

2008

# The Western States Theatre Review, Volume 14, 2008

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Northwest  
**THEATRE**  
REVIEW

Volume 14

2008

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## NORTHWEST THEATRE REVIEW

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## The Doomed Pursuit of Aesthetics and Its Turbo-Charged Afterlife

JOHN FROHNMAYER

When I reported aboard the *USS Oklahoma City* as a newly commissioned Ensign, the Executive Officer asked what I had studied in college. I told him I had just completed a Masters in Ethics. He said, "What's Ethics?" and then put me in Engineering, presumably because it started with "E." Similarly, the definition of aesthetics has morphed from the philosophical pursuit of the qualities perceived in works of art to a pharisaical set of rules and requirements, assuming the default position that art is merely what is housed in our museums. And as we all know, what hangs on the walls of our museums is entirely up to the guy with the hammer.

But that's not why the pursuit of aesthetics is doomed. Much of historical aesthetics was a schooled effort to exclude or prescribe what was in or out of the academy and thus was an anathema to both artists and the public. In my rude engagement with the political progress as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, the worst argument we could make was that Senators and Congressmen didn't "understand" the arts. Few citizens accept that message with grace, particularly when their tax dollars are paying the bills. Moreover, few outside the academy think much of those in it. When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilization, he replied that it would be a very good idea, indeed.

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Schools of art are an historical footnote in today's broad and even more indefinable art scene that includes video art, comic book art, minimalist art, performance art, video games and dozens of other collaborative, innovative projects. Expanding the scope and content of art was accelerated by Andy Warhol's soup cans and Brillo boxes, but Robert Mapplethorpe's XYZ portfolio was certainly a statement that aesthetics cannot be defined by subject.

But, the primary problem is that aesthetics can't describe in words the magic of what happens in art. The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu's first precept is that language is the great barrier that prevents us from knowing *the way*, that names are not *Eternal* names.

The inability of words to encompass all of art is simply acknowledgement that art has more volume, dimension and emotion than words can accommodate; that the pursuit of aesthetics requires all of our senses as well as the opportunity to confront the art first hand rather than simply reading, talking or thinking about it. The offense that most people took during the time I was at the NEA was about art they hadn't seen as described to them by those who hadn't seen it either.

Philosophy and, therefore, aesthetics is typically linear in its thought process. There is thesis, antithesis and synthesis. That logical process works poorly for art that swarms around in a circular miasma and sometimes, in the words of T.S. Elliott, can communicate before it is understood. Philosophy has, in the words of Henry Adams, met these dilemmas by giving "unintelligible answers to insoluble problems."

So, if both words and logic are too anemic to support the aesthetic endeavor, it is doomed; that's the end of it, and we should repair to the bar and propose drunken toasts to its memory. Not so Fast! Society *needs* aesthetics to verify, strengthen and understand itself. I see aesthetics not as the search for some timeless metaphysical truth, but as a cheerleader, a town crier, an advocate and a critic of the art produced in our own time and our own place. In the words of Marcel Proust, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" (Lewis, 169). The journey here is not one that seeks consensus. Our brains are burdened by what we know, what we think we know, what we remember and what we made up. All of these filters cause us to see things differently, react differently, experience differently and understand differently. Aesthetics can expand or erase boundaries and help us to understand new frontiers. What follows then is more than a commercial for the study of aesthetics. It is an imperative for healthy society. The

American poet, William Carlos Williams, reminds us that we cannot find news in poetry, but we often perish for the lack of it.

Aesthetics appreciates art's irrationality. What makes a single line drawing by Modigliani art? What is the mystery that imbues it with something that is "wholly other" in the same sense that Mircea Eliade attempts to describe the sacred (Eliade, 9)? In a society that is as bottom-line oriented as ours, an appreciation of mystery, something we can't quite grasp, provides leaven, color and depth to our existence.

The palette of time is also part of art's message. With a culture of instant gratification, aesthetics advises us to wait, to listen, to be silent and to give art the opportunity to work its magic. One of the first public art projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1966 was *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is a huge, lumpy, red steel stabile by Alexander Calder. It was plopped down in the middle of a public square and raised a hue and cry from some of the citizens who thought it too big, too ugly, too red, too abstract for their city. Now, it is the logo on the city's garbage trucks. It entertains a festival around its base every summer as citizens gather to celebrate their lives together. It graces the city's stationery. It is beloved.

