers to submit production proposals, which include intended venue, casting, and other artistic elements," said Abbie Van Nostrand, the director of corporate communications at Samuel French, who handles the licensing of Albee's plays. When Albee was alive, he was notoriously particular about how his plays were presented and who could perform in them; it's even been reported that he requested approval of the heights of the actresses cast in *Three Tall Women*.[8]

It comes as no surprise then that the estate's decision was backed by the Dramatists Guild, which stressed the necessity to abide by the author's wishes when it comes to casting and drew a parallel with non-white authors who requested their plays to be cast with people of color. The website *Deadline* reproduced an excerpt of the statement issued by Tari Stratton, the Dramatist Guild's director of education and outreach:

> The Guild asserts that it is a playwright's fundamental right to approve of casting choices to ensure they reflect his or her authorial intent. We assert this right for Edward Albee and his estate, just as we have asserted it on behalf of Lloyd Suh and his work *Jesus In India* and Katori Hall and her play *The Mountaintop*. We also assert the right of playwrights to specify diverse casting for work that is not demographically specific. Playwrights own their work, and therefore have the right to make decisions about all aspects of its presentation.
>
> At the same time, the Guild is actively engaged in conversations and initiatives aimed at making the American theater a more inclusive place with greater opportunities for all playwrights and lifting the barriers that have for far too long severely limited opportunities for far too many. We remain firm in our belief that our art form can't achieve its full potential until it embraces our cultural and demographic diversity.[9]

Whereas the first paragraph foregrounds the absolute preeminence of the author's will and intent, the second paragraph voices an unease probably related to the racial content of the decision. Of course, the references to playwrights such as Suh and Hall are meant to counter the idea that the estate's motivation may have been racist, as the Guild's commitment to "authorial intent" has also reinforced the presence of non-white actors onstage. Yet, as noted by Damien Geter in an interview to *Oregon*

8 Diep Tran, "When a Writer's Rights Aren't Right: The 'Virginia Woolf' Casting Fight," *American Theatre*, May 22, 2017.

9 Jeremy Gerard, "Who's Afraid Of Edward Albee? Dramatists Guild Backs 'Virginia Woolf' Playwright In Casting Dispute," *Deadline*, May 22, 2017.

Live, the estate's decision definitely holds political significance as far as the Shoebox theatre production is concerned: "The thing for me is, they kept making reference to the physical attributes of Nick. But they didn't tell me I couldn't play the role because I'm bald ... so to me, that makes a difference." [10] Indeed, Geter's skepticism is rooted in the fact that to allude to the "physical attributes" of the characters denies the specificity of race, which, unlike baldness, is a social construct used to legitimize mechanisms of violence and oppression. Besides, denying the rights to the production deprived a racialized individual of an employment opportunity in a competitive work environment. One may also argue that it stifles the artistic voice and vision of the production that sought to introduce an added layer of meaning to a play that has been performed on many occasions very faithfully to the author's intent.

AUTHORIAL INTENT: THE YARDSTICK OF THEATRICAL AUTHORSHIP?

Whereas in the present case the legal lines are rather easy to draw, the estate's decision also posits the fact that the author of the play is the one and only source of theatrical authority. To a certain extent, the estate's attempt to fend off "directors attempting to use Albee's work to provide their own commentary" presupposes a very limited input of the artistic team of a production in the meaning-making process of theatre performance. It presents the director, cast and technicians as mere mediators, go-betweens connecting the Word of the author to the audience, with as little interference as possible. Given the necessarily polyphonic nature of the dramatic genre, this conception of theater plays down the artistic significance of the performance. Edward Albee himself would often say that the ideal way to access a play was to read it. In 1965, in an article entitled "Ad Libs on Theater," he claimed:

> When will we return the theater to the audience? Well, I don't think we should, frankly. Does the tree that falls in the forest, nobody hearing it, make any sound? I've always thought it did. The theater may well be the possession of the audience but the playwright is not. The play is not. [11]

Yet, the centrality of the playwright is far from being obvious. In an article entitled "Is There a Text on This Stage? Theatre / Authorship / Interpretation," Gerald

10 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," *Oregon Live*, May 26, 2017 (updated January 09, 2019).

11 Edward Albee, *Stretching My Mind*, New York, Carroll & Graf, 2005, p. 32.

Rabkin examines how the gap between written text and performance complicates the genealogy of authority on the theatrical stage and notes that since Antonin Artaud's seminal idea that the central participant in the theatrical moment is "the person who controls the direct handling of the stage," many directors, authors, ensembles, have qualified what Rabkin labels "text privilege." Therefore, the performance allows for the emergence of new interpretations, and the text becomes the fertile ground on which an artistic vision is sown:

> The function of the playwright was spread among members of the ensemble or subsumed by the director-auteur. Or—as in the early work of Grotowski and Schechner—a classic originary text became the unprivileged ground from which a radical performance text was created. [12]

To that respect, director Michael Streeter lamented the fact that the estate's decision froze the play in the fixity of its univocal interpretation, dooming it to inescapably remain "a museum piece." [13] The unquestionable fixity that the phrase "museum piece" suggests underlines the almost sacred nature of a play that definitely belongs to the American theatrical canon. When he was alive, Albee constantly underlined the necessity to maintain the integrity of the text, which would warrant its status as a literary work rather than as a mere script designed to be used for performances and discarded afterward.

In the case of the Shoebox theatre controversy, the issue is further complicated by the fact that the Albee estate withheld the rights posthumously, less than a year after Edward Albee's death. Therefore, it is a legal decision that is consistent with Albee's ruling principles in terms of casting, but one that was made once he could no longer approve or disapprove of it. As the debate around the decision gained momentum on social media, one of its most striking aspects was the inflammatory rhetoric used to refer to Albee as a person. Many commentators on *Twitter* and *Facebook* seemed to lament the fact that Albee's rigidity when it came to handling his rights had not died with him. Many mentioned Albee's curt personality in extremely violent terms. A few months after his death, a monstrous ghost was revived on the hyperbolic stage of online opinion through anecdotes relating unpleasant interactions with the playwright, and comments on his casting choices. In the cathartic outpour of social

12 Gerald Rabkin, "Is There a Text on This Stage? Theatre / Authorship / Interpretation," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2/3, 1985, p. 143.

13 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," art. cit.

media venom, the distorted, ghastly figure of an old white racist misogynist was brought back to life through vivid and colorful language. Here is a short sample of some of the most scathing epithets used to refer to the dramatist. In the comments to Streeter's initial post, Albee was described as a "total jerk," a "pisser," a "nit-picking asshole." Some virulent commentators used oxymoronic structures to both hail his talent and disparage his personality such as "genius prick" or the enumerative "OCD, ego maniacal, control freak, narcissistic genius." On *Facebook*, one user even regretted the fact that "assholery never dies."[14] Thus, like Hamlet's ghost, Albee almost seemed to have risen from the dead to speak his controversial posthumous truth. In the comments to Streeter's post, the estate's decision was referred to as a way to abide by "the spirit of Albee," and the posthumous nature of the controversy did little to restore the image of the deceased playwright. Indeed, the acute dramatization of the playwright's reputation and personality on social networks led to what one could be tempted to call "post mortem characterization." It seemed as if the retrospective anger triggered by the estate's choice reverberated on the dead playwright, burying him in a memorial of digital hatred and exacerbated personality features: enshrined in digital fabric, the supposedly acrimonious playwright became a stock character, a caricature of the type you only meet onstage.

ALBEE'S RACE POLITICS: OBSCURING WHITENESS

The attacks against Albee's harsh personality, however, should not overshadow the centrality of the issue of race in the controversy. The claims of racism need to be addressed by considering both the dramatic works published by the playwright and the casting and production choices that sparked the animated polemic. One should of course, bear in mind that the limit between "The Man" and "The Work" is necessarily blurry and elusive—if not irrelevant—and that trying to delimit and locate such a pervasive mechanism as race oppression is an arduous—if not impossible—task. By addressing how racism entered the conversation in this specific case, I wish to question the ways in which an individual decision exemplifies deep-rooted mechanisms of systemic oppression rather than to linger on the interpretative speculations on the ethics of a dead man. One may nonetheless consider as a starting point the many instances when the qualifier "racist" became a central term of the acrimonious online conversation. I wish to dwell on two instances in which the noun "racism" was

14 All these colorful expressions were found in the comments to Streeter's posts or as a response to a thread started by a retweet of Streeter's post by journalist Mark Harris.

preceded with an adjective to describe the estate's decision. Damien Geter termed the withholding of the rights "Textbook racism" in an article published on the website *BuzzFeed*, arguing that refusing to grant the rights because an actor is black and not white constitutes a matter of discrimination, regardless of the context. *NPR* host Scott Simon used the term "convoluted racism" (that he opposes to simple racism) to account for the supposedly twisted logic at the heart of this refusal. [15] What does this deviation in the qualifiers used—from "textbook" to "convoluted"—reveal about race in Albee's plays and on the stage of Broadway in the late 2010s? This section will be devoted to trying to outline how the body of Albee's texts as well as his casting approvals and denials (and that of his estate) resonate with issues pertaining to whiteness and blackness on the American stage.

CONJURING UP THE RACIST GHOST OF EDWARD ALBEE?

In his interview with *Oregon Live*, director Michael Streeter takes pains to distinguish between the scope and consequences of the decision of the Albee estate and their intentions: "Unfortunately, there are people hearing of it and thinking that Edward Albee is a racist and that the estate is racist. The intent may not necessarily be there, the results may be—that's a distinction that a lot of people don't make." [16]

Let it be reminded that even if the overwhelming majority of Albee's characters are white, Albee did tackle the issue of race directly in his 1960 play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The plot of the play is set in 1937, the year when the famous blues singer Bessie Smith died in a car crash. It was long believed that she was refused admittance in several whites-only hospitals and that her death was the direct result of Jim Crow Laws enforcing segregation. Even if this later proved to be a myth (she was taken straight to a colored-only hospital), this situation provides the basis for Albee's one-act play. The plot is centered on the figure of a white nurse at the admissions desk of a white hospital, the audience witnesses the contempt with which she treats the black characters and is led to feel sympathy for Jack, the black driver responsible for the accident who fails to save the famous singer. [17] The play also evokes the authoritative figure of a "Great White Doctor" who hovers above the play but never condescends to engage in healing anyone. First performed in 1994, the experimental play (or sit-around) *Fragments* is

15 A recording of his intervention is available online.

16 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," art. cit.

17 Edward Albee, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1958-1965*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2007.

uncharacteristically vague regarding casting, save for references to the approximate age of the 8 unnamed female and male characters and one specific indication: "Man 2 must be cast with an African-American actor; beyond that, let common sense determine casting." [18] Finally, on a personal level, as early as 1963 and the international tour of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee explicitly stipulated that his work could not be licensed to a theater in which segregation was enforced. This applied both inside and outside of the United States. In a 2004 interview, the playwright presented the casting restrictions demanded throughout his career as a way to claim full ethical responsibility for the content of his works:

> ALBEE – [...] It's my work up there, and I want it as close as it can be to my intentions. I'd rather take my own praise and my own blame than somebody else's. And that's why I've retained approval of all actors and directors in all my plays, from the very beginning.
> GREEN – What other restrictions have you found it necessary to place on productions?
> ALBEE – Early on, there were still segregated theaters in the United States, so I had to put in my contracts that my plays may only be performed in fully integrated theaters. [19]

Albee thereby resorted to the same legal apparatus that prevented Damien Geter to be cast as Nick in order to push a political agenda. It enabled him to voice his political disapproval of the South-African apartheid regime as well as the segregated states of the south of the United States. Besides, as an individual, Albee has on many instances expressed his sympathy to the Civil Rights Movement and he occasionally took action to voice his dissatisfaction with race inequalities and apartheid. David A. Crespy and Lincoln Konkle, who edited *Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator*, wrote in their introduction to the volume:

> Though Albee had permitted race-blind castings of his productions in some cases, he has also apparently disallowed such requests when, again, to do so would undercut the realism of the play. This was by no means because Albee was racist. Early in his career part of the control he exercised over his plays was that they could not be performed in segregated theatres. [20]

18 *Id.*, *Fragments*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1978-2003*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2008, p. 388.

19 Jesse Green, "Theater: Edward Albee Returns to the Zoo," *The New York Times,* May 16, 2004.

20 David Allison Crespy and Lincoln Konkle (eds), *Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019.

This excerpt almost presents Albee's commitments for the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s as credentials for his moral integrity, for his being "not racist," as if his involvement could shield him and his estate from any form of racial oppression. Besides, their defense of the playwright blends ethical and esthetic issues: if the racialized body of the performer is deemed in the way of "the realism of the play," it can be cast offstage for the benefit of authorial intent. The black body in performance is therefore dismissed as destabilizing the esthetic framework of realism by its mere presence. As I will develop later in this essay, Crespy and Konkle's allusion to realism refers to the fact that Nick's blonde features constitute a key element of his characterization, yet their remark also highlights the fact that casting is likely to disrupt the esthetic of a play and that the category of realism does not exist *ex-nihilo*. One could then question this need to safeguard the realism and verisimilitude of the play through casting choices that are deemed consistent with authorial intent. Indeed, in an article entitled "The Evolution of American Literary Realism," Eileen J. Herrmann asserts that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "destabilizes the boundaries between domestic realism and the experimentalism of the avant-garde by incorporating the non-real."[21] Could there not be room for unsettling and destabilization of authorial intent and racial boundaries in the equivocal undecidability of Albee's writing? Does not the polysemy of the play allow room for a conversation on race?

SHOULD COLORBLIND CASTING BE A HORIZON FOR BROADWAY?

The debate around the estate's refusal assuredly shifted the focus of the conversation on race on Broadway. Edward Albee has often been reproached for his refusal to write beyond the boundaries of a white upper-class middle-aged heterosexual sphere. If this choice is mainly an artistic one and if it would not necessarily be productive to assess it in ethical terms, the way the playwright accounts for it deserves consideration. For instance, in 2011, Albee received a Lambda Literary Award, a distinction granted to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender books. The author's acceptance speech sparked a fierce debate as he claimed that he did not want to feel limited in his expression by his gay identity, stating: "I am not a gay writer, I am a writer who happens to be gay." So, paradoxically, his wish to appeal to everyone is often translated onstage by the representation of dominant characters so that a discursively constructed "majority"

21 Eileen Herrmann, "The Evolution of American Dramatic Realism," in Keith Newlin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism*, New York, Oxford UP, 2019, p. 508.

could identify with them.[22] To a certain extent, one could consider that the characters onstage are often modeled after the demographics of Albee's Broadway audiences (white, middle-aged and affluent). For the dramatist, it seems that social criticism consists in magnifying the petty defects and shortcomings of the prototypical theatregoer rather than welcoming diversity onstage. The ambiguity of the playwright's discourse on diversity is best exemplified by his assessment of the Civil Rights movements expressed in a 1991 *New York Times* article entitled "Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken:" "'I involve myself in all civil rights movements,' he elaborates. 'But I'm leery of bandwagoning and opportunism. I wanted to warn people not to make the same mistake of separatism that a lot of people in the black civil rights movement did.'"[23] This quote clearly posits Edward Albee on the side of integration in the debate between integration and separation as suitable responses to racial oppression. African-American playwright August Wilson took the opposite stance in a seminal speech entitled *The Ground on Which I Stand* delivered on June 26, 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group national conference at Princeton University. In his keynote address, Wilson stated:

> I am what is known, at least among the followers and supporters of the ideas of Marcus Garvey, as a "race man." That is simply that I believe that race matters—that is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men most respond.[24]

The mention of the legacy of famous advocate of separation Marcus Garvey allows Wilson to lay claim to a theatrical ground that would not require black performers to work as "mimics," that is to say to erase an identity whose specificity reflects the violence inflicted on black bodies by slavery, segregation and racism. In his words, the bodies of the performers become a site of embodied history: "The history of our bodies—the maimings, the lashings, the lynchings, the body that is capable of inspiring profound

22 This choice does not preclude the queering of Albee's heterosexual characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as noted by Tison Pugh who describes "the protean force of a queer subtext in Albee's play." Tison Pugh, "Edward Albee's Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol. 31, no. 1, Fall 2018.

23 David Richards, "Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken," *The New York Times,* June 16, 1961.

24 August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand" (1996), reproduced in *American Theatre* online by permission of the estate of August Wilson, 2016.

rage and pungent cruelty—is not for rent."[25] For Wilson, the economic exploitation of the black body onstage in white plays and productions enacts an added layer of race violence that culminates in colorblind casting of black performers. In *Theatre & Race*, Harvey Young defines colorblind casting as follows: "Colorblind casting assumes that color is the least consequential or least significant element when evaluated alongside age, physical ability, and gender and that, as a result, it can be ignored or overlooked."[26] According to Young, the appeal of colorblind casting lies in the fact that "it treats the theatre as a place where universal stories that can be embodied by any person are told."[27] However, for August Wilson, the dismissal of color as a relevant category entails the violence of the negation of black people's lives and experience and must be strongly rejected: "We reject any attempt to blot us out, to reinvent our history and ignore our presence or to maim our spiritual product."[28] The mechanisms of erasure through which colorblind casting disposes of race as a site of production of meaning could also bear social consequences, insofar as it supports the illusion of what Brandi Catanese calls "a neutral white space," in which whiteness would be equated with a universally unquestioned form of neutrality. According to Catanese, colorblind casting could contribute to devaluing nonwhite cultures:

> An uncritical deployment of colorblind casting invites the question of whether race is truly irrelevant in American performance practices, or if the rhetoric of color blindness only diminishes the value of nonwhite cultures, while leaving whiteness intact. Is Michael Eric Dyson correct when he argues that "the cost of colorlessness is always an investment in whiteness"?[29]

Catanese views the stage as a place where whiteness is likely to be reinforced by the integration of black performers, while acknowledging how race as a socially constructed category impacts their lives.

This might explain why, like Michael Streeter, many theatre artists privilege the term "color-conscious" over "colorblind" as the aim of such a choice is to expose the socially constructed racializing strategies in a play rather than to erase it. Harvey Young underlines that "conscious casting actively draws attention to the ways in which race complicates or supports a production. It encourages audiences to see race and to think

25 *Ibid.*
26 Harvey Young, *Theatre & Race*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 57.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
28 August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, *op. cit.*
29 Brandi W. Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2012, p. 34.

critically about its meaning and value in performance."[30] In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jessica Gelt describes the shift towards more and more color-conscious casting on the American stage:

> The shift from "colorblind" to "color-conscious" may be attributed partly to the growing diversity of stories being produced. In eras past, when the vast majority of tales unfolding onstage were written by white playwrights about white characters, it took colorblind casting for an actor of color to be seen.
> But now we're in the era of "Hamilton." A better term is "color-conscious," said Diep Tran, associate editor of American Theatre magazine, who writes a monthly column on equity, diversity and inclusion. "Color-conscious" means "we're aware of the historic discrimination in the entertainment industry," she said, "and we're also aware of what it means to put a body of color onstage."[31]

Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical, which revisits the birth of the United States with a racially diverse cast, is quoted as evidence that the onstage presence of black actors in a country fraught with racial tensions and discriminations is necessarily political and gives audiences an insight into a historical past that should not be silenced. Whereas the term "colorblind" is gradually losing its appeal—at least in artistic and progressive circles—, the term "color-conscious" has sometimes been contested. In her work *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, Angela Pao prefers to use the word "non-traditional casting," which historically alludes to the one of the first incentives in this field, the Non-Traditional Casting Project, launched in 1986:

> [Nontraditional casting] is inclusive in terms of both the people affected and the approaches developed. Perhaps even more importantly, it foregrounds the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on the stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions.[32]

By referring to a theatrical "tradition," Pao wishes to highlight the contingency of traditional casting, to present it as the remains of a historical past that bears little

30 Harvey Young, *Theatre and Race*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

31 Jessica Gelt, "Authenticity in casting: From 'colorblind' to 'color conscious,' new rules are anything but black and white," *The Los Angeles Time*, July 13, 2017.

32 Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2010, p. 5.

resemblance with the racial and cultural diversity of twenty-first century American society. Besides, by stating that all-white casts are historically determined, Pao draws her readers' attention to the fact that this tradition can be replaced by new practices that better reflect the diversity of people who contribute to theatremaking and their prospective audiences. According to Pao: "Perhaps the most desirable attribute of the qualification nontraditional is its foreshadowing of its own obsolescence."[33] Indeed, the more non-traditional casts set foot onstage, the more their iterated presence challenges the boundary between what is traditional and what is not.

Nonetheless, the focus of the debate on the sole issue of casting somewhat obscures one of the main aspects of the argument: if all the theater enthusiasts who took part in the intense online exchanges seemed to agree on the fact that more racial diversity was welcome and desirable on the American stage, the issue remains as to whether a play that addresses racial issues only in a slant manner, and written by a white playwright, is the best locus to promote such diversity. What are the political consequences of the non-traditional casting of a character whose physical description is part and parcel of his characterization? Nick's blond hair is so constitutive of his persona that he is described physically before being named. At the very beginning of the play, Martha reminds George of Nick's physical appearance: "About thirty, blond, and... [...] Good looking."[34] As the play unfolds and the linguistic games become crueler, "Blondie" will become one of his nicknames. To what extent can a black performer fit into the standardized eugenic nightmare that Nick seems to embody in the eyes of George? Is this recasting a rewriting, and if so, is it an innovation or a betrayal of the play and racialized performers alike?

RE-CASTING AS RE-SEMANTICIZING

As stated by representatives of the Albee estate, recasting Nick as a black character introduces an odd disjunction between the silence on the issue of race and the violence with which the younger character is treated since signifiers such as "stallion" or "houseboy" would immediately appear as thinly-veiled racial slurs. In an article published in the *New York Times* and entitled "A Black Actor in 'Virginia Woolf'? Not Happening, Albee Estate Says," Michael Paulson quotes a spokesperson for the Albee estate:

33 *Ibid.*

34 Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1958-1965*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p. 160.

> Mr. Albee wrote Nick as a Caucasian character, whose blonde hair and blue eyes are remarked on frequently in the play, even alluding to Nick's likeness as that of an Aryan of Nazi racial ideology. [...] Furthermore, Mr. Albee himself said on numerous occasions when approached with requests for non-traditional casting in productions of 'Virginia Woolf' that a mixed-race marriage between a Caucasian and an African-American would not have gone unacknowledged in conversations in that time and place and under the circumstances in which the play is expressly set by textual references in the 1960s.[35]

This silencing of the issue of race actually raises many ethical questions: had Nick been black, the stifling atmosphere of repressed racism implied by the power relationships between the characters could have been unbearable to black audiences. The Albee estate actually found support in Tania Richard, a black columnist and Chicago actress who devoted a post to the issue on her blog "Writing my Mind." She contends that "[t]he reflexive cries for racism are misdirected" and that this casting choice and Nick's desire to fit in "is based in the presumptive belief that Black people want to neutralize or be the same." Tania Richard stresses the linguistic violence of forcing a black actor into a play that completely overlooks race:

> Mr. Streeter's casting of a Black actor within the time period, on a small campus with two predatory characters cannot happen unless the Black actor's skin color is ignored, overlooked and ultimately sacrificed for the story. Theatre is not the place where minority actors need to be sacrificed. It's been done.
>
> Theatre cannot simply sew minority actors into the fabric of American theatre by having them be surrogates. By the Albee estate taking a stand and wrestling back Albee's original intent it unintentionally forces the fact that the Black actor deserves an opportunity to tell a story that doesn't ask observers to ignore his entirety.[36]

Not only does Richard's post highlight the artificiality of the casting choice but it also voices its violence: the reference to "sacrifice" shows that the very act of silencing race despite the onstage presence of the black performer would be an erasure that could remind the audience of Wilson's aforementioned "blotting out." Similar criticism has been directed at the casting choices of *Hamilton*. Having black performers embody white historical figures, some of whom were slave owners, can also be read as a form of

35 Michael Paulson, "A Black Actor in 'Virginia Woolf'? Not Happening, Albee Estate Says," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2017.

36 The *original post* published on Richard's blog hosted by the *Chicago Tribune* is only accessible outside of Europe, but some excerpts of her post are available on the website of the *Chicago Inclusion Project*.

historical erasure, especially since the musical completely obliterates the role played by enslaved or free persons of color in the early decades of the new republic. As historian Lyra D. Monteiro remarks, "it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought."[37] The rejection voiced by Richard and Monteiro could therefore suggest that casting performers of colors in narratives from which characters of color are excluded appears as a meager substitute for giving them a voice that would not be a form of ventriloquism.

Despite the concerns that a bi-racial performance may trigger, other productions starring black actors have since been approved by the estate. A few months after Michael Streeter's post, director Chris Jackson presented a version of the play introducing a black George and Martha. Hugh Iglarsh, who reviewed the production for the website *New City Stage*, considered that the casting choice "render[ed] those avatars of dessicated [sic] WASPdom more universal."[38] This statement posits an updated definition of universality which runs counter to the version defended by Albee in his 2011 Lambda Literary Award acceptance speech during which he argued that he wrote heterosexual characters as a way to "transcend self and write about the needs, the beauties and the anguishes of us all."[39] In this speech, Edward Albee playfully defined himself as a minority as he was "male," "white," "educated," "creative" and "liv[ed] in what passes for a democracy," a remark which was welcomed with laughs from the audience. By underlining these specific characteristics, Albee ironically makes use of the word "minority," which is here to be understood in a purely quantitative sense, to acknowledge his many privileges. But this remark also points out the paradoxes of his discourse: the "transcendence" of his gay identity and minority status to appeal to the greater number establishes racial, economic and heterosexual privilege as the vantage point from which humanity at large is to be addressed. The argument of the universal appeal is hinted at in August Wilson's refusal to cast black performers in plays written by white authors that only reveal their inadequacy to account for the African-American experience:

37 Lyra D. Monteiro, "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*," *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, p. 89-98.

38 Hugh Iglarsh, "Painful with a Purpose: a Review of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf at Pulse Theater," *New City Stage*, August 10, 2017.

39 Albee's full acceptance speech is available on the platform *Vimeo*.

> To mount an all-black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, and our difficult but honorable history in America; and it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large.[40]

When one bears in mind Wilson's words, the endorsement of Chris Jackson's production may appear as a way for the Edward Albee estate to move beyond the controversy that broke out a few months before, to rebrand the Albee trademark and dispel the suspicions of racism, and to broaden the scope of the writer's claim of universality through "transcendence of the self." But this assimilation of the black performers's bodies, even in all-black casts, raises suspicion of tokenism. Brandi Catanese reiterates Josephine Lee's association between non-traditional casting and liberalism when she claims that "nontraditional casting is an extension of the politics of liberal integrationism, which seek at once to acknowledge and efface difference, reifying the desirability of the ideological institution into which the raced body is meant to be assimilated."[41] Lee and Catanese denounce the "depoliticizing" of such casting practices even if one could argue that some productions of the play succeed in achieving a form of artistic agency from all the black artists who get involved in the creative process. In the months that followed the Shoebox production scandal, many well-researched articles traced back a genealogy of diverse castings of Edward Albee plays. In fact, as early as 2001, Vera Katz, described by the website *Arts Integrity* as "the first white theatre professor at the historically black Howard University,"[42] reached out to Edward Albee to make some slight changes to the script to make it fit for an all-black cast for a university production. Director and playwright worked hand in hand to make these adjustments and introduce the names of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and adapt the references to the characters' physical traits to the cast. In the Howard production, the purely linguistic offspring of the middle-aged couple was no longer a "blond blue-eyed child" but a "dark dusky child." The will to maintain the poetic quality of the alliterative sonorities opens up new semantic possibilities and

40 August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand", *op. cit.*

41 Brandi W. Catanese, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

42 Howard Sherman, "Contrary to What You've Heard, You Can Cast Albee Plays Diversely," *Arts Integrity*, August 18, 2017.

shrouds the fictional child in an added layer of textual obscurity: the references to "darkness" and "dusk" suggest a liminal space of uncertainty, and echo the character's undecidability, as the son is neither completely fleshed nor absolutely absent.

CONCLUSION: THE SECOND CONJURING UP OF THE GHOST, A SPECULATIVE READING OF BLACK NICK

Upon closer examination, one may be surprised by the diversity of casting choices of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* sanctioned by Edward Albee and his estate. As it appears, over the years, black performers have played all the roles in different configurations. This endows the refusal to grant the rights to the Portland production with even more potency. Why is there such anathema upon this specific casting arrangement (white Martha, George and Honey and black Nick)? To investigate this issue, let us conjure up a second ghost, a "spook" to use the same word as Philip Roth's Coleman Silk in the novel *The Human Stain*.[43] As in Roth's novel, academia becomes the setting for a scene in which the dialectic between the absence and presence of black individuals reveals underlying racial tensions. To a certain extent, the ghostly presence of a black Nick would make Martha's use of words such as "stallion," "poor little bastard," "houseboy" almost unbearable. The references to Nick's remorseless ambition would therefore lead George and Martha to voice the anxieties and fears of miscegenation that have left their mark on American history. Nick's subservient black body, as well as the animalizing *lexis* used by Martha would unmistakably rekindle the slave-owning past of the protagonists' historical namesake George and Martha Washington.[44] For instance, George's evocation of Nick's career plans would resonate with a myriad of historically and racially charged meanings: "[You could turn into] an inevitability. You know… Take over a few courses from the older men, start some special groups for myself…plow a few pertinent wives…"[45] Casting Nick as a black character in a play that was written less than 10 years after the murder of Emmett Till would

43 In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain,* Coleman Silk, a seemingly white academic gets in a judicial quagmire for calling two absentee students "spooks," unaware of the fact that they are in fact black and that this qualifier will be construed as a racial slur.

44 After they settled in Philadelphia, the first president and his wife took their slaves with them. Under the law of the state, the enslaved workers who spent six months on Pennsylvanian soil had to be enfranchised, so the Washingtons sent their slaves back to Virginia before the deadline to circumvent the legislation. In *Never Caught,* historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar sheds light on the fate of Ona Judge, an enslaved woman who ran away from the Washingtons.

45 Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

confront twenty-first century audiences with the fears and prejudices historically expressed by white populations such as the fantasy of the sexual potency and lust of black men. It would also put in the limelight the humiliating treatments of an athletic young black man who experiences the violence of the academic hierarchy in his own flesh. Finally, the 2017 Portland production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* would have been contemporary with artistic works that tackle the issue of black eugenics and white anxiety, such as the thriller *Get Out* by Jordan Peele. Indeed, *Get Out* presents its audience with a derelict white-supremacist aristocracy that kidnaps black individuals selected for their potency and capabilities (some are athletes, and the main protagonist is a photographer with an acute eye for artistic composition…) to revive its decaying genomes through insane scientific experimentations. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George, the old university professor, acknowledges being fascinated by "the pragmatic accommodation by which you wave-of-the-future boys are going to take over."[46] In a way, George's cues would—if addressed to a black Nick—also express this "racial replacement" fantasy and the Nazi reference would recede in the dark only to be replaced with post-colonial tensions and violence. To conclude, with this speculative conjuring up of the racial ghost, this hypothetical interpretative gesture, I wished to dwell on the racial violence and unresolved tensions that the casting choice would have triggered. Whether the presence of a black Nick onstage would have allowed an "Exorcism" (to quote the title of the third act) or merely staged another black man's sacrifice—as Tania Richard propounds—remains to be debated online and offline. For the time being, black Nick has been banned from the stage but has been fleshed out by the voices of infuriated online commentators, forever a creature of fiction trapped in the limbo of theatrical absence, forever a "dark dusky child."

Yet, this article, adapted from a paper given in 2018 and developed in 2020, in the immediate wake of the murder of George Floyd, could not end on the visual absence of the black body. Floyd's death and the many protests, gatherings and demonstrations that ensued brought to the attention of white academics such as myself the political potency of representing and circulating violent images. The spectacle of police brutality has been instrumental in raising awareness but has also awakened the historical ghosts of the visual staging of lynching, which treated the murder of black people as a family entertainment.[47] It is no longer possible for those of us working in the field of theatre, a genre etymologically dedicated to sight, to turn a blind eye on how whiteness has

46 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

47 See Melanye Price's article "Please Stop Showing the Video of George Floyd's Death," released in *The New York Times* on June 3, 2020.

long occupied centerstage in the American theater. In the dreadful context of race violence and a global pandemic leading to the cancellation of the 2020 Tony Awards, the organization Broadway Black organized the first Antonyo Awards, an online ceremony designed to celebrate black artists and theatre professionals working on and off-Broadway. It was broadcast on June 19, 2020, on Juneteenth, the anniversary of the emancipation of enslaved African-American workers. In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, this initiative appeared as an opportunity to address issues pertaining to systemic racism in theatre and to promote increased visibility of black theatre professionals. On the shaky theatrical ground on which we currently stand, one can hope that this redirecting of the spectatorial gaze is ripe with potential for political change. Finally, I wish to mention one action that builds activism on a reversal of the focus of the theatrical gaze. "We see you White American Theatre", the collective of

Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) theatremakers published a statement and list of demands to address "the devaluation and violence against Black bodies in the world." on their website. Written in powerful alliterative style, it derives its strength from its ability to shift the theatrical focus and expose the violence of theatre as a professional environment. Therefore, I wish to end my essay on an excerpt from this powerful statement, which, I hope, will pave the way for new eye-opening political perspectives on deliberately anti-racist theatre:

> We have watched you exploit us, shame us, diminish us, and exclude us. We see you.
> We have always seen you.
> And now you will see us.
> We stand on this ground as BIPOC theatremakers, multi-generational, at varied stages in our careers, but fiercely in love with the Theatre. Too much to continue it under abuse. We will wrap the least privileged among us in protection, and fearlessly share our many truths.
> About theatres, executive leaders, critics, casting directors, agents, unions, commercial producers, universities and training programs. You are all a part of this house of cards built on white fragility and supremacy. And this is a house that will not stand.
> This ends TODAY.
> We are about to introduce you...to yourself.
> Signed,
> **The Ground We Stand On**

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Notice

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Abstract

On May 17 2017, Portland director Michael Streeter posted an infuriated Facebook status lamenting the fact that the Edward Albee Estate had not granted him the rights to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because he had cast a black actor as Nick, the ambitious and handsome young academic who shows up at Martha and George's late night afterparty. This post triggered a heated online debate: charges of racism were leveled at the estate whereas other commentators claimed that the author's intent should always prevail. To what extent does non-traditional casting introduce a re-semanticization of the theatrical text as literary object? What does it reveal about the power relationships within the competitive work environment of the American theatre circuit? This paper seeks to investigate this digital era dispute, to unravel its threads of online comments in order to outline the race politics of one of the most famous American playwrights of all times.

Key words

Edward Albee; Michael Streeter; Damien Geter; Tania Richard; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*; American theatre; color-conscious casting; race; diversity

Résumé

Le 17 mai 2017, dans un statut Facebook aux accents rageurs, le metteur en scène Michael Streeter s'émut de ne pas avoir obtenu les droits de la pièce *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* du dramaturge Edward Albee car il avait décidé d'octroyer le rôle de Nick, le jeune blondin ambitieux, à un comédien noir. Au sein des cercles théâtraux new-yorkais, cette déclaration déclencha une vive polémique dont les réseaux sociaux et la blogosphère se firent la caisse de résonnance. Tandis que certains commentateurs criaient au racisme, d'autres soulignaient que l'intention de l'auteur devait primer quelles que fussent les circonstances. Il s'agira donc de s'interroger sur ce que nous disent ces échanges souvent houleux du statut du dramaturge aux États-Unis et de la manière dont les tensions raciales s'invitent au spectacle. En quoi les choix de distribution rebattent-ils les cartes interprétatives ? Comment peuvent-ils infléchir le sens du texte et les rapports de pouvoir au sein de l'environnement professionnel impitoyable qu'est le monde du spectacle ?

Mots-clés

Edward Albee ; Michael Streeter ; Damien Geter, ; Tania Richard ; *Qui a peur de Virginia Woolf ?*; théâtre américain ; casting et distribution ; race ; diversité

PART III

The Pursuit of Community

ON NEOCLASSICISM: THEATROCRACY, THE 1%, AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

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During the December 2018 upheavals in France, major public and private theaters in Paris, such as the Théâtre de la Ville and the Théâtre du Rond-Point, cancelled their program and closed their doors to the protesters. The ancient conception of the theater as a place where the audience could deliberate and practice its democratic competences seemed far remote, especially given the protesters' avowed need for a collective discussion and collective clarification of their political aims, and their need for locations where this could occur.[1] However unfortunate, and however rationally motivated, the decision to shut down and exclude was hardly surprising, for much of the institutional, Western theater circuit has taken a sharp turn toward a monological, authoritarian conception of democratic culture, while at the same time expressly invoking an often ill-assorted compound of democratic, socialist, and libertarian ideals. This shift is observable in other major European cities, too. In Berlin, for instance, the ongoing transformation of major institutions such as the Berliner Ensemble and the Volksbühne into profitable enterprises has brought about a string of highly publicized lawsuits, which in turn sparked a string of candid declarations according to which a "more diverse" and "younger" program would constitute a sufficiently robust opposition to "capitalism."[2] Also, the current intersection of politics and theatrical practice has mostly been discussed in light of the adoption of performative or histrionic techniques by politicians, hence almost completely overshadowing the way explicitly democratic theatrical productions actually use the idea of democracy as an aesthetic and political device.

In what follows, I would like to trace the perennial democratic horizon of the theater back to a dilemma whose resolution Plato considers to be one of the conditions of possibility of sustainable democratic life. I will then discuss one of the most frequently

1 See: Evelyne Pieiller, "Théâtre des émotions", *Le Monde diplomatique* (blog), December 10, 2018.

2 See: Christine Dössel, "Was für eine kleinmütige Entscheidung der Berliner Kulturpolitik", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 13, 2019.

staged plays of the post-2008 era, Howard Zinn's neoclassical, or neo-Sophoclean *Marx in Soho* (premiered in 1995), and argue that much of the purportedly autonomist intention of post-financial crisis aesthetics confirms, rather than infirms, one of Plato's most insidious arguments against popular rule. That this situation is regrettable should go without saying.

AUTONOMY AS A PUN

The philosophical tradition has long punned on the various uses and semantic layers of "nomos." *Nomos*, as a "law," a "territory," or a "limit," features prominently in some of the crucial entries in the philosophical lexicon, "autonomy" being perhaps the most contentious and ancient one of them. In the *Laws* (Νόμοι), for instance, Plato points

out a more uncommon meaning of *nomos* in order to discuss the relationship between rationality and normativity in the orderly political city: *nomos* as "song," "melody," or "tune." In 700 a–d, Plato famously lays out the reasons why corruption befell the political and aesthetic norms of a once orderly political community:

> Anthenian Stranger – [...] Among us, at that time, music was divided into various classes and styles: one class of song was that of prayers to the gods, which bore the name of "hymns"; contrasted with this was another class, best called dirges; "paeans" formed another; and yet another was the "dithyramb," named, I fancy, after Dionysus. "Nomes" also were so called as being a distinct class of song; and these were further described as "citharoedic nomes." So these and other kinds being classified and fixed, it was forbidden to set one kind of words to a different class of tune. [...] It was a rule made by those in control of education that they themselves should listen throughout in silence, while the children and their ushers and the general crowd were kept in order by the discipline of the rod.[3]

This paragraph is less transparent than it may appear at first sight, for Plato makes a highly ambiguous use of the homonyms *nomoi* as "citharoedic nomes" and *nomoi* as "laws" or "enclosures." I would like to argue that this play on homonymy is unavoidable, and that this passage reveals a vastly more insidious ambiguity in Plato as to the origins of "theatrocracy" which, according to the *Laws*, brought about the corruption of laws. To paraphrase Plato, *Nomoi* or "Nomes," a particular class of songs, were called

3 Pl. Leg. 700a–d. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are from the somewhat outdated, yet standard Loeb edition: Plato, *Laws, Books 1-6*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 187, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1926, pp. 245-246.

thus because they were so distinct from other classes of songs as to appear to be *nomoi* in all *other* senses of the word too: because "Nomes" were clearly identifiable as a particular class of songs, they resembled particular "laws" or particular "enclosures." But "Nomes" were called also thus because they implied that laws ("*nomoi*") derived their existence and, to a qualified degree, legitimacy, from *song* itself. In other words, "nomes" (tunes) were not only the illustration of "*nomoi*" (laws), they were also their origin. Occasionally, Plato suggests as much, for instance in 799e ("our *nomes* ["tunes"] have become *nomoi* [laws]")[4] and in the lines that follow:

> Anthenian Stranger – [...] In the matter of music the populace willingly submitted to orderly control and abstained from outrageously judging by clamour; but later on, with the progress of time, there arose as leaders of unmusical illegality poets who, though by nature poetical, were ignorant of what was just and lawful in music; and they, being frenzied and unduly possessed by a spirit of pleasure, mixed dirges with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, and imitated flute-tunes with harp-tunes [...]. By compositions of such a character, set to similar words, they bred in the populace a spirit of lawlessness in regard to music, and the effrontery of supposing themselves capable of passing judgment on it. Hence the theater-goers became noisy instead of silent, as though they knew the difference between good and bad music, and in place of music there sprang up a kind of base theatrocracy. For if in music, and music only, there had arisen a democracy of free men, such a result would not have been so very alarming; but as it was, the universal conceit of universal wisdom and the contempt for law originated in the music, and on the heels of those came liberty.[5]

The last sentence makes his argument explicit. The "populace" cannot judge the possible lawfulness of unmusical transgressions ("*amousos paranomia*" [700d]), yet wealthier citizens who have received an education may be more qualified to do so. A condition must be met, however: their expertise and authority must be limited to the Muses and the arts they inspire—the theater, oratory, and music itself. This condition was breached, however, and the categories by which the arts of the Muses were formerly ordered and perceived came to be dismantled. In turn, chaos spread to the political institutions of the city in the narrower sense of the term. A "theatrocracy" arose in which laws were thought to be as mutable as hymns and paens: the theater became the absolute metaphor of democratic political participation.