Aesthetics has traditionally compared what is done today with what was done yesterday, and the generation before that, and the millennia before, back to the beginning of recorded history. Since art is a commentary on the human condition, we can revisit our past, learn from it and criticize it. From the Enlightenment to the beginning of World War I, history was seen as marching inexorably toward a more perfect society. Artists knew better since, as students of human nature, they realized that scientific achievement, logic and education were not necessarily going to produce a peaceful world. Kurt Vonnegut's description of artists as "canaries in a coal mine" is part of the package. Artists are, and therefore the study of aesthetics is, an attempt to describe the human condition. In that way it tills some of the same ground as those engaged in sociology, anthropology and ethics. But from a historical perspective, the study of aesthetics is an attempt to discover what is new, fresh and profound in art.

Aesthetics appreciates art's Janis-faced of bringing order to chaos and chaos from order. An example of the former is the South African musical, *Sarafina*, based on the 1976 incident where 200,00 black students in Soweto gathered to protest imposition of the Afrikaans' language over their native Zulu. Police moved in shooting and clubbing. Many were killed or injured. The musical celebrates the triumph of the human

spirit over systematic injustice. In the “order to chaos” department, take the words of the installation artist, Judy Pfaff, whose monumental burnt logs present her view that, “having it all together is the least interesting thing for an artist.” In this sense, aesthetics strokes our sadistic pleasure by afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.

Today’s art world is scruffy, rebellious, self-centered, arrogant, contentious, self-indulgent and occasionally brilliant. Who else in our society is asking us to look, to listen, to ponder and to judge our puny human efforts? Artists are taking the intellectual risks, going where the answers are unclear, keeping that edge of terror that we can, and often will, fail. Like Bill Bowerman, famous track coach and co-founder of Nike said, “You can’t do the long jump without getting sand in your shorts.” It is an appreciation that, with the earliest cave painters at Lascaux twenty-five centuries ago, both the art depicting the hunt and the hunt itself are inextricably bound in the process of human survival.

Where else in our society are there honest critics seeking to tell the unvarnished truth? You might, with a hoarse cry, yell “religion,” and I would concur that the church and art have much in common, but, in my view, art has a whole lot more vitality in today’s society than does religion. I would venture to say that art is doing a far better job at being a social critic.

And that leads to the act of creation as a soul sustaining myth. Aesthetics attempts to describe the process by which the artist makes something wonderful out of the common place, out of materials that are, by themselves, ordinary and unexceptional, like stone, or paint or wood.

Traditionally, the creation myth is a means by which society reinvigorates itself, because the person who is transformed, who has literally died and been reborn, carries the moral authority that the society needs to sustain itself. The creation myth is so powerful, because most of what we do in our daily lives, in our politics, in our work, drains rather than sustains us. But art has that mystical ability to turbo-charge our lives, to give us a boost by telling us something that is fundamental and true.

Like what? Well, like reaffirming human dignity, the necessity of community, the centrality of beauty to a healthy life. When we go to a museum or see a sculpture on the public mall, it tells us something about our community, and what we value. The aesthetician may help us focus on new ways of seeing and experiencing the world, of the renewal that escape from our commonplace gives. Aesthetics may help describe our extended capacity for empathy and cognitive growth; art gives us empathy, because art draws us into the experiences of others, and it provides us

with cognitive growth, because art requires us to confront and attempt to understand. Aesthetics is not, after all, a purely spectator sport. It requires heavy intellectual lifting and sorting. In doing so, art helps to create social bonds through peoples’ reactions, both positive and negative, to the artist’s attempt to express communal meanings.

This conversation in which the aesthete is involved has a significant effect on public health. A study published a few years ago in the *British Medical Journal* followed 13,000 people over nine years and found that those who did not participate in cultural activities were one and a half times more likely to die sooner. The reasons, they speculated, were that emotional release is good for you; people draw strength from stories, and people socialize through the arts. But I suspect the primary reason is that we stay alive by being alive, being engaged and fulfilled intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically.

Philosophy has tried to throw an intellectual net over the beast, but the aesthetician is more like a tour guide who helps us approach the art, and the art then becomes the teacher, even though the message may be far from clear. The towering 20th Century theologian, Paul Tillich, tells us that the appreciation of the ambiguity of our greatest achievements as well as our worst failures is a definite sign of moral maturity.

By heightening our appreciation of ambiguity, there comes another long neglected skill, namely, that of listening. I’m talking about really trying to understand another’s point of view instead of forming the stinging retort while the other’s lips are still moving; and not just aural listening, but also considering all the evidence, the commentary, the articles, the papers and dialogue. Here aesthetics can teach society a lesson that it knows but has forgotten: the art of polite but passionate discourse. In politics it used to be called statesmanship. In art it is called criticism, and at its best, it glorifies the human condition, because it recognizes that persuadability and emotion and passion and logic and communication fulfill us as human beings. Although, I must say that in my experience, most artists think critics are to art are what dogs are to lamp posts.