4 My translation.

5 Pl. Leg. 700d–701a, Plato, *Laws, Books 1-6*, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-246.

Several political theorists and classicists have described the role the theater was subsequently to play in the formation of "democratic knowledge"[6] in democratic Athens. Intellectuals more precisely devoted to the project of radical autonomy as a political regime typically discuss the theater as a place where the democratic political imaginary becomes prehensible, and where political attitudes attuned to the essentially opinion-driven nature of democratic knowledge are trained. They attribute a political function to the theater that is consubstantial not only with its mode of staging discourse and events, but also with the communicative situation it entails. Cornelius Castoriadis for instance describes how Sophoclean tragedies mobilized the members of the audience to formulate their own *opinions*—opinion as opposed to knowledge, but also as opposed to violence, as Plato suggests in the *Gorgias*.[7] The example of Sophocles' *Antigone* is archetypal for scholarship on Greek political theory.[8] Several questions arise in the midst of the audience: is Antigone acting justly when she attempts to give funeral rites to her brother against the orders of the King, Creon? Is "natural"[9] or filial law above political law? Does this natural law turn out to be just another political law after all? On which grounds, then, is Antigone's political law more legitimate than Creon's? Is Antigone guilty of having tried to pass off her political law as a question of imperative familial duty? Is this a worse crime than letting a corpse rot in the sun? Or again, is this a worse crime than breaching kingly law? Can both Antigone and Creon be right at the same time? In this radical democratic model, the audience ponders these questions as what Plato denounces as "noisy," rather than "silent" theater-goers; doing so, they develop their ability to participate in Athenian democracy as reflexive political actors.[10]

6 Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001, p. 33. See also: Juliane Rebentisch, *Die Kunst der Freiheit: Zur Dialektik demokratischer Existenz*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2014, pp. 69-76. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 130-167.

7 Cornelius Castoriadis: "Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et autocréation de l'homme chez Sophocle," *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, vol. 6, Paris, Seuil, 2009, pp. 17-42. See also: Cornelius Castoriadis, *La cité et les lois, Séminaires 1983-1984: Ce qui fait la Grèce*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, pp. 71-90.

8 See also: Michael Pauen, Harald Welzer, *Autonomie: Eine Verteidigung*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2016, pp. 70-80.

9 Very generally, see also: Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 120-164.

10 See also Hallward's discussion of Rancière's often muddled attempts at rephrasing theatrocracy in radical democratic terms: Peter Hallward, "Staging Equality: On Rancière's Theatrocracy." *New Left Review*, vol.37, 2006, pp. 109-129.

The suggestion that Plato's argument is a constructive contribution to, rather than a radical critique of the democratic system is in line with a tendency in Plato scholarship that has gained visibility in recent decades.[11] Following this line of reasoning, Plato points out that any democracy which rejects the primacy of philosophy as a legislative instrument must deal with the consequences of publicly disclosing the aesthetic, or at the very least non-philosophical origins of *nomoi*. Disclosing the independence of a just political order from both philosophical inquiry and metaphysical (or more plainly: God-given) normative orders hence forces the political community to come to terms with its alleged consequences: the destruction of the political city. Democratic cities must hence develop a *politics* of the publication and democratization of paranomic knowledge. Every democratic society must develop a *politics* of "autonomy", that is a politics of the institution of laws by the legal and extra-legal (for instance: musical or theatrical) practices of the *polis* itself. This politics must both preserve and authenticate the knowledge of the non-philosophical origins of laws and make sure this knowledge does not spread to all segments of the population and to all domains of political life.[12] Plato's understanding of democratic law-making, or democratic *nomothetics*, is, I take it, one that inevitably leads to instituting a dialectics of partly showing and partly hiding the power of the citizens to institute the new measures by which they will henceforth live politically.

FROM DELIBERATION TO CONSENT

How explicitly and openly can a democracy admit to itself (or "institute explicitly," in Castoriadis's terms)[13] its own dependency on radical autonomy as its only way of instituting rules and expectations of behavior? To which degree can the knowledge of the fundamentally paranomic, that is, extra-legal (for instance: musical, doxic, theatrical, or democratic) nature of autonomously instituted laws be made public? These questions, which Plato hints at and tacitly admits on theoretical grounds (because any democracy must come to terms with their implications) while rejecting them on account of them not being correlated to the nature of just laws (because laws that are *consistently just* cannot be the product of "tunes"), benefit from being rephrased

11 Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, pp. 156-247.

12 On this point, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 22-78, as well as: Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 132-140.

13 Or: "institute itself explicitly." Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987, p. 215

in the terms chosen by Plato in the text of the *Laws*: the theater, theatrocracy, noise, liberty, and contempt.

Since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, several peripheral American and European theatrical productions have been brought back to light on the college circuit and, in turn, on major stages. Such a structure of mutual authentification and legitimation, of which Zinn's *Marx in Soho* is a paradigmatic example, is well-established: while major public or private theaters bestow official and financial recognition on student productions, the college circuit bestows "civic" or "political" legitimacy on major theaters and their criteria of consecration. Many of these student plays or—equally importantly—many of these plays intended to be staged by students expressly intend to rejuvenate the Sophoclean conceit of a participatory, deliberating audience keen on developing its doxic, democratic competences. Despite their often flamboyant professions of faith in radical democracy and anticapitalist activism, these productions are especially enlightening in terms of their conceptual contradictions.[14] Some productions for instance invite the audience to express its opinions, value-judgments, and choices of plot-development by way of digital interfaces handed out before the show;[15] in such examples, the classical mode of dramatized democracy, as described by Castoriadis, is relocated within the framework of spectacular liberalism: the political horizon at work on stage commutes democratic deliberation into a permanent survey, hence confirming Paul Kellogg's near prophetic insights (1912) into the ultimate transformation of democracy into governance through the emergence of a survey and surveillance culture.[16] Another, perhaps more insidiously monological, antidemocratic tendency in expressly democratic, neo-Sophoclean theater can be outlined by taking the example of a patently antidemocratic staple of the college campus circuit: Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho*, which nevertheless invokes the specter of a deliberating, reflexive "people." Zinn is the best chronicler of his own play's popularity:

> [...] it was performed in 1995 in Providence, Rhode Island, and then in Washington, D.C. Since then it has been staged in several hundred venues in the United States, performed variously by Brian Jones, Jerry Levy, and Bob Weick. In 2009 it was performed at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, directed by David Wheeler. Translated into Spanish, French, Italian, and German, it has played in

14 See also: Bradley J. Macdonald, *Performing Marx: Contemporary Negotiations of a Living Tradition*, Albany, State UP of New York, 2006, pp. 4-12.

15 For instance Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* (2010).

16 Paul U. Kellogg, "The Spread of the Survey Idea", *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1912, pp. 1-17.

a number of European cities, as well as in Havana and other venues in Latin America. After being translated into Greek it was done in various cities by the distinguished Greek actor Aggelos Antonopoulos and directed by Athanasia Karagionnopoulo. I was invited to Athens in 2009 to see the performance, before an audience of a thousand, at the University of Athens. [17]

A one-person play with a single scene (in itself a generic staple of the post-2008 circuit and of spontaneous street-performances, [18] as well a prime device for monological politics), the play involves minimal staging costs and is hence primed for performances in the shackles of austerity. The play recounts biographical anecdotes about Marx, brings Marx back to life in the early 2000s, repeats a few basic tenets of Marxist doctrine, and concludes, in its final line, with the second-coming of Marx: "Christ couldn't make it, so Marx came." Needless to say, nothing of the sort has happened in Greece in the last decade, with the exception of the punitive effects which economic austerity and Christian ethics sometimes have in common. [19] Despite its certain aesthetic failings and an archaic conception of the relationship of Marxism and radical democracy, the play is noteworthy for its early use of the rhetoric of the 1% that became central in the Occupy Wall Street movement a decade later:

> Karl Marx – All right, let us say only a hundred people in world history have ever understood my theory of surplus value. But it is still true! Just last week, I was reading the reports of the United States Department of Labor. There you have it. Your workers are producing more and more goods and getting less and less in wages. What is the result? Just as I predicted. Now the richest one percent of the American population owns forty percent of the nation's wealth. And this in the great model of world capitalism, the nation that has not only robbed its own people, but sucked in the wealth of the rest of the world. [20]

Symptomatically, the play identifies the 1% as a *national* group, and at the expense of Marx's internationalist paradigm, while still nodding towards "the rest of the world"

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17 Howard Zinn, "Introduction", *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2010, p. xi.

18 Marcel Spaumer, Bernard Odendaal, "Die eenpersoondrama as (steeds ontluikende) subgenre: 'n skets van sy ontwikkelingsgang en kenmerke", *LitNet Akademies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 162-208.

19 For an (often implicit) reformulation of Weber's thesis, see: Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 482-528.

20 Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho: A Play on History*, *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2010, p. 129.

as belonging to the 99%, forming an international order of magnitude that, nominally, is on purportedly equal terms with the US-American national 99%. In recent years however, economists and financial institutions across the political spectrum[21] have pointed out that the income of the Western "middle-class"—that is, the income of the typical audience in a university theater, either in terms of factual salary or in terms projected salary expectations—is sufficient in order to belong to the *global* 1%, and hence participate in what Zinn calls "suck[ing] the wealth of the rest of the world."[22] Simultaneously, such comparisons between national, international and global figures are routinely drawn on in order to muddle otherwise evident class antagonisms and the growing income inequalities within Western societies.[23] Yet these reservations, enlightening as they might be as to the political callowness of Zinn's conception of a global opposition to capitalist exploitation, miss the essential mark set by the classical conception of "theatrocratic" autonomy referenced throughout *Marx in Soho*. Zinn, for instance, conjures up *Antigone*'s classical disposition of competing legal, or *nomic* paradigms, evoking its rotting corpses and competing territorial jurisdictions:

> Marx – [...] (*Picks up newspaper again, reads*) "Anniversary of Gulf War. A victory, short and sweet." Yes, I know about these short, sweet wars, which leave thousands of corpses in the fields and children dying for lack of food and medicine. (*Waves the newspaper*) In Europe, Africa, Palestine, people killing one another over boundaries. (*He is anguished.*)
>
> Didn't you hear what I said a hundred and fifty years ago? Wipe out these ridiculous national boundaries! No more passports, no more visas, no more border guards or immigration quotas. No more flags and pledges of allegiance to some artificial entity called the nation.[24]

Zinn's transformation, or controversion of the questions Sophocles raises in *Antigone* amounts to a form of mild epistemic blackmail. On the one hand, the urgency of producing a response to a political impasse (*Antigone*) or geopolitical crisis (*Marx in Soho*) is resolved by suspending all instituted *nomoi*—in the territorial sense of the term—and by reintroducing *rhetorically* the internationalist horizon of revolutionary

21 Facundo Alvaredo *et al.*, World Inequality Report 2018; Credit Suisse Research Institute, Global Wealth Report 2018.

22 Generally, see also: Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%*, London, Verso, 2014.

23 See also: Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, "The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective", *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 96, no. 2 (May 2006), pp. 200-205.

24 Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho*, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140.

Marxism: "No more flags and pledges of allegiance to some artificial entity called the nation." On the other hand, the play suggests that this internationalist horizon may best be realized by instituting another *nomos*—in the sense of a conceptual "enclosure" or, in Zinn's wording, "some artificial entity"—, that is, by identifying the richest 1% of the US-American population as a target group, thus correlatively creating a homogenous, transnational group uniting the West and, I take it, the rest.

What is the audience of *Marx in Soho* given to see? The mutability of *nomoi*, their origins in harangue, but not their constitutive arbitrariness, nor their dependence on deliberation, reflexivity, contestation, and consent. Indeed, playwrights such as Zinn, on the one hand, and protest movements such as Occupy, on the other hand, have occasionally thwarted attempts at a discussion of who, precisely, "we" are, if we are not the "99%", but rather, maybe, the national upper 40% (a proposition which would be factually true with respect to the effective audience of the college circuit, with respect to a minoritarian segment of the effective participants in the Occupy Movement, and with respect to the overwhelming majority of the authors and readers of academic articles)[25] and whether, consequently, the bottom 60% are justly accounted for in Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho* and in the Occupy Movement's rhetoric of the 1%. These numbers mean nothing in themselves, and that is precisely the point: the formation of a political opinion on such crucial questions is excluded from the realm of contemporary theatrocratic politics.

FROM CONSENT TO DECISIONISM

By excluding the question of the formation of political interest groups—or, in the jargon of what has become neoliberal governance, by excluding "identity" politics—from the object of theatrocratic deliberation, Zinn tacitly endorses the Platonic argument in favor of the exclusion of the public from an important part of nomothetic work. By forsaking the radical autonomy that remains the horizon of Sophoclean or neo-Sophoclean theater, and by conjuring political bodies that serve doubly as political universalizations (a global "we") and as forms of ideological dissimulation, Zinn's dramatized opposition to capitalist exploitation merely reinstates the monological, non-

25 The epistemological blind spots entailed by this willful self-inclusion in a global 99% have given rise to a whole critical genre that—often straight-facedly—includes the Western, highly educated middle class as a member of global subalternity. See for instance Marielle Macé's explicit references to Occupy Wall Street, Gramsci, and Castoriadis, and her outline of an ultimately politically innocuous "stylistics of existence." Marielle Macé, *Styles: Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, pp. 86-115.

deliberative politics it otherwise professes to undermine.[26] It also more consequentially forsakes the integration of democratic theater in an educational framework.[27] Indeed, if Zinn is justly suspicious of claims of political universality, he nevertheless forsakes the role democratic theater can play for the "universalization of the conditions of access to universality",[28] that is, the role democratic theater can play for the democratization of the means of access to political agency, rationality, and the effective self-description[29] of populations in Western societies, whether such self-descriptions draw on percentages or not. Such a democratic conception of the theater would entail expressly thematizing the possible political contradictions of an intranational and an international politics of inequality and redistribution (or: distribution), their possible convergence, the value and legitimacy of empirical data on wealth distribution, and the criteria presiding over the self-description and self-categorization of the audience as members belonging to a political group or "percentage" (such criteria might include political effectiveness, empirical substantiation, and the adequation of both).

In the greater context of the most visible movements for greater social justice and equality (loosely, often contradictingly, but also often unproblematically encompassing both revolutionary and reformist strains) that have emerged since the financial crisis of 2007–2008, Zinn's *Marx in Soho* hence announces a crucial shift in theatrical, or theatrocratic politics: rather than disclosing the radical *nomic* (or *musical*) origins of the law, as well as its arbitrariness and dependence on popular assent, Zinn's play provides affirmative *propositions*, that is, designates an opponent, or enemy. It also does so without pointing out that propositions of this kind are essential to monological—and hence self-contradictory—conceptions of democratic politics, and does so without offering even the semblance of grounds for deliberation or debate among citizens, that is, its audience. There is no category error in this juxtaposition of civic and aesthetic frames. While the Sophoclean tradition referenced throughout the play incites the audience to ponder the normative options presented on stage and to make a political, instrumental reading of the action *as citizens*, Zinn overturns the political premises of democratic theater; the fundamentally antagonistic and competitive nature of opinion-

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26 See also: Barbara Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism*, New York, Fordham UP, 2014, pp. 111-135.

27 See also: Teresa L. Ebert, *The Task of Cultural Critique*, Urbana, Univ. of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 71-87.

28 I am somewhat freely adapting one of Bourdieu's most incisive aphorisms. Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1994, p. 227.

29 On this particular subject, see: Marcello Tarì, *Autonomie! Italie, les années 1970*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2011, pp. 36-50.

driven democracy is externalized or projected onto a segment of the population which is implicitly excluded from nomothetic work, that is, among others responsibilities, from the formation and definition of political bodies. By contrast and as a logico-political consequence, assent and neo-Platonic "silence" reign supreme within these political bodies. Again, the question whether such exclusions are justified or justifiable is entirely beside the point in this discussion.

It is helpful to think of this "decisionist"[30] turn in the context of the simultaneous reemergence of Zinn's play and of the recent reemergence of an explicitly "Schmittian" Left which, it should be noted in passing, shares little with the American and European Populisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Alternatively proposing enclosures, territories, limits, that is, *nomoi*, this particular Left has attributed an important role to the polysemy of *nomos* and, more generally, to the arts. In this tradition, rather than providing reasons for competing conceptions of what should constitute a just norm, the arts are reoriented towards providing reasons for kinds of social cohesiveness that are based on exclusion. While the explicit reference to antagonisms within specific social groups, however multiple and overlapping these antagonisms may be, is maintained under the name of "agonisms", these agonisms nevertheless resort to the kind of willful decisionism that is characteristic of Schmitt's solution to the problems of parliamentarism and consensus-oriented democracy: "This requires that we do not elude the moment of decision, and this will necessarily imply some form of closure. It might be that an ethical discourse can avoid this moment, but a political one certainly cannot."[31] In even more marked terms, this decisionist moment forsakes the need for consensus-based, rational justifications of limits and laws: "By bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision—in the strong sense of having to decide within an undecidable terrain—what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus."[32]

This is surely a legitimate move—if only on account of the descriptive powers of such a decisionist political culture. Western societies are indeed the scene of violent divisions and antagonisms which, in certain cases, lack modes of resolution that are themselves grounded in consensus. Yet what counts as "rational" consensus here? And why should the deliberative rationality of democracy entail such a rigid condemnation

30 The critical literature of an important part of the "populist Left" acknowledges the Schmittian origins of the term. Schmitt discusses decisionism ("Dezisionismus" or "Entscheidungsdenken") most concisely in: Carl Schmitt, *Über der drei Arten des rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2006, pp. 20-24.

31 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London, Verso, 2013, p. 15.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of "any rational consensus" in the first place? The Sophoclean-democratic tradition provides precisely the kind of rationalities Chantal Mouffe seems to call for. Rather than justifying the need for decisionism on account of a stale continuum fallacy—the good old "undecidable terrain" of politics and the fetishization of "norms" it engenders—, the democratic tradition grounds political decisions in collective processes to which it decides to attribute legitimacy; this, if anything, is indeed a political decision. The focus here is on the processes by which a political community may institute those *nomoi* which are best accorded with its imperatives (for instance its interests, or moral norms, or values), rather than on the decision which these processes inevitably lead to according to instituted legislative-political frameworks (majority vote, for instance). Hence, the central importance of such art forms which incite citizens to train their nomothetic abilities.

The reemergence of Zinn in this context is hence significant in more than just a literary-historical sense: it is indicative of an ongoing decline of democratic political culture among proponents of democratic ideals, as well as of the increased ease with which classical, or even classicist anti-democratic arguments gain credence among democratic audiences once these arguments are cloaked in the garb of popular rule.

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Notice

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Abstract

This article examines one of the most widely staged, and least discussed plays of the past 25 years, Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho* (1995). Zinn's transparently neoclassical aesthetics, as well as his numerous references to Sophocles' *Antigone* throughout the play, jar with his authoritarian reading of the tradition of democratic theater. Beginning with a discussion of the "democratic paradox" of Plato's *Laws*, this article outlines major and still operative transformations in the democratic theater in the United States, as well as its move away from the horizon of democratic deliberation and toward democratic decisionism.

Keywords

Howard Zinn; Sophocles; Antigone; Occupy Wall Street; democracy; decisionism

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur l'une des pièces les plus fréquemment mises en scènes et les moins commentées de ce dernier quart de siècle, *Marx in Soho* de Howard Zinn (1995). Les choix esthétiques clairement néoclassiques de Zinn, ainsi que les nombreuses références à *Antigone* au fil de la pièce entrent en contradiction avec la lecture autoritaire que propose Zinn de la tradition du théâtre démocratique. Partant d'une lecture du "paradoxe démocratique" qu'esquisse Platon dans les *Lois*, cet article se propose d'ébaucher les transformations majeures et toujours actuelles du théâtre démocratique aux États-Unis, ainsi que son abandon d'un horizon délibératif au profit d'un horizon décisioniste.

Mots-Clés

Howard Zinn ; Sophocle ; Antigone ; Occupy Wall Street ; démocratie ; décisionnisme

PRODUCING COMMUNITY: A PROCESS-ORIENTED ANALYSIS OF PING CHONG + COMPANY'S *UNDESIRABLE ELEMENTS: GENERATION NYZ* (2018)[1]

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On January 13, 2018, Ping Chong + Company's *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ* premiered for a sold-out audience at the Duke on 42nd Street, the New Victory Theater's smaller venue, conveniently located in the heart of Manhattan. Despite its relatively short run consisting of only ten public performances, the piece gained popular as well as critical acclaim, being hailed as "an inherently political show that arrives at a time of fervently uncivil discourse,"[2] or as providing audiences with "the very best reason for resisting the current administration"[3] by looking at the actual lives affected by recent policies. Co-written and co-directed by Sara Zatz, the company's associate director, and artistic collaborator Kirya Traber, playwright and cultural worker, the piece marked the 25th anniversary of *Undesirable Elements*, the ongoing series of interview-based, community-specific theatre works conceived by the award-winning, interdisciplinary artist Ping Chong, one of the most prominent voices of American theatre and performance of the last five decades. The show explores what it means to be a teenager in NYC in the current political climate through the lens of seven 18- to 21-year-old teenagers of different backgrounds—Mexican, Puerto Rican, Pakistani, Jamaican, and British-Bosnian—who address their own experiences of bullying, depression, undocumentedness, and gender fluidity, highlighting the ways in which they have carved out their niches of resistance. Celebrating the 25th anniversary of a nationwide journey of community engagement, the production consolidates the status of *Undesirable Elements* as one of the most enduring series of this kind, while "turn[ing]

1 The author would like to thank Ping Chong and Sara Zatz for their kind support in documenting this article. Research for this article was supported by a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award at CUNY—The Graduate Center, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center (2017-2018).

2 Laura Collins-Hughes, "Undesirable Elements, Documentary Theater for Uncivil Times", *New York Times*, January 15, 2018.

3 Michael Feingold, "Meet the Seven Extraordinary Individuals of Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", *The Village Voice*, January 20, 2018.

the storytelling over to a new generation: Generation NYZ."[4] Tellingly, four other productions in the series have been presented on American and international stages in the meantime, *Aan Yatx'u Saani: Noble People of the Land* (2018), in Juneau, Alaska, *Undesirable Elements/ Dearborn* (2018), at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, *(Un)Conditional* (2019), at Profile Theatre in Portland, Oregon, and *Undesirable Elements: Difficult Lives* (2019), at Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre East, in Japan. Furthermore, *Generation NYZ* was revived at the prestigious La MaMa ETC in early 2019, while *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity* (2015) continues its successful touring engagements throughout the US.

Originally meant as a one-time performance at Artists Space NY in 1992, *Undesirable Elements* has become an ongoing series with over sixty site-specific pieces to date across the US and several other countries, such as Japan and the Netherlands, which have been produced in collaboration with a wide range of partners, including theatres of all sizes, performing arts centers, colleges and universities, festivals, museums, and community organizations, and supported by an equally diverse, multi-layered network of funding bodies, combining public as well as private sector contributions.[5] Centering on the lives of "outsiders within the mainstream community,"[6] the series explores the multiple facets of cultural otherness and socio-political disenfranchisement in contemporary America (and a few other spaces) through works created in and with marginalized communities. Conceived as a choral meditation on "the metaphysics of culture and history and its effects on the lives of individuals within a society"[7]—the overarching themes of Chong's prolific career—the show has relied, from the very beginning, on an adaptable structure which interweaves the dramatized stories of the performers, most of whom are non-professional actors, with relevant historical events serving as the background against which these life-worlds unfold. The series continues, in this unique community-based format, Chong's career-long interest in critically engaging

4 Ping Chong, "Creator's Note", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, The New Victory Theater, 2018, p. 4.

5 The list of long-standing company funders includes the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, The Ford Foundation, The Fan Fox & Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Howard Gilman Foundation, The Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation, The Hyde and Watson Foundation, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, The Shubert Foundation, The Leon Levy Foundation, The Lucille Lortel Foundation, as well as numerous individual donors. See *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, *op. cit.*

6 Ping Chong + Company, "Undesirable Elements", *Ping Chong + Company Website*.

7 "Playbill for *Undesirable Elements: New York (a work-in-progress)* at Henry Street Settlement's Nations of New York Arts Festival", Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

with official History with a capital H, either by retelling it from an absolutely unusual perspective, for instance, through an aliens' reconstruction of the racial history of the US in *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre- and Post-Racial America* (2014), or by excavating long-forgotten/ invisible/ suppressed histories, such as in *Alaxsxa/ Alaska* (2017), which explores the little-known history of intercultural encounters in that space, to name but two of the company's more recent non-*Undesirable Elements* productions. Ever since the 1980s, prior to conceiving the series, Chong had been recognized as an influential *auteur*[8] of the US performing and visual arts scene on the strength of his aesthetically spectacular, multidisciplinary works bringing together text, movement, sound scores, and a distinctive visual stagecraft, in their prismatic explorations of the intersections of history, culture, technology, and the media. While the sparse format of the series at hand departs from the stunning *mise-en-scène* of Chong's other works, his signature subject matter—with a focus on the dynamics of sameness and difference, individual and community—nonetheless infuses and shapes the community-based pieces as well. This is precisely what distinguishes them within the wider spectrum of theatre projects of this kind, which have been traditionally produced by community-based companies and professional ensembles primarily or exclusively devoted to this kind of work, such as Roadside Theater[9] or Cornerstone Theater Company,[10] to name only two of the most prominent contemporary examples. Created by an *auteur* whose oeuvre has ramified, over the past five decades, in multiple artistic directions and media (theatre and performance; visual arts and multimedia installations; and video works), *Undesirable Elements* is a *rara avis* of this field.

Based on the oral histories of the performers, the pieces in the series bring their own specific contributions to this continuum of historical reflection, given that they themselves are very much about time, about chronology, about the unfolding of personal histories against the backdrop of the march of entangled political histories. Over the years, this flexible interweaving of micro- and macro-histories has enabled the series

8 See, for instance, Chong's inclusion in Frank Rich's "Auteur Directors Bring New Life to Theater", *New York Times,* November 24, 1985.

9 Founded in 1975 in central Appalachia, Roadside Theater has documented the cultural identity of this region in plays created for, by, and with various local communities; their more recent work also includes "intercultural" plays produced in collaboration with other culturally specific theatres such as Pregones.

10 Founded in 1986, the LA-based Cornerstone Theater Company has created a broad spectrum of works ranging from adaptions of the classics in rural communities across the US (1986-92) to multi-year play cycles exploring, from multiple angles and within diverse communities (of age, geography, culture, workplace etc.), such topics as *Faith* (2001-5), *Justice* (2007-10), or *Hunger* (2011-17).

to function in a variety of contexts, accommodating a plethora of community-specific issues and a broad spectrum of communities, ranging from immigrants who shared the condition of cultural and linguistic in-betweenness in the "cultural" productions of the first decade, to individuals with different types of, and experiences with, disability (*Inside/ Out...voices from the disability community*, 2008), to African American women from the same Pittsburgh neighborhood (*The Women of the Hill*, 2009), to survivors of sexual abuse (*Secret Survivors*, 2011), or to Brooklyn-based activists (*Brooklyn '63*, 2013), in more recent pieces. Replicated and adapted from production to production, this format—which includes an introduction in the participants' native languages, a mix of historical and personal entries, an occasional "What Do You Think Of...?" section, and an outro in which the cast members reintroduce themselves in English—is, to my knowledge, a unique phenomenon within the landscape of community-based theatre in the US.

Famously defined by Richard Owen Geer as theatre "of the people, by the people, for the people,"[11] community-based theatre distinguishes itself within the larger field of applied theatre practices by privileging the role of the community at all the stages of developing and producing the work. To quote from Jan Cohen-Cruz, community-based theatre is premised upon an understanding of the community as "a primary source of the text, possibly of the performers as well, and definitely a goodly portion of the audience."[12] This description suggests an underlying philosophy which not only grants access, but also invests the community with varying degrees of authority over the finished product. Cohen-Cruz's three-fold account calls attention to the ways in which this type of theatre facilitates a process whereby individuals with stakes in that community-specific issue are offered the opportunity to respond to it in a public space, while also allowing other community members to participate in the *sui generis* agora created within the frame of the performance. While the ambivalent status of community-based theatre (is it art or social work?) continues to be a matter of critical debate and while the practices within its wide spectrum remain quite diverse—in point of dramaturgy, development, production (collaborations with other institutions), and performance (aesthetic modes and forms)—what nevertheless connects such different strands is a shared vision underlining the importance of process and a

11 Richard Owen Geer, "Of the People, By the People, and For the People: The Field of Community Performance", *High Performance*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1993, pp. 28-31.

12 Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, New Brunswick/ New Jersey / London, Rutgers UP, 2005, p. 2.

similar conception of the political labor and the intended (if not always guaranteed) outcomes thereof.

In this regard, Petra Kuppers discusses community-based performance as resting "in process rather than product, in the act of working together, allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to emerge." [13] This might lead to imagining and enacting certain types of group dynamics and forms of reciprocity and collaboration predicated on the equal value of all participants and their respective contributions to the collective project. Ultimately, the processes at work in the collective creation of community-based theatre (from interviews, story circles and workshops, to rehearsals, to performances, to follow-up activities) provide the participants—practitioners and non-professionals alike—as well as the audience with "models of how we live together, suggesting something bigger than our individual selves." [14] One productive strand of analysis has examined the political function of such processes by establishing an analogy between their core principles and those of participatory democracies. For instance, Cohen-Cruz argues that community-based theatre is informed by the same principles of "call and response" inherent in empowered democracies, i.e., first of all, "practical orientation" towards specific concerns "narrowly enough defined to be achievable," secondly, "bottom-up participation," ensuring that the voice of those affected by the aforementioned concerns is heard, and, finally, a process of deliberation and collective decision-making predicated on listening to each other and leading to sensible "group choices." [15] Embedded within such models of working and living together, and investing the community with the function of the "dramaturg," community-based theatre seeks to build "an avenue to individual empowerment and community development," [16] thus not only responding to social realities but aiming to positively change them. Such intended social outcomes are inextricable from its process-oriented nature, as Susan Haedicke argues in a seminal article on the dramaturgy of this format:

> These performance texts give the community a voice and help establish bonds that create "community" largely because the "text" is not just the finished product, but also the process. It is a process that enables the community to look at its history, its

13 Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 4.

14 Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

16 Susan Chandler Haedicke, "Dramaturgy in Community-Based Theatre", *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, no. 3, 1998, p. 132.

> contributions, its successes, and its failures. It is a process that allows the community to experiment with strategies to solve their particular problems. It is a process that encourages a sense of identity and fosters pride. [17]

Starting from the same premise that community-based theatre should be analyzed not only through the lens of the finished product, but rather as process and praxis, this essay engages in a multi-layered account of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*, zooming in on the dramaturgical development of the play in the first part, exploring the thematic concerns of the text in the second, and finally offering an insight into the reception of the production, based on a number of audience questionnaires as well as reactions within the frame of a talkback discussion.

THE DRAMATURGY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORAL HISTORY PERFORMANCE

A brief retrospective look towards the beginnings of the series is instrumental in understanding what has meanwhile become the formalized development process at the core of *Undesirable Elements*. In the fall of 1992, Chong was commissioned to produce a theatre piece meant to accompany an installation he had made at Artists Space in NYC. Entitled *A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements*, the installation was based on the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion encapsulated in the image of a quarantine facility. Both pieces—the visual arts installation and the subsequent performance—revolved around an exploration of such questions as: "Who is doing the channeling? What, or whom, is being contained and why? Who/ what is undesirable? And according to whom?" [18] Without providing any settled answers, the two pieces aimed instead to open up a space of critical reflection in which the audience could grapple with such ambiguities in a productive way. Within the frame of the performance, it was the figure of the immigrant Other that became the vehicle for an exploration of such issues. Wishing to create a piece based on the play of possibilities inherent in bringing together a medley of languages and cultures on stage, Chong gathered a group of friends and collaborators at his apartment in NYC, who were hailing from such places as

17 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

18 "Program Notes for Ping Chong's *A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements*, Installation, Performance and Video", Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

Ukraine, Japan, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Germany, Lebanon, and sharing the condition of cultural in-betweenness. They became the cast of the first production, entitled *Undesirable Elements I (a work-in-progress)*.

Based on the stories shared that evening at Chong's place and developed in collaboration with the cast, that first piece offered a journey through the diverse political dislocations of the twentieth century, as embodied in the individual and collective acts of remembering performed by the interviewees themselves in the space of the quarantine facility at the gallery. These acts delved into stories and histories from different cultural spaces, spoken in different rhythms and registers, converging and diverging in their concerns, enhancing one another, and adding layer upon layer of meaning to what was starting to emerge as the co-created history of a community in the making—one that would later incorporate so many other communities and stories, with each new piece in the series. They were stories about the colonial legacies in the Philippines, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, escaping from Ukraine during WW2, the sterilization of Native American women, or the Civil War in Lebanon. Above all, they were stories about the ambivalent condition of selves necessarily inscribed at the intersection of multiple subject positions, allegiances, and affiliations, stories about the challenges of forging sites of belonging while engaging in a process of renegotiating the boundaries between past and present, as well as those between ethnic, national, and cultural identities. While the focus of the pieces has expanded in more recent productions, the overarching questions of belonging and of negotiating shifting landscapes of identity while navigating various power structures and social matrixes have been the red threads circulating, in different shapes, throughout the series.

As more and more productions were commissioned, the development process itself acquired a more rigorous, multi-step structure. It now begins with the company reaching out to its partner organization(s) with a view to finding potential participants who fit the focus of the production and are willing to share their personal histories on stage. The candidates first complete an application form designed by the company, which, in the case of *Generation NYZ*, included questions about their background and family history, the groups and communities they identify with, the challenges they see as currently urgent within such communities, their experience of living in NYC, with a focus on memories of "feeling like an outsider," and the spaces where they have found "a sense of belonging or support." [19] The questionnaires offer a first significant insight into the model of living together promoted by this project and the

19 Ping Chong + Company, "*Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", *op. cit.* The application form was available on the website in the fall of 2017; it has since been deleted.

types of communities it hopes to engender. Such requirements as willingness "to make critical observations about one's culture" and "to allow others to express contrary opinions or political views"[20] anticipate the political vision supported by the show itself, suggesting a praxis premised upon critical distance towards one's community (as opposed to mythologized celebrations thereof) as well as an informed and respectful openness towards diversity and otherness. Based on these questionnaires, the company then selects a number of people for the in-depth interviews. As Sara Zatz explains, for the production under discussion, the company reached out to over fifty schools and community organizations in NYC, hoping to find a group of teenagers of diverse backgrounds and experiences of coming of age in the metropolis; twenty of them were selected for the interview, and, ultimately, seven stories made their way into the show.[21] As stated in the application forms for the productions, the selected participants receive stipends for the rehearsals and performances.

While the process has become more formalized over time, the germs of *Undesirable Elements* have been located, then and now, in the act of sharing stories about oneself—to company members in the interview sessions, to fellow performers in rehearsals, to audience members in performance. Then and now, the text of the productions has grown out of these interviews. Thus, as Chong explained in a personal interview, in that first moment of text development, the interview sessions, the goal of the artistic team is to create a safe and productive listening and narrating environment, so as to help the interviewees "get at the truth of their stories,"[22] as layered, storied, framed as that truth might be. This process of getting at the truth also implies that the performers have to do some background research into the histories of their families as well as the larger political histories of their home countries. For the cast members, this veritable learning process turns them into historians digging into their family's past and their respective countries' histories, confronting the gaps and frictions of narratives whose meaning is not always immediately decipherable. Naturally, weaving their memories about specific events around the memories of family members necessarily reshapes and complicates the performers' original accounts.

It is intriguing to think about the ways in which the company then translates these poignant fragments—interview and research entries—into dramatic forms, especially in light of negotiating "the power and the responsibility of making public what had

20 *Ibid.*

21 Amy Zhang, "Creating Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ", *The New Victory Theater Blog*, January 5, 2018.

22 Ping Chong, "Interview conducted by the author", New York City, November 30, 2017.

been told in private."[23] Worth emphasizing here is the fact that this is no verbatim theatre, but a dramatization of the interview material that ensures thematic and stylistic coherence across the series, while aesthetically heightening and harmonizing all the individual contributions in the emerging play. Of course, this two-fold dramaturgical orientation carries a potential for tension, setting in motion, on the one hand, a certain negotiation of authority and "voice(s)" between the interviewees and the facilitators,[24] as well as one between the individual "monologues" shared in the interviews and their orchestration as intersecting fragments of a "dialogue" in the play. As has been noted, theatre projects of this type, whose purpose is "to give a voice to the voiceless," or to create a platform through which previously unheard voices can be amplified, often run the risk, in Janet Gibson's words, of speaking "*for*," rather than speaking "*with*," which suggests an "appropriation" rather than a "negotiation" of voices.[25] To address the tension delineated above, the creative team makes sure each voice and each story has equal weight in the production, and all the performers have full editing rights over their parts, including the right to change their mind about sharing certain stories or details throughout the development of the piece. A comment made in a talkback by one of the cast members of *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*, currently the most successful piece of the series, is instrumental in understanding the principles underpinning this stage of dramaturgical construction. Describing it as "an inclusive process" whereby the practitioners had to rewrite her lines multiple times until she could hear her own "voice,"[26] the performer thus offered an insight into the ethics of collaborative practice at the heart of the project, into sharing authority over representation, and, ultimately, into a process of collective decision-making and a sense of mutual recognition.

23 Della Pollock, "Telling the Told: Performing Like a Family", *Oral History Review*, no. 18, 1990, p. 15.

24 The term is widely used in social justice and community development projects in various fields, including applied theatre / theatre for social change, "to connote commitment to certain principles—of *enablement* and participant-centredness—and *processes* that involve equitable *negotiation* between those involved." Theorists and practitioners working with such tools have called attention to the necessity of developing self-reflexive practices of *critical* facilitation, with a view to "uncovering the complexity of the dynamics of facilitation and seeking to understand the power relations that exist within and beyond a workshop." Sheila Preston, "Introduction to Facilitation", in Sheila Preston (ed.), *Facilitation: Pedagogies, Practices, Resilience*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016, p. 1, 4, emphases in the original.

25 Janet Gibson, "Saying it Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre", *NEO: Journal for Higher Degree Research Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 4, 2011, p. 5.

26 "Talkback with the Cast of *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*", City Lore, New York City, November 15, 2017.

This account of the process by no means assumes that the performers' voice is invested with authenticity, whereas the theatrical dramatization necessarily alters that authenticity, but rather looks at the process of turning the interviews into the performance text as the result of negotiating (equally constructed) representations.

What emerges at the end of this process of rewriting, editing and restructuring the raw interview material is a script arranged chronologically into a predetermined yet adaptable structure, common to all the productions in the series, which interweaves the personal and family histories of the cast, on the one hand, and significant events of global political history with an impact on those micro-histories, on the other, in a collage of intersecting testimonials. Finally, the text is infused with the artistic signature of the creative team, including phrases that circulate from one production to the next and a formalized visual, auditory, and movement-based framework that is repeated, with variations, in most of the pieces, giving coherence to the series. This design underscores the act of making memory and history on stage *together*: sometimes the entire cast repeats a word, phrase or sentence from one performer's account, uttering it in a collective voice and investing it with shared meaning. At various other times, the performers become characters in their colleagues' stories, giving voice to family, friends, co-workers, or authorities, thus covering the entire spectrum from allies displaying solidarity to antagonists embodying all kinds of obstacles. This polyphonic rendering is reinforced by a choreography of ritualistic gestures performed in unison, such as clapping or changing their seats several times during the show.

When the parts are dramatized and interwoven in what will become the provisional text of the play, the performers finally meet each other in rehearsals and get acquainted with their partners' histories. Thus, the oral history process already taking shape in the interviews comes to engender, in rehearsals, a reflexive space of re-membering one's history while encountering the histories of others, a space in which one's history acquires new significance in conversation with different voices and perspectives, a relational environment in which everyone is, in turns, storyteller and witness. As Della Pollock has noted, oral history is "a process of making history in dialogue, a cocreative, co-embodied, specially framed, contextually and intersubjectively contingent, sensuous, vital, artful in its achievement of narrative form, meaning and ethics."[27] Mohammad Murtaza, one of the performers of *Generation NYZ*, talks about the process of co-creating this history as one of his major takeaways from the project: "I wouldn't get the same experience if I wasn't working with these people and really

27 Della Pollock, "Introduction: Remembering", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 5.

trying to understand their backstories and how NYC has shaped them."[28] Another performer, Porscha Polkahantis Rippy, discusses her participation in the project along similar lines: "I'm with people I've never met and we're all coming together to tell our stories. I've never heard of something like this, so just being part of the process is exciting."[29] As demonstrated by the "community agreements" that the participants decide upon on their very first meeting ("respect each other's boundaries," "be open," "ask questions" etc.),[30] the rehearsal stage of the project is also informed by an ethics of responsibility and a desire to address any tensions that might arise in the process, including that between the interview "monologues" and their juxtaposition as a "dialogue" in the play. While community-based drama is certainly fraught with a wide array of anxieties inherent in the not-always-formalized power relationship holding between the participants and the facilitators, by negotiating and abiding by some specific principles and guidelines regulating the collaboration with the communities throughout the stages of the process, the *Undesirable Elements* series might serve indeed as an antidote to alleviate such concerns.

THE POLITICAL STAKES OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

In the talkback following the performance on January 20th, 2018, co-creator of the show Kirya Traber discussed one of the goals of the production as that of creating a critical intervention in the reductive representations of NYC youth in the media and public discourse, which most frequently portray this category as either "Upper East / West Side fancy" or by association with "the hood, and cops, and guns."[31] As Traber argued, the stories of NYC teenagers are much more complicated and diverse than these two rather stereotypical narratives which have come to dominate the mainstream imaginary. Interested in giving voice to a wide array of stories illuminating how particular individuals live and make sense of their multiple positionings, the play foregrounds stories of coming of age scattered across the five boroughs, from East New York to West Harlem, and from Far Rockaway to the Bronx. As such, it expands the tropes of representation by bringing to the fore the seldom heard voices of young protagonists facing multiple deprivations and vulnerabilities in a city portrayed, from

28 "Meet Generation NYZ", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

30 Amy Zhang, "Creating Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ", art. cit.

31 Kirya Traber, "Talkback with the Cast and the Creators of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

the very beginning, in a balanced manner, as a site of "diversity, acceptance, culture, and opportunity," but also as a space of "cops, capitalism, gentrification, homelessness, and inequality."[32]

Just as in the previous productions, the narrative arc goes beyond the personal stories of the performers to consider the wider historical forces that have determined the paths of their ancestors' lives and, in particular, their decision to settle in NYC. From the very beginning, this contextualization suggests the ways in which the stories of the protagonists are embedded in and framed by multiple layers of re-membering and re-constructing, preserving the traces of all those who have interacted with them in one way or another. This historical arc includes, on the one hand, the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the cities in the North, and, on the other, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which eliminated national quotas that privileged immigration from Western and Northern European countries in the hopes of attracting skilled labor from other parts of the world to the US. The first migration path brought Porscha's grandfather to NYC from a Tennessee farm, while the second policy allowed Mohammad's parents to leave Pakistan for NYC after winning the visa lottery, and Syl's mother to flee war-torn Yugoslavia and arrive in the US as a refugee. Other performers' families have come to NYC in the wake of more recent dislocations: Monica's mother fled a life of poverty and violence in Mexico, crossing the border into the US as an undocumented immigrant, while Rafael's mother and siblings fled the high crime rate in Puerto Rico for a better future on the mainland. However, for none of them did the city prove to be as welcoming and full of opportunities as they might have expected. For example, Mohammad's father, a lawyer in Pakistan, was not licensed to practice law in the US, so he had to work two jobs at Wendy's and 7-Eleven to support his family. Throughout his high school years, Rafael and his family had to live in a homeless shelter, as they could not find any affordable housing. Not being able to apply for a computer science program open to US citizens only, Monica realized not only that her family's undocumented status involves no legal protection, but also that "not being a citizen is holding [her] back from [her] dreams."[33] Overall, the play

32 Ping Chong + Company in collaboration with the performers Edwin Aguila, Monica Victoria Tatacoya Castañeda, Syl (Andrea) Egerton, Mohammad Murtaza, De-Andra Pryce, Porscha Polkahantis Rippy, Rafael Rosario, *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* Performance, The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018. All subsequent references and quotes from this show are excerpted from this performance.

33 *Ibid.*

succeeds in dramatizing the ways in which the performers negotiate their experiences at the intersection of two narratives—one that they and their families have created for themselves as residents of the US, driven by the promise of opportunity at the core of the myth of the American dream, the other perpetuated by the political and media discourse, which frames them as ethno-racial and / or cultural Others, or as "illegal," in the case of undocumented migrants.

A prominent strand of the piece gravitates around the ways in which the performers have grappled with various forms of discrimination and social marginalization, learning to negotiate their places within a landscape dominated by boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In this regard, the narrative works by accumulation of detail: Monica was called "a dirty Mexican" by her schoolmates, who refused to sit next to her in class; Syl was ostracized by his classmates in Strasbourg due to his unconventional look and clothing style; Edwin's school years were similarly marked by bullying on account of his weight; in the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia, Mohammad was constantly harassed and called "terrorist"; finally, the examiners at a college acting program audition found Porscha's Shakespeare monologue unexpectedly "articulate" (for a girl from the Bronx, she adds).[34] As young as they might be, the performers understand the paradoxes and contradictions of living in a metropolis like NYC, especially in what concerns law enforcement and police brutality—the most striking aspect of everyday life that Syl noticed upon moving from France to the US. The security protocols at Porscha's high school in the Bronx make her "feel like a criminal" every day; however, as Edwin remarks, even if the police are everywhere, they will do nothing to fix the problem of shootings in his neighborhood.[35] This observation illustrates one of the strategies frequently employed in the play, namely shifting from personal experiences and individual discontent to a critique of the larger structures perpetuating certain forms of violence, precariousness, and structural insecurity. Significantly, the play references several times the shooting of Mike Brown and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement, and even stages at one point a moment of protest in which all the performers chant "Black Lives Matter, no justice, no peace!"[36] raising their arms and clenching their fists. While the show certainly serves as an arena for staging one's identity and as a vehicle for individual empowerment, it nevertheless achieves its most nuanced commentary when gleaning the social and political matrixes in which these

34 *Ibid.*
35 *Ibid.*
36 *Ibid.*

individual lives are rooted, by contextualizing their struggles against the background of hegemonic forces that limit their agency and their claims for empowerment.

In full awareness of such limitations, the audience is positioned, throughout the play, as a witness to the seven protagonists' quests for identity and community. "Will I finally find a place to belong?,"[37] Rafael poignantly asks at one point, giving voice to a concern shared by all his stage colleagues. It is worth noting here that most of them first turn to their mixed ethnic and cultural background as a potential site of belonging. In giving an account of such rich backgrounds, the performers occasionally engage in deeply subjective, synesthetic descriptions of the sights, sounds, and tastes of their ancestors' countries, emerging at the intersection of different layers of perceptual, cognitive, and emotive experiences. As in the previous productions in the series, especially the "cultural" pieces of the 1990s, the narrative weaves into its structure a Muslim tale (of a young man's brave deeds), a poem in French, and a wealth of references to the Bosnian and Jamaican cuisine. Yet, as most of them learn, their hybrid lineages do not necessarily serve as a matrix of belonging and community, nor as a source of comfort. For instance, Mohammad finds it difficult to reconcile the gender norms in his Muslim upbringing with those of mainstream American society; furthermore, he realizes that his struggles with depression are "untranslatable" in his parents' culture. In one of the most stirring scenes of the play, we see Mohammad's father crossing into English so that they can finally talk about a subject like depression in a language that allows for such conversations. Embarking on her own quest for belonging, De-Andra comes to acknowledge that "Jamaica is home but it's not; when I'm in New York I feel like a Jamaican, but when I'm in Jamaica, I feel like an American."[38] While she is interested in celebrating her heritage by representing her island at the West Indian Day Parade, she nonetheless feels disconnected from her roots, "like [her] own people hate [her]." In the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, Rafael muses about the difficulties of negotiating a sense of home in similar terms: "I worry about my sister and nephew; they're okay, but it's so hard to be so far away. My heart belongs to Puerto Rico, but I'm a New Yorker now. My life is here, the life I made for myself despite everything I'd been through and I don't know if I could ever go back."[39]

Such more or less fragile ties with the cultural background of their ancestors are not enough for these bold New Yorkers, who have to create their own voices and forge their own communities despite the setbacks outlined above. Having struggled with depression

37 *Ibid.*
38 *Ibid.*
39 *Ibid.*

for most of his high school years, Mohammad finds his community in the world of theatre and performance. Edwin starts to embrace the blackness in the Puerto Rican mix of cultures, while also becoming aware of the power of music as a tool to advocate for social issues, especially after he performs at the famous Nuyorican Poets Café. In an effort to show that she is "not just another girl from the Bronx" and "more than the stereotypes,"[40] Porscha becomes a musician and gets to play a solo at the prestigious Carnegie Hall; she also learns American Sign Language and plans to become an interpreter for the deaf. For Syl, NYC becomes an environment in which non-binary individuals can feel comfortable, a space in which gender identity can be expressed in one's preferred personal pronouns. Finally, as a Latina feminist, Monica discovers that she has a voice "and it feels good to use it,"[41] especially when it comes to dismantling pervasive assumptions and damaging stereotypes about Mexican immigrants and feminists.

> Every day people make assumptions about me. As a Mexican immigrant, people assume, "Oh you must clean houses." I do, but there's no shame in that.
> As a Christian, people assume, "Oh you must be homophobic." No, I believe in actual Christianity, not judging others.
> As a feminist, people assume, "Only ugly girls who can't find a man are feminists." Well, I am here to say I choose who I date, and I don't need anyone else to tell me what beauty is.[42]

As stressed in Monica's part, finding one's voice should not be regarded merely as an act of self-expression, but as a critical response to the dominant discourses about the categories with which she identifies. In her inquiries into the process of "coming to voice," with particular reference to women within oppressed groups, bell hooks draws attention to its potential as "an act of resistance" whereby "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject."[43] Coming to voice, however, is more than the act of telling one's experience; as hooks makes clear in an earlier text, moving into the position of the subject also allows for a "strategic" use of "coming to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects"[44]—about undocumentedness

40 *Ibid.*
41 *Ibid.*
42 *Ibid.*
43 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Cambridge, South End Press, 1989, p. 12.
44 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 148.

as a condition of being, in Monica's case. Not only does this strand of the play humanize statistics about undocumented youth, thus problematizing the simplified representations in the media, but it also imagines a performative vision of citizenship for the undocumented non-citizens. The ethical and political stakes of the play's engagement with undocumentedness lie, in fact, in disrupting Monica's legal identity as a "non-citizen," and bringing to the fore the urgency of a performative notion of citizenship enacted by "exercising, claiming and performing" rights and duties that are otherwise unauthorized.[45] As Monica herself explains the precariousness of her status, "to remain eligible for DACA, you can't have any criminal record, not even an arrest at a peaceful protest marching for your own rights, so I have to look for another way." This performance becomes that other way – not only a space of existence for a category mainly defined through its legal non-existence, but also a space in which she can make rights claims that are otherwise unavailable and contested, thus calling into being a broader and more generous understanding of citizenship.

hooks' comments might be extrapolated to all the voices in this performance and the ways in which they are strategically employed in order to give a nuanced account of such topics as gender fluidity, poverty, or bullying, which are often underrepresented, if not squarely silenced or suppressed, in mainstream discourses. "Occupying" a mainstream theatre space with their stories and bodies, and doing that in front of a diverse audience which also included their peers, i.e., individuals for whom theatre is hardly accessible otherwise, further reinforces the political manifesto of this young generation.

AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND THE ETHICAL DEMANDS OF LISTENING AND SPEAKING *WITH*

What is remarkable about this play and the other productions in the *Undesirable Elements* series is that this manifesto does not end when the show ends but actually bleeds into the talkback discussions which follow many of the performances. *Generation NYZ* thus creates an ethical space of encounter in which the audience is invited to reflect upon these stories and invest them with unexpected layers of meaning by placing them in conversation with their own experiences and worldviews. As a perusal of their history of productions and events clearly shows, Ping Chong + Company has always stressed the importance of audiences for their artistic practice, demonstrating

45 Engin F. Isin, "Performative Citizenship", in Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, Maarten Vink (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007, p. 502.

their commitment to enriching their work by adapting it to site-specific contexts and audience-driven agendas. As such, in addition to innovating in matters of theatrical form and content, the company has supported a long-standing goal of diversifying and expanding their audiences through various strategies, such as organizing related programs (workshops, presentations etc.) meant to enhance and extend the impact of the productions or making their shows available to members of the community by subsidizing tickets.[46]

That audience reception is part of the process and of the "text" of *Generation NYZ* is also suggested by the performers themselves in a series of one-minute video interviews produced by the company for the 2019 revival of the play at La MaMa ETC. As brief as they might be, these interviews show the performers' marked interest in prompting public debate and in pushing the conventional boundaries of the play so as to include the audience in its fabric. Notably, as part of their introductions to the play, the cast found it important to talk about "people in the audience who can relate" (Syl), about reaching "as many young people as possible" (De-Andra) and telling their story "so that other people can listen to it" (Rafael), and even about "help[ing] other people who have gone through things, or things similar" (Porscha). What seems to motivate the performers is the fact that their message "will not echo, but is gonna go to all the people in the audience, when they leave, they're gonna take it with them" (Mohammad).[47]

Listening and responding to the stories being testified to on stage thus becomes an integral part of the theatrical experience. According to D. Soyini Madison, embedded in the genre of personal narrative performance is the permission to respond, for, as she argues, "the stakes of the stories are often both intimately imagined and communally constituted,"[48] both individual and inextricable from a shared history of social processes. Madison further notes that this permission to engage with the stories on stage results in a shift from "notions of narrative ownership to an act of sharing—from the narrative as commodity to the narrative as commons—for the circulation of a wider public of listeners and receivers"[49]—or, in other words, from an act of speaking *to*, to one of speaking *with*. The act of speaking *with* (as opposed to speaking *for*) is therefore

46 Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

47 Ping Chong + Company, "Meet Syl", "Meet De-Andra", "Meet Rafael", "Meet Porscha", "Meet Mohammad", *Interviews with the Cast*, *YouTube*, January 11 and 25, 2019.

48 Soyini D. Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 136.

49 *Ibid.*

not only a major principle of the dramaturgical process, but one that expands to the process of audience reception.

Of course, the meaning-making processes in which theatre audiences engage have often been regarded as beyond the (full) control of theatre professionals, hence difficult to (fully) anticipate. In the case of the testimonial performance of stories of vulnerability and trauma, questions of reception are further complicated by what Julie Salverson has called "an aesthetic of injury"[50] or even "an erotics of injury"[51] that might prompt a dangerous combination of superficial empathy and voyeuristic identification on the part of the audience, while reinscribing a narrative that works to perpetuate the status of the protagonists as victims. To quote Salverson, the ethical conundrum at the heart of such theatre practices is: "how do you guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny difference?"[52] Moreover, how do you guard against turning the traumatic stories presented on stage into "an object of spectacle" to be consumed by audience members? Recounting her own experiences with an arts project about the lives of refugees in Canada, Salverson wonders whether, to what extent, and how such performances might "invite an encounter that does not dismiss empathy, but rather challenges the terms on which it is negotiated,"[53] creating, as she argues elsewhere, "an ethical space in which a relationship between detachment and contact occurs."[54] How can this type of performance prompt an audience that has not been affected by the issues at stake to better understand those who have? How can it help an audience for whom such experiences of vulnerability and violence are relatable? Ultimately, in light of the social change aspirations of community-based theatre, how can such works contribute to creating and cultivating a sense of responsibility towards the Other, as "active, caring citizen[s] in a collective world"?[55]

The public talkback after the performance on January 20, 2018, coupled with the audience questionnaires I designed and administered to several audience members of diverse ages and professional backgrounds, offered an illuminating case study for the

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50 Julie Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetic of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics", *Theatre Research in Canada/ Recherches théâtrales au Canada*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1999.

51 Julie Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury", *Theater*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2001, pp. 119-125.

52 Julie Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling", art. cit.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Julie Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms?", art. cit., p. 119.

55 Kathleen Gallagher, "Responsible Art and Unequal Societies: Towards a Theory of Drama and the Justice Agenda", in Kelly Freebody, Michael Finneran (eds), *Drama and Social Justice,* London / New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 57.

multi-layered reception of the play. While the limited number of questionnaires and talkback reactions to be discussed in what follows cannot account for larger patterns of reception, such responses are nevertheless instrumental in shedding light on the many different ways in which the audience wove its own tapestry of stories around the stories they had just heard on stage. In many ways, "the chamber piece of story-telling," [56] as the company describes the *Undesirable Elements* series, opened up to include the stories of the audience members themselves. As prefigured in the video-interviews with the performers, some of the responses were galvanized indeed by questions of relatability and identification. For instance, one audience member who identified as a Puerto Rican non-binary youth still in the closet asked Syl for advice about coming to terms with their own quest for identity. This young spectator was so inspired by the show that they decided to come out and acknowledge their gender non-conforming identity, for the very first time, in a public space. "I have never seen myself represented on stage before," [57] they added, which speaks to the company's achievement in urging others to "come to voice" themselves. Another audience member asked Rafael about making it through the years of living in the shelter, which positioned the performer as an "expert," investing him with the authority of lived experience. [58]

Further reactions from the questionnaires I conducted highlighted that the performers were "so brave to tell their stories which hurt them so much," which prompted that particular audience member to feel "happy for them that they can finally face and solve these problems, because the most important thing is they can be someone they really want to be." [59] This last response emphasized the affective landscapes generated by the show even in the absence of any identification processes at work, suggesting an interpretation of the play as a narrative of survival and resistance, of "facing" and "solving" problems, which skillfully escapes the dangerous cycle of violence and victimhood warned against by Salverson. While acknowledging the obstacles inherent in the performers' journeys, this audience member chose to focus on their agency in building their identities, on the ways in which they carved their own sense of selfhood in accordance with their desires and aspirations, as a major takeaway from the play.

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56 Ping Chong + Company, "Undesirable Elements", *op. cit.*.

57 Audience Member #1, "Talkback with the Cast and the Creators of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

58 Audience Member #2, "Talkback", event cited.

59 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by Y.L.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* Performance, The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

Furthermore, besides being jolted into an awareness of their position as witnesses of these lives, other questionnaires indicated a new or enhanced understanding of key issues that the play facilitated. One spectator wrote about the ways in which the play shed new light on the degree to which "life is so segregated in NYC and minorities are very disadvantaged in every aspect of life."[60] For such audience members, the performance became an arena where new understandings of racism, discrimination, and social exclusion were allowed to emerge, and a space which creates the conditions for the otherwise invisible stories of these young people to finally pierce the public discourse. In Madison's words, such performances function as "pedagogies of what we did not know or feel before, in this way,"[61] which serve to expose the audience to the un-common and the not-yet-imagined, the still-not-known, yet not-fully-knowable either. Still other spectators were inspired to think about the personal histories brought together and given dramatic shape in this performance, and, ultimately, about the writing of any history as implying a process of selection, editing, and organization, which necessarily privileges some figures and voices at the expense of others. To quote one such response: "The power of these narratives induced me to think about other issues—perhaps not directly raised in the play. For instance, why do we consider these stories worthy of selection and performance. What is achieved and what is silenced?"[62] Beyond the emotional burden of identification, such reactions testify to the ways in which the show can produce a type of historical insight emerging from this collective weaving of memories, words, and gestures into a performance. What kinds of stories, emotional landscapes, and "comings to voice" would have been amplified had there been a different selection of the performers? What other elements of this generation would have been "given voice?" As such, the staging of oral histories is not only a way of bringing "'the storied experience' of the uncelebrated into public conversation and debate,"[63] but also a space of reflection about the making of such histories, calling attention to the potential of performance to serve as "a means to express, to explore, and vicariously to experience history."[64]

60 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by S.S.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* performance cited.

61 Soyini D. Madison, *Performed Ethnography, op. cit.*, p. 137.

62 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by D.V.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* performance cited.

63 Jacquelyn D. Hall, "Afterword: Reverberations", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York / Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 188.

64 Natalie M. Fousekis, "Experiencing History: A Journey from Oral History to Performance", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 178.

What this selection of audience feedback demonstrates is the wide range of possibilities for responding to the performance, the many ways of learning from the acts of remembrance performed on stage, and, finally, the many ways of contributing to and sharing in the act of storytelling. Emphasizing the role of the audience as witnesses and interlocutors to these life-worlds rather than spectators per se, the show extends an invitation not only to communal reflection on the topics raised by the play, but, more importantly, to the type of involvement in civic life exemplified by the cast. If performance is indeed significant because it *does* something in the world, then audiences share just as much responsibility in doing their part and continuing the work begun by the creators of the show—both performers and theatre practitioners—in their communities. Beyond the "ethical demand"[65] of listening to and opening oneself up to the testimony of the Other, as Amanda Stuart Fisher fittingly describes it in Levinasian terms, there is another, subtler demand placed on the audience of community-based, personal narrative performance, that of re-envisioning oneself as a more thoughtful and more involved citizen of the world. Predicated on an ethics of inclusivity, collaboration, and responsibility at all stages of its development and production, community-based theatre seeks to model the same values in its audience members, who are given an opportunity to practice ways of being listeners and tellers, and, ultimately, ways of engaging with and responding to each other in a communal setting, within the frame of the performance events and especially the talkbacks. From the collaborative dramaturgical processes of creating the play whereby the participants and the practitioners become partners in conversation, to the performance event which emphasizes the collective act of "coming to voice" together as part of a community in the making, to the reception processes which incorporate the audience into the fabric of this community of storytellers and witnesses, community-based theatre thus creates the conditions for a re-imagining of ways of living together within a turbulent social and political context where such models are not always foregrounded.

65 Amanda Stuart Fisher, "Bearing Witness: The Position of Theatre Makers in the Telling of Trauma", in Tim Prentki, Sheila Preston (eds), *The Applied Theatre Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 114.

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Notice

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Abstract

In conversation with recent theoretical explorations of community-based theatre and oral history performance, this article offers an analysis of *Generation NYZ* (2018), the 25th year anniversary production of Ping Chong + Company's *Undesirable Elements* series (1992-), one of the most vibrant and enduring theatrical projects of this kind on the contemporary American stage. Relying on a wide array of source materials, including interviews, archival material and audience feedback, the three-fold inquiry looks at the dramaturgical processes at work in the creation of the play (within the context of the whole series), its main thematic concerns and the stakes of "coming to voice" (hooks), as well as the politics of audience reception. This approach shows that the format of community-based theatre transcends the primacy of the text and its performance, encompassing instead a broader range of processes, from dramaturgy to reception, which could all be regarded as working towards and rehearsing "models of how we live together" (Cohen-Cruz).

Key words

community-based theatre; oral history; youth theatre; dramaturgy; reception; social change

Résumé

En dialogue avec les récentes explorations théoriques du théâtre communautaire et de la performance fondée sur l'histoire orale, cet article offre une analyse de *Generation NYZ* (2018), le spectacle qui a marqué le 25ème anniversaire de la série *Undesirable Elements* (1992-) de Ping Chong + Company, l'un des projets théâtraux les plus durables et les plus vivants dans son genre sur la scène américaine contemporaine. À partir d'un large éventail de sources, d'entretiens, de documents d'archives et questionnaires aux spectateurs, la présente analyse vise à déplier d'abord le processus dramaturgique à l'origine de la pièce (dans le contexte de cette série) ; puis les thématiques les plus importantes et la « découverte de la voix » (hooks) ; enfin les enjeux politiques de la réception. Cette approche montre que le format du théâtre communautaire met en question la primauté du texte et de sa mise-en-scène, et comprend une gamme complexe de processus, de la « dramaturgie » à la réception, qui peuvent être conçus comme une façon de répéter et de s'approprier des « modèles du vivre ensemble » (Cohen-Cruz).

Mots-clés

théâtre communautaire américain; histoire orale; théâtre pour les jeunes; dramaturgie; réception; changement social

INDECENT: CHALLENGING NARRATIVES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM THROUGH COLLABORATIVE CREATION AND THE USE OF MEMORY AS A DRAMATURGICAL DEVICE

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Co-created by writer Paula Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman, *Indecent* was co-commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, premiering at the La Jolla Playhouse and then the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2015 before transferring to New York in 2016, where it played for a year. *Indecent* is a play-within-a-play, telling the story of the play *God of Vengeance* by Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, from its beginnings in the theatres of turn-of-the-century Europe to its downfall in 1920s New York where it was censored for indecency for portraying a lesbian kiss on stage. When I saw the play on Broadway in 2017, I was struck by two central elements. Firstly, the themes in *Indecent* felt incredibly relevant, reflecting the socio-political shifts that occurred during its conception, development and production—the changing ways in which American society (and the US government) perceived immigrants and minorities. Secondly, in conjuring up historical memory, not only of *God of Vengeance* but also of early twentieth-century European Jews, *Indecent* made the act of memorial both theatrically inventive and emotionally wounding for the audience.

The act of making this play, of telling this story, demonstrates Vogel and Taichman's profound ambivalence about America's trajectory as a country; *Indecent* is a celebration of queer stories but also a mourning for the decline of liberal democracy and progressive foreign policy. They use Asch's play and the story of its production in order to comment on the parallels between the rise of populism, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in early 20th century and during the Trump Administration, while also creating what Joanna Mansbridge calls a "site[s] for remembrance" for the tragedy of the Holocaust.[1] Since that fateful Broadway production of *God of Vengeance* in 1923, there have been significant victories for the LGBTQ community in terms of legislation and also the representation of queer stories on stage, as evidenced by the critical and box office success of *Indecent*. In April 2016, Vogel was finally awarded the

1 Joanna Mansbridge, "Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*", *Modern Drama*, vol. 61, no. 4, Winter 2018, p. 489.

Ph.D. Cornell University had refused her many years ago, accepting *Indecent* as her revised dissertation project. "To go back and receive the generosity and mentorship of younger colleagues who embrace queer and lesbian studies makes me think you just have to live long enough," she explained.[2] However, Vogel's play asks us to also consider the parallels between draconian immigration policies passed in America in the 1920s and those that have been passed by the Trump Administration. The metatheatricality of the play-within-a-play conceit allows the piece to reflect the changes in the socio-political landscape occurring during the creation and production of their show, from the Obama Administration to the Trump Era. "It's terrifying to think that we're at another swing of a pendulum. We can't let it turn back."[3] In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which Vogel and Taichman engage with the story of *God of Vengeance* to explore the historical limits of American liberalism through collaborative theatre-making and the use of memory and memorial as dramaturgical devices, asking the audience to consider their contemporary political context.

RESTAGING AND REIMAGINING *GOD OF VENGEANCE*

Indecent is the product of Vogel and Taichman's collaboration, using the creation, production, performance and reception of *God of Vengeance* as a way of interrogating history through various modes of performance. Vogel and Taichman developed the play together during multiple residencies, workshops and commissioning periods, alongside co-composers Aaron Halva and Lisa Gutkin and choreographer David Dorfman. Vogel and Taichman had come across *God of Vengeance* individually, as university students, harbouring a love for the play and a need to find a way of telling the story of its creation and the night it was censored in New York.[4] In her programme note for the Broadway production, Vogel says, "A young married man, Sholem Asch,

2 Paula Vogel quoted in Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, "With her eerily timely 'Indecent', Paula Vogel unsettles American theatre again," *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2017.

3 *Ibid.*

4 "I started thinking about the story that was at the heart of *Indecent* 20 years ago. As a student, I happened on all the materials about the play *The God of Vengeance* and its obscenity trial and I tried to make a piece then. It was called *The People vs. The God of Vengeance*. It was clearly a meaningful story but not well enough told. As a writer, I was trying to figure out how to do it myself and I couldn't figure out how to contain the complexity of it. I pursued, I never let go of, the longing to tell that story. [...] When finally I found Paula Vogel, who had an equal passion for *The God of Vengeance*, it felt like a miracle." Rebecca Taichman, quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, "Stage directions: Tony Winner Rebecca Taichman Explains How Indecent Permanently Changed Her Outlook", *Playbill*, February 14, 2018.

wrote this love scene between two women in 1907? To this day I have not read as beautiful a scene between two women, one that accorded their love the pure desire of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony."[5] Written in Yiddish by Asch in Warsaw in 1906, *God of Vengeance* is about Yankl, a Jewish brothel owner, whose daughter Rifkele falls in love with Manke, one of the sex workers in the brothel, during her betrothal to a young man from a respectable family. Yankl has had an expensive Torah scroll made to raise his daughter's status in the eyes of her fiancé's family but when he discovers the affair, he banishes both the scroll and his daughter to the brothel in anger. Although the play toured Europe before and after the First World War to great acclaim and full houses and had a successful run in downtown New York theatres (in Yiddish and then English), when the English language version transferred to Broadway in 1923, the entire cast was thrown in jail under an obscenity law for depicting the first lesbian kiss staged in an American theatre.

Vogel and Taichman use excerpts from *God of Vengeance* within the format of the metatheatrical play-within-a-play, manipulating the passage of time and illuminating the significance of the changing socio-historical setting to the journey of the play, as well as its creators.[6] *Indecent* is seen through the eyes of Lemml, a shtetl tailor who becomes the play's stage manager when he hears Asch read his play in Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz's Warsaw salon. We follow Lemml as he travels with the play around Europe and then to New York, seeing short fragments from *God of Vengeance* that highlight the various themes within it: sin, salvation, sexuality, greed, pride and love. This mechanism gives a context for the story, allowing us to explore different cultural norms and speculate on the contrasting audience reactions, why Europeans applauded and Americans were shocked. *Indecent* is both scripted and staged in order to perform these episodes by engaging with different theatrical tools; Vogel and Taichman utilise scenes from *God of Vengeance*, historical events (such as the obscenity trial),[7] speculative historical scenes (such as Lemml's encounter with American playwright Eugene O'Neill), fictional scenes and sequences that imitate early 20th-century Yiddish performance. Mansbridge writes that in her work, "Vogel mobilizes a variety of dramatic forms,

5 Paula Vogel, *Indecent* Playbill programme, 2017.

6 It is interesting to note that neither Asch's play nor an English translation are cited anywhere in the programme or the published play text, leaving us to wonder if the scenes from *God of Vengeance* are direct quotes, paraphrased lines or Asch's dialogue as rewritten by Vogel.

7 As with dialogue purporting to be from *God of Vengeance*, there is nothing to indicate whether the historical scenes, such as the court trial or Rabbi Silverman's denunciation of the play, are taken verbatim from transcripts or if they were rewritten by Vogel.

like circular and repetitive structures, to reconfigure Artistotelian elements, reorient audiences' expectations, and subvert habitual ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling."[8] These episodic, continually changing ways of telling the story ask the audience to interrogate history, questioning expectations we may have about early 20th-century emigration to America; this, we learn, is not a story of the triumph of the Ellis Island immigrant seeking the American dream, but rather one of American intolerance and its consequences. Towards the end of the play, when Lemml decides to return to Poland, he tells Asch:

> I am done being in a country that laughs at the way I speak. They say America is free? What do you know here is free? All over Europe we did this play with no Cossacks shutting us down. Berlin, Moscow, Odessa—everywhere there is theatre! [...] I am leaving this country.[9]

We see Lemml return to Poland, only to meet his fate in a concentration camp years later. As the audience is forced to confront the painful dramatic irony of Lemml's statement, the play creates a site for Holocaust remembrance, not only for the six million Jewish people who were slaughtered but also for the lost culture of those people that once thrived in Europe.

As Vogel herself acknowledges, the inherently collaborative nature of *Indecent*, the interweaving of text, dance, music and design, enables the play to bring together multiple settings and time periods, activating complex ideological, political and historical concepts for the audience. The production features a small company of seven performers who sing and sometimes play instruments, along with a three-piece klezmer band; these performers and instrumentalists worked with Vogel, Taichman, their composers and choreographer over the course of two years to develop the work. The director calls *Indecent* a hybrid form of theatre, music and dance, explaining that, "the music...propels us through time", serving as connective tissue for the different locations and time periods, from Peretz's salon in Warsaw in 1906 to Asch's house in Connecticut in 1952.[10] This interweaving serves a practical function, facilitating transitions between countries and time periods without significant set or costume changes; because the play is ultimately being presented as a production of *God of Vengeance* in a Jewish ghetto during the war, (though this is not explicitly suggested in the published play text) Taichman dressed the actors in clothing from the 1940s

8 Joanna Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 7.
9 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, New York, TCG, 2017, p. 61.
10 Rebecca Taichman, interviewed by Charlie Rose for *Charlie Rose*, August 1, 2017.

throughout and limited the set to a wooden stage, a table, some chairs, blankets and suitcases, making an allusion to the war years and the Holocaust that the audience doesn't necessarily comprehend until later on in the play. For example, the troupe performs a 1923 Broadway hit song, "Ain't We Got Fun," in brash American accents, top hats and kick lines, aping the hedonism and superficiality of America in the Roaring 20s and providing a counterpoint to the next scene where Asch is talking to his doctor about his compromised mental health, induced by a trip to Europe where he witnessed pogroms in Jewish villages.[11] The play uses this transition to move the narrative quickly between different locations, creating a stark contrast in tone to underscore the theme of the danger of America's increasingly isolationist foreign policy and its link to the vulnerability of European Jews. Feminist theatre scholar Sharon Friedman categorises the plays of Vogel and playwrights that work with adaptation as "re-visions".

> [They] stress the element of interpretation involved in the productions [...].The artists' visions, their approach to elucidating prior texts, though certainly varied, share an awareness that we are all subject to historical contingencies, beliefs, and commitments that inform our responses and expectations. Re-vision means to see and see again. Theatre artists observing, reflecting on their observations, and interrogating the underpinnings of their responses to works that have historical currency produce new texts that are layered and open-ended, inviting audiences to engage in the process of interpretation.[12]

It is the layers of *Indecent* that allow us to find meaning in the story of *God of Vengeance*, as the Jewish company performs the play again and again for us from their Polish ghetto, revealing itself not only to be a reminder of lost Yiddish worlds but also, as Taichman says, "a reminder to love in times of hatred".[13] At the beginning, when Asch's wife Madje reads the play for the first time, she tells him, "My God, Sholem. It's all in there. The roots of all evil: the money, the subjugation of women, the false piety...the terrifying violence of that father...and then, oh Sholem, the two girls in the rain scene!"[14] In *Indecent*, Vogel and Taichman are re-visioning *God of Vengeance* as a play about love between two women against the odds, and the ghetto production of the play as an act of love and faith in and of itself in a time of intolerance and isolationism.

11 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

12 Sharon Friedman, "Introduction", in Sharon Friedman (ed.), *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works: Critical Essays*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009, p. 8.

13 Rebecca Taichman, interviewed by Charlie Rose for *Charlie Rose*, August 1, 2017.

14 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

USES OF MEMORY AS A THEATRICAL DEVICE

In his seminal 1940 essay "On the Concept of History', written before he attempted to flee Nazi-occupied Europe, Walter Benjamin wrote, "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger."[15] Benjamin acknowledges how subjective the concept of history is because it is bound up with the nebulous, unpredictable, human mechanism of memory, that the only way to try to understand history is to attempt to interrogate the individual memories and images we harbour. Vogel and Taichman also acknowledge the conundrum of the difficulty of dramatizing history, centering *Indecent* around these images, these flashes of Lemml's memories, blending together history and historical fiction. We learn at the end of *Indecent* that we have been watching the story of Asch's play through the lens of a performance of it, produced in secretive, dire conditions in an attic in the Łódź Ghetto in 1943 (a documented, historical occurrence) through the fictional character of Lemml. It is the way that Vogel has chosen to present this revelation that is so poignant—that for nearly two hours we do not realise that we have been watching a doomed people, or as Vogel calls them in the script, "The Dead Troupe."[16] By the end of the play, we realise that what the Troupe empties out of their pockets at the beginning of the show is not dust or some iteration of the sands of time, but rather ashes from the camps. This image, this memory flashing by in a moment of danger, is one that challenges Lemml's statement about the freedom to perform in Europe, reminding the audience how fleeting and precious such a freedom can be while also creating a powerful visual shorthand linking this physical sequence to the Holocaust, further contributing to the performance as a site of memorial and mourning. In his essay on Freudian theories on trauma and mourning and artistic representations of the Holocaust, Eric L. Santer writes that taking Nazism and the Final Solution seriously as a trauma "means to shift one's theoretical, ethical, and political attention to the psychic and social sites where individual and group identities are constituted, destroyed, and reconstructed," which he connects to Freud's theory on mourning as "a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses".[17] Thus, the repetition of the performance of the ghetto

15 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Dennis Redmond, Marxists Internet Archive.

16 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

17 Eric L. Satner, "'History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma", in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of*

production of *God of Vengeance* works simultaneously as an act of wounding, mourning and memorial.

Vogel and Taichman arrange the different theatrical elements at their disposal not only so that they behave as *aide-mémoires* for Lemml, through whose eyes we are watching the story unfold, but also so that we the audience feel as if we were recalling the story of *God of Vengeance* along with the stage manager in an act of collective memory. The play treats the history it dramatizes as a kind of theatrical palimpsest, as moments and scenes overlap and are layered in order to create meaning for the audience. Mansbridge notes that, "*Indecent* redistributes dramatic and historical agency to the theatrical event, using gestures as the agentive force of remembrance," and that these gestures are "used to crystallize a critical moment [...] in order to ask what it means to the present," and illustrating "the way history, like theatre, is an ongoing act of recognition."[18] The writer and director use a number of signifiers that are repeated again and again so that we come to recognise what they are signalling: the projections detailing place names, dates, subtitles, translations and explanations; the repetition of certain scenes from *God of Vengeance*; and the use of a layering of voices, costumes, people and music, one on top of the other. The projections on the back wall of the theatre indicate time and place, linking disparate events in history for us, but also conveying the passage of time by acknowledging its movement. For example, we often see the projection, "A BLINK IN TIME."[19] When *God of Vengeance* comes to Broadway, all the titles of the plays that were on Broadway that year are projected onto the back wall, immersing the audience in the world of the 1920s and treating us as if we had been there ourselves.[20] In a moving exchange entitled "1939-1941: LETTERS FROM POLAND", we hear fragments of letters written to Asch from company members back in Poland and Asch's powerless reply from America read side by side, presented like memories, reminding us of the changing political conditions in Poland as the war begins, tapping into a collective understanding of the Second World War.[21] Nakhmen, another Yiddish writer, says:

> My dear Asch, it has been a long time since we read your brilliant little play in the living room. A lot of Yiddish water has flowed over the Polish dam. It is hard for me to ask

Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution", Cambridge & London, Harvard UP, 1992, pp. 153 & 144.

18 Joanna Mansbridge, "Gestures of Remembrance in Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman's *Indecent*", art. cit., p. 479.

19 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

you: The authorities have confiscated our passports. Is there any way you might put in a word to the consulate to make an exception for me?[22]

Nakhmen highlights the passage of time by reminding Asch of the first reading of *God of Vengeance*, thus reminding us of how different wartime Warsaw is from that of the turn-of-the-century Warsaw we saw when we first heard Asch read his play in Peretz's salon. These fragments are designed to trigger the audience's memory of this fictionalised representation of the reimagined historical event presented earlier in the play to place us in time, but they also create parallels with our current political situation, foregrounding the consequences of racist immigration policies—the closure of national borders, restriction of movement, implementation of quotas. There is a brief but affecting moment towards the end of the play where we hear an old recording from the American musical *Oklahoma!* which serves as a bridge between the demise of the Dead Troupe in a concentration camp and the final scene of the play where we see a young writer approach Asch in his Connecticut home in in 1952, asking permission to produce a new translation of *God of Vengeance*.[23] The contrast is stark and the strains from the popular 1943 Broadway musical have a chilling effect; this comparison of cultures and time periods reminds us that in the same year that Americans watched a joyful (and also nationalistic) musical about the Wild West, European Jewry was being extinguished.

Serving as a kind of fulcrum around which all the other memories turn, Lemml's most powerful memory is that of the rain scene, where Rifkele and Manke kiss in their nightgowns in the rain. Other scenes from *God of Vengeance* are repeated throughout the play, but the rain scene is the only one that is presented first in English and then in Yiddish at the end, with rain coming down from above onto the performers in an unusual naturalistic gesture, highlighting the celebration of love and setting it apart from the rest of the play as a moment of transcendence. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson writes, "Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it."[24] We are not simply watching two women kiss on stage, the audience is bearing witness to a kind of triumph in spite of a tragic tale; the other images with which Vogel and Taichman have presented us complete the picture of these two women, making the case that this

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

23 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

24 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962, p. 170.

act of witnessing is an act of celebration and memorial. In recreating the rain element on stage for the audience, this scene reminds us of, but also transcends, its first mention at the beginning of the play. In the first scene of *Indecent*, Lemml tells the audience:

> We have a story we want to tell you… About a play. A play that changed my life. Every night we tell this story—but somehow I can never remember the end. (*He indicates his mind is failing. He turns to the others for help. No one can.*) No matter. I can remember how it begins. It all starts with this moment. Remember this:
> (*Lemml gestures to two women of the troupe, holding each other, and then the troupe explodes in a joyous klezmer song and dance.*)[25]

Lemml cannot remember because it gives him a reason to tell us the story of Asch and his play but also because the ending which he meets is almost too terrible to be retold, the pain too much to endure. Lemml and the Dead Troupe of Vogel and Taichman's imaginations stand in for lost Yiddish culture and the Jews of pre-war Europe who perished in the Shoah. In her programme note for the Broadway production, Vogel explains, "I believe the purpose of theatre is to wound our memory so we can remember. […] I hope that the acquisition of Yiddish in the rain scene helps us remember the culture and lives that existed before 1940. Theatre is living memory."[26] In playing the final depiction of the rain scene in Yiddish, the audience is reminded that Yiddish was once the language of a thriving culture, connecting people and languages across national borders, and that the theatre is a place for remembering and commemorating. Mansbridge explains:

> To see a Paula Vogel play is to participate in a three-way dialogue with the dramatic canon, social history, and contemporary American culture. […] Vogel crafts collage-like playworlds that are comprised of fragments of history and culture that feel, at once, inclusive and alienating, familiar and strange, funny and disturbing. […] Although frequently at odds with the social worlds they populate, these characters also forge a sense of belonging, often through the creative forces of fantasy, memory, storytelling, and other unauthorized acts.[27]

Indecent is a collage of memories, of moments of time and fragments of history and culture, layered one on top of another. The characters become alienated by their act of emigration to the United States, by their foreignness in a land foreign to them, but

25 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
26 Paula Vogel, *Indecent* Playbill programme, 2017.
27 Joanna Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

they forge a sense of belonging through the repeated ritual of the performance of Asch's play, even in the ghetto where they perform fearfully and in secret. The rain scene at the end of *Indecent* provides a duality; it is a triumph that we the audience finally see this censored moment but the tragedy is that it is only conjured up by Lemml's memory of it as he goes to meet his death in the camps.

LINKING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT DAY

The America *Indecent* depicts is both that of the fabled Roaring Twenties and also an America eerily familiar to 21st-century audiences. Vogel and Taichman use the story of *God of Vengeance* as a way of exploring America's political history and also its political present. Within the world of the play, the American setting changes the way the company members perceive each other, and the pain of assimilation is felt keenly. The lead actor of *God of Vengeance*, Schildkraut, fires Reina, the young woman playing Rifkele, explaining, "when people hear Rifkele they got to hear a pure girl onstage. No shtetl, no girl off the boat. They got to see their own American daughter."[28] When *God of Vengeance* is translated into English for the production at the Provincetown Playhouse, Schildkraut feels the pressure to erase its Yiddish origins to fit a New York audience's expectations for the youth and purity of the character of Rifkele, which cannot be tainted by the imperfect, accented English or the Jewish features of the actor playing her. The interwar period in American history that acts as a backdrop for much of the play is one that witnessed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, racist immigration policies, racist domestic policies and the use of eugenics in academic discourse and governance. Historian David J. Goldberg writes:

> Between 1890 and 1914, Americans began to reassess their attitudes toward immigrants. Many old-stock Americans (the term includes descendants of immigrants from northwestern Europe and Canada, but not Native Americans or African-Americans) became disturbed by the arrival of millions of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, whom they deemed to be inferior to those who had arrived before 1890. On the West Coast, a virulent anti-Japanese movement had emerged. Despite the growing opposition, before the war no significant restrictionist legislation had been passed. The Great War marked a turning point. In 1917, Congress, overriding [President] Wilson's veto, enacted a literacy test requirement for new arrivals. Anti-immigrant attitudes, fed by racial theories, hardened in the immediate postwar years, leading to the passage of the

28 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.,* pp. 33-34.

> Emergency Immigration Act in 1921. In 1924, Congress passed the National Origins Act, a law that favored so-called Nordic immigrants and that stood out as one of the most significant pieces of legislation enacted during the entire decade.[29]

This passage is sadly reminiscent of a political episode in January 2018 where President Trump expressed racist views about immigrants from African countries, Haiti and El Salvador, stating that countries like Norway should have priority in the lottery for US visas.[30] In the issue of *The Economist* published in March 2018, it was noted that, "This year's refugee quota, 45,000, is the lowest in three decades, and is not expected to be met," explaining that the Refugee Admissions Programme, "has had an average quota of 95,000 refugees a year, more than that of any other rich country. [...] Because refugee policy is one of the few bits of the immigration system President Trump controls, he has ravaged it."[31] In the 1920s, the United States saw a popular and political backlash to the previous decades of waves of immigration, as well as to the Great Migration when people of colour migrated from the agrarian South to the industrial North to take up jobs in factories, contributing to what Goldberg calls fear of "an increasingly urban and racially mixed society".[32] The US Government passed acts that imposed quotas on immigrants from certain countries, sharply limiting immigration from countries like Italy, Japan and those in Eastern Europe, sure to bring in large numbers of Jews fleeing pogroms after the war and the Russian Revolution.[33]

Indecent is a different kind of Holocaust play; it is designed to remind us of what happened to the Jews of Europe when they were turned away from countries that could have been safe havens, and also frames this history in such a way that we consider the politics and immigration policies of both historical but contemporary America. This is not to say *Indecent* makes an equivalent of restrictive immigration policies and Holocaust, but rather suggests a historical connection between the two. For example, in *Hitler's American Model: the United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, James Q. Whitman makes the case that the Nazi regime was inspired by American legislation around immigration quotas and segregation with respect to the race laws

29 David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, p. 140.

30 Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, "Trump decries immigrants from "shithole countries" coming to the US," CNN, 12 January 2018.

31 "Lost Boy found", *The Economist*, March 1, 2018, p. 41.

32 David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America*, *op. cit.,* p. 127.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

they implemented.[34] It is the collaborative interplay, the layering of dialogue, music, dance and design, of historical fragments and memories, that provokes the audience to consider the contemporary relevance of the piece, warning us of the fate that awaits the immigrants we turn away at our borders. Between the premiere of *Indecent* in 2015 and its closure on Broadway two years later, the United States saw a presidential election that divided the country sharply between left and right in a series of political and cultural wars, culminating in a win for the Trump campaign that was accompanied by a startling increase in and proliferation of racist, xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Islamic sentiment and hate crimes. In an article for *The New Yorker* in May of 2017, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner writes, "In a climate of resurgent anti-Semitism, homophobia, and hostility to immigrants, the success of 'Indecent' feels defiant, if not triumphant," reporting that Taichman told him, "'My heart is broken at how much more relevant this play is today than when it opened at Yale, a mere year and a half ago.'"[35] *Indecent* is, in itself, a plea for tolerance and for love, for the hope that words and performances can bring people closer to their own humanity. After Asch has gone to report on the pogroms in Lithuania in 1923 for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, he tells his wife Madje:

> I can't get the images out of my head. It's hard for me to kiss our children at night. And when as head of our delegation I reported all the atrocities I saw what is the response from our State Department?...These things happen. [...] I have to write something to change the way gentiles see us—that make them see that we are one people with one common root—or they will rip us out, root by root, from the earth until we are no more.[36]

Asch is desperate to make the plight of Eastern European Jews a crucial issue for the government, through the only way at his disposal—by writing. Likewise, Vogel and

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34 "Just eight days after the Reich Citizenship Law, the Law on the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, and the Reich Flag Law were formally proclaimed by Adolf Hitler, 45 Nazi lawyers sailed for New York under the auspices of the Association of National Socialist German Jurists. The trip was a reward for the lawyers, who had codified the Reich's race-based legal philosophy. The announced purpose of the visit was to gain 'special insight into the workings of American legal and economic life through study and lectures,' and the leader of the group was Ludwig Fischer. As the governor of the Warsaw District half a decade later, he would preside over the brutal order of the ghetto." Ira Katznelson, "What America Taught the Nazis" (Review of *Hitler's American Model: the United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* by James Q. Whitman), *The Atlantic*, November 2017.

35 Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, art. cit.

36 Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, *op. cit.,* p. 58.

Taichman hope that, by producing *Indecent*, they can do the same. They can wound us in order to make us remember, to make us believe, to make us care and, as Vogel says in an interview, to wake us up so we pay attention.[37]

During the Broadway run of *Indecent*, Vogel said:

> I think it's a very incredible responsibility that we have as artists, to be witness to our own time, but also to make sure that we don't forget those who came before us... I wanted it to be a larger story of us as Americans and not just about the moment in time when the truth became censored on a Broadway stage.[38]

Vogel and Taichman use the story of *God of Vengeance* and its rejection by the American public in 1923 as a means to engage with both history and contemporary political life through performance. While *Indecent* celebrates the fact that two women in love can kiss on a 21st-century Broadway stage, it confronts the audience with the cyclical nature of history, warning us that the isolationist and racist policies of the 1920s which are being repeated again could lead to another tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust. Vogel and Taichman blur the lines between historical fact and theatrical fiction in a gesture that is at once an act of commemoration, wounding and remembrance.

37 Paula Vogel, "Interview", *Indecent* Broadway website (offline), accessed on 20 February 2018.

38 *Ibid.*

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Notice

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Abstract

This paper considers the ways in which writer Paula Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman use collaborative approaches to writing and staging in *Indecent* (2015) in order to dramatize the story of Yiddish writer Sholem Asch's 1907 play *God of Vengeance*, thus delving into the history of populism and intolerance in Europe and the United States in the 20th century. *Indecent* explores the journey of *God of Vengeance*, from its successful tour of European theatres to the English-language production in New York in 1923, where it was censored for indecency for depicting the first lesbian kiss seen on an American stage. Vogel and Taichman comment on the perils of rising populism and racism in America since the rise of Trump by presenting Asch's play and its Jewish performers and stage manager (newly arrived in New York from Poland), against the backdrop of an increasingly racist, populist and anti-immigrant America in the 1920s. Vogel and Taichman's interweaving of text, dance, music and design enables the production to present multiple settings and time periods, as well as the interlocking stories of real people and imagined characters. This paper also explores the idea of the "dramaturgy of memory"—how the writer and director arrange fragmented theatrical elements almost as *aide-mémoires* for the audience, as if they were remembering moments from *God of Vengeance* and the tragic fate of its company as the Holocaust looms in the background.

Key words

contemporary American theatre; dramaturgy; playwriting; adaptation; yiddish theatre; queer theatre; women playwrights; Rebecca Taichman; Paula Vogel; Holocaust

Résumé

Cet article examine les méthodes collaboratives utilisées par l'autrice Paula Vogel et la metteuse en scène Rebecca Taichman dans leur création *Indecent* (2015). *Indecent* met en scène l'histoire de la pièce *God of Vengeance* (1907) de l'écrivain Yiddish Sholem Asch, et se penche ainsi sur l'histoire du populisme et de l'intolérance en Europe et aux États-Unis au cours du XX^e^ siècle. *Indecent* explore le voyage de *God of Vengeance*, depuis sa tournée triomphale dans les théâtres européens jusqu'à sa mise en scène en langue anglaise à New York en 1923, où la pièce fut censurée pour cause d'indécence, après avoir montré le premier baiser lesbien sur une scène américaine. Vogel et Taichman soulignent les dangers du populisme et du racisme en Amérique depuis l'ascension de Trump en présentant la pièce de Asch, de ses comédiens juifs et de son régisseur (nouvellement arrivé à New York de Pologne) dans le contexte d'une Amérique des années 1920 de plus en plus raciste, populiste et xénophobe. L'imbrication du texte, de la danse, de la musique et du décor permet à Vogel et Taichman de présenter les histoires croisées de personnes historiques et de personnages imaginaires. Cet article explore l'idée d'une « dramaturgie de la mémoire », et questionne la façon dont l'autrice et la metteuse en scène proposent des éléments théâtraux fragmentés en guise d'aide-mémoires pour les spectateurs, comme s'ils se souvenaient de moments de *God of Vengeance* et du destin tragique de sa compagnie alors que la Shoah se profile à l'arrière-plan.

Mots-clés

théâtre américain contemporain ; dramaturgie ; nouvelles écritures ; adaptation ; théâtre yiddish ; théâtre queer ; autrices de théâtre ; Rebecca Taichman ; Paula Vogel ; la Shoah

DETROIT '67: DRAMATURGY AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE THEATRICAL SPHERE AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SPHERE

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On July 23, 2017, Detroit Public Theatre produced a site-specific production of *Detroit '67* by Dominique Morisseau on the hallowed grounds of 12th Street and Clairmount. The most significant work in Morisseau's trilogy of plays called The Detroit Project, *Detroit '67* is a fictional account of characters whose lives are irreparably transformed during the city's July 1967 uprising. The 1967 Detroit Rebellion, commonly known as the 12th-Street Riot, is among the most violent and destructive in United States history. In addition to the loss of forty-three lives and extensive property damage, the events of 1967 and their aftermath have had an abiding impact on the construction of narratives about the city and their relationship to the socio-political realities of those left behind. July 23, 1967 was also a watershed moment for the nation as a whole, as it was part of the ushering in of the full power of the Civil Rights movement that led to "enormous social spending and government-program expansion, including the passage of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, which produced the first government-backed, low-income homeownership opportunities directed at African-Americans."[1] It would seem that these programs would represent a victory for the Civil Rights movement, but in fact they were part of a conspiratorial political effort to "drown" the movement.[2] A little over a decade later, those very government-sponsored programs were used to further disenfranchise African Americans, as conservatives would claim they had created a culture of dependency. This stigma has persisted through the 1990s and into the present day, as conservative and liberal politicians alike have used it to justify further harsh budget cuts to social welfare programs and the exponential growth of "mass incarceration and public tolerance for aggressive policing and punishment directed at African-American neighborhoods."[3] As the site where the 1967 Detroit Rebellion began, the corner of

1 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "How Do We Change America?," *The New Yorker*, June 8, 2020.
2 *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.*

12th and Clairmount holds all of these histories—their conflicts, their hopes and their heartbreaks.

That corner of 12th and Clairmount in the summer of 2017 is where the seeds of our research began. At the end of the performance, the air was thick. Everyone rose to their feet for the standing ovation. The actors gave their obligatory bows and walked off stage. It was over. Everyone began to leave. The backstage crew began to take the props off of the stage. Others began to set up for the next event. On this occasion, the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the 1967 Rebellion, one of the most pivotal days of the year in Detroit, there was no talkback. There was no connecting thread, no space for discourse, between this remarkable production and the speeches about to be delivered by local politicians. We sat stunned in our folding chairs, holding all of the tension of the historical moment, the geographical significance of our location, and the unresolved questions raised in the intersection of our lived reality and the fictional circumstances of the play. As we sat, we sank: deeper into the gravity of the situation, the contemporary social and political circumstances that plague this city, the past seemingly forever locked in a set of assumptions and prejudices. Shame sits inside and among all of us, exerting a stranglehold on any hope of future reconciliation. Morisseau's play was on offer on that day, in that place, to expose and perhaps even to release some of these silences. But the absence of a talkback means that any post-show conversations transpire only in private spaces, only in the small, idiosyncratic intricacies of our individual encounters. The unrest has no outlet. It remains imprisoned in our muscles, our bones, our worldview.

Little did we know that less than three years later, America would be embroiled in a profound national reckoning about a series of catastrophes, some novel, but all of which represent the accumulation and acceleration of historical forces exerting a disproportionate impact on black communities and black bodies in the US. How, then, are we to understand what *Detroit '67* did in the moment of its performance? How are we to understand what this play continues to do as the memory of a performance, as it reverberates through time and space and accumulates new meaning and dimensionality while history marches forward and inevitably repeats itself? In *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin explains that performatives are "saying something as well as doing something, but we may feel that they are not essentially true or false as statements are."[4] This is especially interesting to consider in light of the performativity that characterizes our current moment and the risk we run with regards to perceptions of authenticity and veracity. Theatre is performative and exists in the performative sphere, but it also

4 J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1962, p. 139.

is a kind of sphere within a sphere, bounded in particular ways with its conventions and its spaces.

In what follows, we will investigate our reception of *Detroit '67*, both in the moment of its 50th anniversary performance and in the space between then and now, in order to uncover Morisseau's theory and practice of dramatic composition and how it is both "saying something as well as doing something" within the theatrical sphere as well as within the socio-political sphere. Beginning with a detailed analysis of how Morisseau understands her work, based on interviews with the playwright, we will then turn towards a discussion of how Morisseau's practice intersects with theories of acting and audiencing as embodied philosophy. As such, we will endeavor to work within the language of the form of theatre, itself, as well as with theories from outside of theatre scholarship to make a case for the powerful, transformative significance of what Morisseau's plays can do.

Seen as participating in the legacy of predecessors like Pearl Cleague and August Wilson, Morisseau's plays are typically understood to operate within conventional dramatic structures. Morisseau's contemporaries, like Suzan-Lori Parks, are more often cast as the dramaturgical "radicals," as their dramatic structures challenge, overturn and explode Eurocentric conventions and expectations. This interpretation of the political function of literary structures could lead to a conclusion that Morisseau's dramaturgy participates in a Eurocentric paradigm, in which "whiteness overtly and covertly pervades the texts and linguistic structures, and those who do not share a White lineage or hue are de-centered, misaligned, and exiled from a theatre history that they rightfully co-constructed."[5] The Eurocentric paradigm is thus cast as inherently problematic, leading to suggestions that the path towards liberation is best approached through the "destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking into the world," given that any truth expressed through the framework of the oppressor would obscure or otherwise misrepresent the truth of the oppressed.[6] All of these characterizations are true in their own way. What is less recognized is that the performativity of the space that Morisseau creates is politically influential beyond mere "representation" in the conventional sense. In fact, by oscillating between past and present, by working in the realm of fiction and non-fiction and by creating a trilogy of plays in which the lives of particular characters in one play are impacted by the

5 Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer, *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, p. 1.

6 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *TDR*, vol. 12, no. 4, Summer 1968 (hyperlink to excerpts only).

historical events that transpire in the space in between their play and the other two plays, Morisseau makes manifest a complex conceptual space in which the challenges around the performative—because of its malleability, because of its volatility, and because, per Austin, it cannot be aligned exclusively with the realm of true or false—are laid out on display for audiences to make of what they will. Ultimately, it is through convention, through participating in the representation of historical circumstances, that Morisseau creates a space of liberation.

THE DETROIT PROJECT

In his landmark 1996 speech "The Ground on Which I Stand," August Wilson addressed the implicit racism undergirding the exclusion of black voices from participation in the American professional theatre.[7] Wilson was motivated to speak out because, among other reasons, only one of sixty-six members of the League of Regional Theatres (LORT) was a black theatre. The LORT theatres serve a particular social, political and aesthetic function within the professional theatrical landscape in the US because of the historic significance of regional theatres in America. Whereas it might be taken as commonplace to see the large houses of Broadway and Off-Broadway devoid of substantive content by African Americans, the recognition that the professional regional theatres were also imbalanced in terms of form and content by African-American playwrights and theatre makers was significant. Today the statistics are even worse. Of seventy-two LORT theatres, not one is a dedicated black theatre. In such a landscape, partnered with innovations in community-based theatre, site-specific theatre and other modes of theatre shared outside of purpose-built theatrical spaces, we are seeing an increase in experimentation with how to operationalize the core black aesthetic values around ideas of *for us, by us, near us, about us*, to which Wilson and others have spoken. Twenty years later, contemporary artists responded to Wilson's call with a series of dialogues and colloquia in an effort to gauge the state of black theatre in the 21st century. In her response "New Ground on Old Land," playwright Dominique Morisseau explains that Wilson's essay provided her with the basis for many of her writing principles.[8] Furthermore, Morisseau identifies the abiding political function of Wilson's perspective: "Theatre practitioners cannot be as fearful as broken Americans

7 August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand" (1996), reproduced in *American Theatre* online by permission of the estate of August Wilson, 2016.

8 Dominique Morisseau, "New Ground on Old Land" in "The Ground Together: Responses & Reflections," *American Theatre*, June 20, 2016.

who seek to 'make America great again' by silencing people of color and reverting to cultural, racial, and gender oppression. We have to make our audiences as balanced as the art we seek to produce."[9] The plays of Morisseau can be interpreted as a direct response to Wilson's call to action.

Dominique Moriseau's trilogy of plays, The Detroit Project, have garnered her international attention as a unique voice in the articulation of the black experience. In these three plays, which are all set in the rust-belt city of Detroit, one of the most influential and misaligned cities in the American imaginary, Morisseau explores the form and function of historical representation in dramatic contexts. Each of the plays in the trilogy engage with one of the most significant historical periods for African Americans in Detroit. These three monumental periods of history have had an impact in shaping contemporary realities. *Paradise Blue* engages with the vibrant history of the 1940s jazz community in Detroit, emblematic of the renaissance in black arts that was taking place in urban centers across the US at that time. The subsequent displacement of the African-American community in Detroit due to processes of gentrification affected Detroit's vital arts scene and undermined the social, economic, and political infrastructure of African-Americans lives. *Paradise Blue* reflects a particular jazz community during the Albert Cobo election: a troubled trumpeter who wants to sell his business; a mysterious woman who is on her own. The play examines what tears a community apart, asking: "Is it something within or something outside?" *Detroit '67*, the second in the trilogy of plays, deals with the history of the 1967 riots, rebellion or civil unrest that continue to haunt the city—both rhetorically and materially. Morisseau's award-winning *Detroit '67* explores an explosive and decisive moment in a great American city. The play's compelling characters struggle with racial tension and economic instability. *Detroit '67* is a work grounded in historical understanding that also comments meaningfully on the pressing issues of our day. The final work in the trilogy, *Skeleton Crew*, takes on the topic of the auto industry, urban renewal and who it impacts. A makeshift family of workers at the last stamp fix plant in the city discover the plant is closing. The play explores themes of gentrification, "new" vs. "old" Detroit, homelessness, class divisions, violence and the abiding impact of the automotive industry on the mobility and immobility of African Americans in the city.

Morisseau has constructed the narratives in her trilogy in such a way that the history of displacement of African Americans in Detroit is spread out across three points in history, across multiple generations of African Americans. This distribution of the narrative illustrates the ways in which circumstances of one historical period lead

9 *Ibid.*

to the next, and contemporary realities can only be understood as a complex and ongoing dialogue between past, present and future. Morisseau's aim in writing these plays was to shed new light on how Detroiters are viewed in the United States. When interviewed by *American Theatre* about her response when Detroiters asked if she was going to make them look good, she said, "I am going to make you look human. Because that's what you are."[10] There is a gravitas embedded within this question and even more embedded within Morisseau's answer, because the question does much more than denote a concern about appearance in the visual sphere. Rather, the question is a reflection of the dehumanization of Detroit residents in the aftermath of 1967, and of the dehumanization of African Americans in the public imaginary for centuries. Morisseau's response to this question and, indeed, Morisseau's scripting of this play, is about a first step toward reconciliation: reconciliation of the conflict that Americans hold about the humanity of black people. As a first step in this process, Morisseau endeavors to restore the humanity of black characters, black bodies on stage. In this respect, her project is intimately intertwined with Geneviève Fabre's argument that black theatre is, "born out of historical conflict...[in] quest for identity."[11] However, this mission to restore the humanity of black characters, black images, black bodies and black lives is complicated by the illusion that restoration and reconciliation are not necessary. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in "The Case for Reparations:" "We believe white dominance to be a fact of the inert past, a delinquent debt that can be made to disappear if only we don't look."[12] Morisseau's plays invite audiences to look and to learn, if they are willing. As Morisseau noted in a conversation with article co-author Billicia Hines:

> What I really feel responsible to is humanity. I feel responsible to creating three-dimensional characters in everyone, because that's what I owe everybody. I owe everybody some excavating of their humanity. That's what I owe my characters. That's what I owe my people because they have been considered three-fifths of humanity for so long, still now in the Constitution. To me as a writer, if I've made a five-fifths human being out of my own people, then I am already creating a rebellion.[13]

10 Suzy Evans, "Dominique Morisseau Is Telling the Story of Her People," *American Theatre*, January 5, 2017.

11 Geneviève Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1983, p. 1.

12 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2017.

13 Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines, August 17, 2017.

Morisseau's perspective is sensitive to the complex, imaginative and fundamentally politically engaged nature of meaning-making as it transpires in the theatrical encounter. In a Q and A with theatre students at Wayne State University, Morisseau elaborated on the significance of the cycle as it pertains to the political implications of such historical representation:

> Q. – As a playwright, but especially as an African-American woman, how does it feel for you to know that these plays that you've written about Detroit, are informing my generation and generations after me about our history as African Americans in this country, as well specific areas like Detroit?
> Dominique Morisseau – I don't ever expect something based on history to be a history lesson. I think people often do. I think that's where they get disappointed. Whatever interests you, I implore you to go in and investigate the humanity of it. If you're interested in history, I say dig in, but you don't have to become a slave to history. Storytelling and history don't always match. If I told you everything that happened back on a regular day in 1949, it wouldn't shatter you. I'm gonna find an extraordinary day in 1949 to tell the story about. It's gonna be a fictional story, but it's gonna be based on some real stuff. Dizzy Gillespie did come to Black Bottom. Charlie Parker did play. They didn't come to this fake paradise bar / boarding house that I created. That's me. I think that we can dance with history and know what things we want to maintain the integrity of, but still not betray our imagination, because we gotta have room for our imaginations as writers or what are we doing? Here's a little bit of a nugget from that world, now go find out whether what I said was true or not. Go read for yourself. Go see. Go see and learn some things. I feel responsible to the truth sometimes. To the facts of the world, but only as much as they help my story. [14]

The political dimension of Morisseau's invitation for audiences to engage with her work is made even clearer by a note from the playwright printed in the program for *Detroit '67*:

> **Playwright's Rules of Engagement**
> You are allowed to laugh audibly.
> You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.
> My work requires a few "um hmms" and "uhm hnnns" should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.

14 Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines and students, Wayne State University, October 10, 2017.

> This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.
> This is also live theater and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them, or thwart their performance.
> Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room.
> Exhale together. Laugh together. Say "amen" should you need to.
> This is community. Let's go.
> peaceandlovedominique :) [15]

Arguably, even if not read, Morisseau's rules were tacitly, implicitly and explicitly understood by the audience in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit '67* in a way different from an audience in attendance at Detroit Public Theatre's black box space. The community attending the site-specific performance has a cultural relationship to these "rules" and, further, due to the nature of the memorial context of the performance, the practices of call-and-response and invocation are all the more pertinent. What eventuates is that the attention toward the sonic landscape then welcomes the complexity of the ambient sounds of the environment as much as it invites the need to speak from audience members. At one point, a heated conversation transpires a hundred yards across the street from the performance. Voices in conflict pour into the sonic environment due to a situation having nothing to do with the play, itself. Yet this dimension is influential in an ambiguous, elliptical way, which parallels the ricochet of meaning and information as characters within the play describe their experiences of police brutality in a 1960's setting while actual police men and women surround the performance to protect the performers and audience members.

Speaking with Hines on another occasion, Morisseau describes the significance of appreciating and occupying a black cultural perspective as an artist:

> You should not be touching my play if you're coming out talking about "We're all one." You're the wrong person for this play right now. To me it drives me crazy if there's an artist outside of a culture who just completely negates that there are cultural differences. I think often what we see when we have seen a failure of a white director directing a work of color is a failure to recognize our different cultures. You think because you're interested in us that we're the same. Honestly even with black directors. To me, I'm more interested in a director that understands that cultural experience in the work, that we have different cultural experiences and that black culture is a culture. It is not white American culture. It is its own particular culture. There is a black culture. There are

15 Printed in production program for *Detroit '67*, Summer 2017, Detroit Public Theatre.

people that are afraid to admit that black culture exists and I can't rock with any of them no matter what race they are, because then they don't understand my work because my work is absolutely from a black cultural perspective. [16]

ACOUSTIC SPACE

The cultural specificity that Morisseau is calling for resonates strongly in the aesthetic space that is created in the context of *Detroit '67* and, in particular, the site-specific memorial production of the play, inviting a shift from "looking" towards "seeing," as articulated by critic John Berger. Berger writes, "seeing…establishes our place in the surrounding world…The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." [17] Looking allows one to only see things in a mechanical way; seeing takes looking into a deeper level. In fact, we would argue that Morisseau is able to accomplish this shift, in part, by de-centering the visual as a central mechanism of theatrical communication and instead placing increased emphasis on creating what we refer to as acoustic space.

In the world of *Detroit '67*, the timing, tempo and agency associated with playing music is directly tied to the livelihoods and prospects of hope for the characters. Throughout the play, all five characters (adult siblings Chelle and Lank; longtime friends of the siblings Bunny and Sly; and stranger Caroline) use music as a way to connect to and express their emotional states. Furthermore, the presence of songs placed strategically in each scene is the single strongest indicator of the temporal location of the play. Morisseau also establishes a constant tension between music and technology, which provides her with an engine for conflict that moves the action of the play forward. The conflict is at once symbolic and concrete. Running an unlicensed bar out of the basement of their home, Chelle and Lank need music to provide the atmosphere for their business. The success of this illicit enterprise hinges on their ability to meet customers' expectations, as another "after-hours joint" has "tightened it up" with a new "hi fi." [18] But the siblings disagree about how best to use the limited resources they have to enhance the customer experience. Chelle, a widow supporting a grown son who is away at college, is also the bearer of the family history, and so nostalgically and

16 Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines, art. cit.
17 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*, London, British Broadcasting, 2012, p. 5.
18 Dominique Morisseau, *Detroit '67*, London, Samuel French, 2014, p. 9.

prudently favors using her late father's record player, encouraging Lank to purchase more records. But Lank, a technophile, instead uses their money to purchase an 8 track. These fictional circumstances were particularly resonant for the audience members in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit '67*, who were acutely aware of the fact that African Americans in Detroit had limited opportunities for upward mobility, suffering from housing and employment discrimination and a brutal, biased police force. Making these circumstances even more poignant, the 1967 uprising came about from a police raid on just such an unlicensed bar on the precise ground where we were seated. This was hallowed ground which had until recent months been an empty, open field for fifty years, all contents having burned to the ground at the end of five days of rebellion. For the duration of the play, we were seated within the nascent state of a park, built as a remembrance to the events of 1967 and their aftermath. Within this

landscape, we, as the very real members of the future that fictional Lank was imagining, were aware not only of what would become of this block, but also of the ultimate obsolescence of the 8 track, which was supplanted by digital technologies that are now, paradoxically, in competition with a resurgence of interest in vinyl. In this regard, Morisseau scripts the conflict between Chelle's record player and Lank's 8 track, which transpires over the course of the play, as a symbol in itself.

Technology presents itself as stubborn throughout *Detroit '67*. In the opening scene, Chelle is alone on stage making preparations in the basement, accompanied by The Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" on the record player:

> (*Chelle sings along as she works to untangle the Christmas lights. Suddenly the record skips.*)
> Chelle – Dang it!
> (*She hurries to the record player and moves the needle past the skip. Goes back to singing. It skips again.*)
> Chelle – (*cont.*) Not this part ... come on!
> (*She goes to fix it again.*)
> (*to the record player*) You gonna behave now?
> (*Waits. Watches it. It seems cool. She goes back to untangling the lights. The record player skips again.*)
> Dang it! (*She plays with the needle.*) You got something against David Ruffin? Huh? What's the matter? (*She waits for an answer from the player.*) [19]

Chelle proceeds to engage the record player in a dialogue that casts the device as an agent with power, influence, feelings and behaviors. Placing central focus on the agency

19 *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

of the record player and the sounds that it produces is the first signal that Morisseau has created a play in which acoustic space is on an equal footing with visual space. This is a highly unconventional dynamic in the theatre, which privileges the "world of reflected light," the mesmerization of the stage picture:

> We, who live in the world of reflected light, in visual space, may also be said to be in a state of hypnosis. Ever since the collapse of the oral tradition in early Greece, before the age of Parmenides, Western civilization has been mesmerized by a picture of the universe as a limited container in which all things are arranged according to the vanishing point, in linear geometric order. The intensity of this conception is such that it actually leads to the abnormal suppression of hearing and touch in some individuals. [...] Most of the information we rely upon comes through our eyes; our technology is arranged to heighten that effect. Such is the power of Euclidean or visual space that we can't live with a circle unless we square it.[20]

Because the world McLuhan describes is so overwhelmingly biased toward visual space—a condition which has only been amplified now in the 21st century—surely Morisseau's acoustic intervention has limited impact. This would especially be the case when *Detroit '67* is produced in a purpose-built theatre which is designed to privilege light. In the 50th anniversary site-specific performance, however, something perhaps unexpected occurred regarding the visual space, which enabled the acoustic space to hold greater influence. In this production, as we were drawn into the particularities of the relationship between Chelle and the acoustic technologies, we simultaneously became increasingly aware of the permeability of the visual space, as the performance was taking place in the open air, in the light of day, with, among other things, a cadre of police appointed to stand guard. This created a co-presence of multiple temporalities that amplified the vulnerability of this particular site, as the most significant landmark of the violence that occurred before, during and after the uprising. By comparison, in the darkness of a conventional purpose-built theatrical space in which the stage would be the sole destination for light—the womb of visual information into which we would be peering—the acoustic would once again be displaced. But because the site-specific performance invited so much light in, from so many different directions, we were experiencing a barrage of visual information that thus made the acoustic space much more potent.

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20 Marshall McLuhan, "Visual and Acoustic Space," in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York and London, Continuum, 2004, p. 67-72.

The ghosts of Morisseau's play invite audiences to redirect their gaze and thereby reconsider the location of shame. Melissa V. Harris-Perry writes:

> Blackness in America is marked by shame. Perhaps more than any other emotion, shame depends on the social context. On the individual level, we feel ashamed because of how we believe people see us or how they would see us if they knew about our hidden transgressions. Shame makes us view our very selves as malignant. But societies also define entire groups as malignant. Historically the United States has done that with African Americans. This collective shaming has a disproportionate impact on black women, and black women's attempts to escape or manage shame are part of what motivates their politics.[21]

Although Ralph Ellison reminds us of the "interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness"[22] in these projects of shame, Chris Hedges explains how that understanding is undermined by whiteness that is constituted by a "willful blindness used to justify white supremacy."[23]

Morisseau is writing these moments in time from a 21st-century perspective. As a playwright of what Mikell Pinkney calls, "The New Age Post-Revolutionary Era," *Detroit '67*'s purpose is "to look at the past with learned perspectives of the present, leading the way into new, different, and better future."[24] For the past fifty years, the memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been experienced as an unresolved blemish, a scar on the city with profoundly deep, devastating and far-reaching impacts. The memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been governed and produced largely by polarized, bifurcated notions about race, class and history, itself. Attending to the fundamentally aporetic space achieved through the temporal frictions and inconsistencies we find in art enables new space for reflection on these circumstances and, one would hope, forms of reconciliation based on the fundamental principles of unknowing. It is in this spirit that John Baldacchino recommends that we embrace art's "groundless forms of

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21 Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2011, pp. 101-133.

22 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, New York, Vintage International, 1995, p. 45.

23 Chris Hedges, "James Baldwin and the Meaning of Whiteness," *Truthdig*, February 20, 2017.

24 Mikell Pinkney, "The Development of African American Dramatic Theory: W.E. B. DuBois to August Wilson—Hand to Hand!," in Sandra Garrett Shannon and Dana A. Williams (eds), *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 30.

meaning" which are "beyond product and process."[25] In order to do this, however, one must contemplate the ways in which art is neither product nor process:

> Art is not a product, even when there seems to be an object called art. Likewise art cannot be reduced to a process, even when many make an argument for art as a process in order to avoid it becoming a product. To define art from within the paradoxical assumption that it is an in-between would help us understand the art form's open character.[26]

Ultimately, then, it is not only that Morisseau has created a structural or dramaturgical intervention by creating a trilogy of plays that disrupts our perceptions and expectations of history. She has, further, invited performers and audience members to participate in a complex choreographed dance between the past and present, between fiction and non-fiction in which the conceptual and affective space of lived experience can be unearthed, encountered, and mined as a form of liberation.

Philosopher Tzachi Zamir describes theatrical relationships between actors and audience members as "an entry into a fictional space upheld by the shared imaginative effort of a performer and a spectator."[27] In a process he refers to as "existential amplification," Zamir explains that this imaginative space, co-produced by the performer and the spectator, is composed of a combination of fictional and non-fictional elements, involving simultaneous processes of embodiment and disembodiment.[28] Through a skillful combination of the fiction of the given circumstances and the non-fiction of embodied experience, "[a]ctors amplify their own lives by imaginatively embodying alien existential possibilities."[29] In his 2010 article, "Watching Actors," which is one of the foundational essays that he developed into his 2014 book, *Acts: Theater, Philosophy and the Performing Self*, Zamir writes powerfully about the reasons we are drawn to particular actors' performances. He, further, places the spectator in the center of the art of performance—not simply as a receiver or an interpreter of the actor's work, but as an active producer of the experience. This approach, of course, corresponds with established ideas, from Dewey's *Art as Experience* to Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*. Taking this approach further, Caroline Heim has analyzed the audience *as* a performer. Heim explains that audience members, too, engage in such performative

25 John Baldacchino, "The Praxis of Art's Deschooled Practice," *JADE*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2008, pp. 241-260.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

27 Tzachi Zamir, *Acts: Theater, Philosophy and the Performing Self*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 121.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

amplification, making all of theatre a series of interrelated reciprocal encounters: "the encounter of the actors with the audience, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other."[30] Rancière further illustrates the inner life of the spectator:

> The spectator acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. This is a crucial point: spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers.[31]

Placing this passage from Rancière into conversation with Morisseau's "Rules of Engagement," in which she invites her audience to audiate, to testify and to breathe together, we begin to see that Morisseau's understanding of the audience's role in the creation of the play exceeds Heim's configuration of the audience-as-performer. She leads us back to the simplicity of Zamir's *shared imaginative effort*. Because even when they appear to say nothing, to do nothing, embedded with Morisseau's invitation is an understanding that the audience is incredibly active in *creating* not one, but a multitude of fictional spaces imaginatively. The fictional spaces they are creating, as communitarian as they might seem—"being together in rooms, audiences have multiple opportunities to feel part of a community and perform as a community"—are ultimately wholly dynamic, volatile and completely idiosyncratic to each and every audience member.[32]

The polyphonous nature of audience reception and the meaning-making that it generates as part of the theatrical encounter can be understood as a kind of "nameless awareness."[33] To call it something would immediately falsify the experience. It is nameless. But it is an awareness, nonetheless. It is in excess of our perceived knowledge of anything in particular, in excess of our perceived knowledge of everything in general. It is a recognition of the surplus reality that any *thing*, and really any *concept* represents:

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30 Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 3.

31 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London, Verso, 2009, p. 13.

32 Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

33 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke UP, 2010, p. 4.

always outside of the human grasp. It is in this way that the edges of human perception (including our perception of our perception, itself—the edges are not just, spatially, on the outside of perception; there are interior edges, throughout) constitute an excess and a void simultaneously. The void because we cannot fill it with ideas, information, facts, words with which we typically confirm or authenticate our own consciousness. The excess because within that void is not actually emptiness, but rather the vast agency and reality of the external world that exists independently of our perception.

One way to understand how knowledge, as a "nameless awareness," is generated in the actor-audience relationship is through the lens of embodied metaphors. In their landmark book, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that: "The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical."[34] Take, for instance, our experience of the word "comprehend." Lakoff and Johnson illustrate that when we experience a sense of *comprehension*, it is inextricably linked to the embodied metaphor that understanding is "grasping." In this way, when we comprehend something, when we understand something, we automatically (and largely unconsciously) experience that comprehension, experience that understanding, as the physical sensation of grasping—of holding something tightly.

Many of these core metaphors are durable and remain a central facet of human experience over generations. Yet, as our knowledge about the body and our experiences with technology change, so do our metaphors. Lakoff explains:

> There's a difference between the body and our conceptualization of it. The body is the same as it was 35 years ago; the conception of the body is very different. We have metaphors for the body we didn't have then. [...] In this respect, the contemporary body and brain, conceptualized in terms of neural circuitry and other information processing metaphors, were "invented."[35]

It is in this way that the actor-audience experience, in *Detroit '67*, simultaneously produces and unravels, simultaneously weaves and tangles, disturbs, unsettles, and unhinges our perception of our perception. In his many descriptions of how thought transpires—and the limitations of our understanding of thought—Foucault does not have many "should" statements. But here is one that seems pertinent for the point

34 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, p. 3.

35 George Lakoff quoted in John Brockman, "Philosophy in the Flesh: A Talk With George Lakoff," *Edge*, September 3 1999.

we are wanting to make: "What is essential is that thought, both for itself and in the density of its workings, should be both knowledge and a modification of what it knows, reflection and a transformation of the mode of being of that on which it reflects."[36] Up until this particular passage, Foucault has already illustrated how thought is just that—human thought is perpetually undoing itself, revealing its falsehoods and limitations, its inversions and gaps. But what we hear in this particular "should" statement, is something further. The "should" here, we take to refer to the human understanding of what thought is and how it operates. It isn't simply that human thought is replete with fallacies. But it is our obligation to attend to those gaps and not simply try to fill them with the right or correct (new) thoughts. It is our obligation to always engage actively in the thought that simultaneously constitutes knowledge and the modification of what is known: Bennett's nameless awareness. It is both a reverence for and a calling into the void.

The derangement that characterizes our current political moment is idiosyncratic to the pressures and complications of the many crises we are living through: the pandemic, global warning, systemic racism, police brutality and government irresponsibility, all of which have amounted to a genocidal war on black lives and black bodies. But the derangement is also paradigmatic of the larger human malfunctioning that Foucault understands as being fundamental to the convolutions of human thinking:

> The question is no longer: How can experience of nature give rise to necessary judgements? But rather: How can man think what he does not think, inhabit as though by a mute occupation something that eludes him, animate with a kind of frozen movement that figure of himself that takes the form of a stubborn exteriority? How can man *be* that life whose web, pulsations, and buried energy constantly exceed the experience that he is immediately given of them? How can he *be* that labour whose laws and demands are imposed upon him like some alien system? How can he be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without him, a language whose organization escapes him, whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words he momentarily activates by means of discourse, and within which he is obliged, from the very outset, to lodge his speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate, for a brief period, one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities?[37]

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36 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 327.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 323.

What is a theatre, then, other than an *animation, for a brief period of one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities?* What is theatre, then, other than a co-created experience in which actors and audience members think through something they don't yet know and can never fully understand? As conventional as Morisseau's plays might seem, in their structure, in their characterization, in their representation of historical circumstances as staged reality, they also constitute, fundamentally, a theatre in which we knowingly inhabit that which eludes us—which is, actually, everything.

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the authors' reception of Dominique Morisseau's play *Detroit '67*, both in the moment of its 50th anniversary site-specific performance in 2017 and in the time that has passed since, in order to uncover Morisseau's theory and practice of dramatic composition. Beginning with a detailed analysis of how Morisseau understands her work, based on interviews with the playwright, the chapter then turns toward a discussion of how Morisseau's practice intersects with theories of acoustic space and embodied philosophy. As such, the chapter endeavors to work within the language of the form of theatre itself, as well as with theories from outside of theatre scholarship to make a case that Morisseau's work operates within the theatrical sphere as well as within the socio-political sphere.

Keywords

Dominique Morisseau; August Wilson; black theatre; acoustic space; audiencing

Résumé

Les auteurs de ce chapitre explorent leur réception de *Detroit '67*, pièce de Dominique Morisseau, à la fois lors de la représentation *in situ* du 50ème anniversaire des émeutes de Détroit en 2017, et dans le temps qui s'est écoulé depuis, afin d'analyser la composition dramatique de l'autrice dans sa théorie comme dans sa pratique. Partant d'entretiens avec Morisseau qui révèlent en détail sa façon d'envisager son travail, le chapitre se consacre ensuite à l'étude des croisements entre la pratique scénique de Morisseau, les théories de l'espace acoustique, et celles de la philosophie incarnée. Les auteurs empruntent leurs concepts à la fois aux études théâtrales et à des théories extérieures à ce champ, pour mieux montrer que l'œuvre de Morisseau fonctionne à l'intérieur de la sphère théâtrale comme à l'intérieur de la sphère socio-politique.

Mots-clés

Dominique Morisseau ; August Wilson ; théâtre noir-américain ; espace acoustique ; théorie du spectateur

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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