Because of ambiguity and discussion and changing viewpoints, aesthetics is always a work in progress. And here, aesthetics appreciates not just the product, the final object or image of the artist, but the process of making art itself. Marcel Duchamp described it in 1957: “...the creative act is not performed by artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” (Battock, 48). Indeed, the aesthetician or critic is part of a triangular process where the

artist, the audience and the critic all need each other to draw attention to the work, debate the work and participate in the creation of the work. Often what the artist intended, if the artist is even able to articulate such an intention, is not what ultimately emerges from the work, and this is precisely because the art work takes on a life of its own.

Aesthetics was an early casualty in the culture wars of which I was a part, where the attacks came from both the right and left. Feminist artists, particularly, objected to standards that favored gender, dead white males, while others like Samuel Lippman and Leonard Garment thought those should be our entire repertoire. In asking what should be the new standards, some women suggested the criteria of honesty. By honesty I think they meant not just actively telling the truth but also dispelling what we know to be the misunderstanding of others. In a time of political spin, not just by politicians but also by business leaders, religious leaders and advocates of all stripes, it is difficult to find honesty in fact.

I believe that the business of quality art is seeking the truth about the way things work in nature, about what is real, valuable, beautiful, enduring. The aesthetician is involved in seeking the truth, telling the truth, honoring the truth and perhaps most importantly, being persuadable about the truth.

While I would no more expect to find society adhering to a single truth than I would finding a consensus on the true meaning of art, I so think that artists, when they are functioning at their best, bring a clearness to our human condition. The critic, Gregory Battock, wrote thirty-five years ago, in words that literally spit from the page, "...the modern artist had been collared and leashed and led down the path of philosophy" (Battock, 28). Rather than an insult, I consider the reference to philosophy a badge of honor, because philosophy is a real attempt to understand real people and real problems and to seek real solutions. A solution may be beauty, which is fundamental food for the human soul. It may be a search for the truth, for honesty in a society that seems to honor neither truth-telling nor honest searching. It may be the appreciation of silence, of listening to the world around us and seeking out the lessons that are there for those who can really hear. It may be the simple willingness to engage in conversation, to be persuadable and to be available to converse in a language of art with our fellow citizens. It may be the willingness to confront the ugliness that is a constant part of human-kind.

Is this a marginal, academic, insignificant exercise? I think it is central to our survival. The doomed pursuit of aesthetics, like the mythological Phoenix, rises in a search for a society that is real, that is just and that is complete.

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## Performances of the Intersections of Race, Gender and Class on the American Stage

MELISSA HURT

The major proponents of American political theater include two generations of artists that perform socio-political theater analyzing intersections of race, gender and class in contemporary society. The first was in the 1960's and included the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Luis Valdez in *El Teatro Campesino* (The Farmworkers' Theater). These groups brought attention to the injustice dealt to racial and ethnic minorities as they sought their socio-economic place in society. The San Francisco Mime Troupe and *El Teatro Campesino* performed works specifically about and for *their people*: low-income audiences including racial minorities who could not afford attendance to the mainstream upper-class theaters. Their works tapped into the social unrest simmering in the audience and stirred social awareness amongst their communities.

The second generation began in the 1980's and includes African American playwright and performance artist, Anna Deavere Smith and the three-man Chicano performance group, Culture Clash. Anna Deavere Smith and Culture Clash have maintained the socio-political legacy of the first generation while taking it a step further by interviewing members of their community and representing them as they reenact their stories onstage. Anna Deavere Smith broke new ground in the American theater landscape with her riveting and controversial play, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Culture Clash has unapologetically shown the angst brewing in their

Chicano community using political satire, spoken word poetry, music and dance to affect their audiences further. One of their most famous productions is *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami*, in which they perform dozens of characters as they portray Miami's citizens and social issues. This paper will review the major proponents of the genre of American political theater who use popular forms to explore tensions that surface in analyzing race, gender and class onstage. In addition, the *performative* shifts that occurred between the first and second generations will pose questions regarding identity politics in contemporary society.

Popular entertainment forms for communicating a social message to masses of people have been used as an educational tool for hundreds of years. These forms include mime, *commedia dell'arte* (a seventeenth century form of street theater with a working class point of view), vaudeville, puppetry, clowning and political satire. All of the artists discussed here use at least one of these forms for communicating a socio-political message to their audience. But, why do these forms continue to appear? Claudia Orenstein explores what she coins "Festive-Revolutionary Theater" and says,

Popular forms rely on concrete and exaggerated movement and are intimately bound up with the material conditions of life. They foreground the diversity and extraordinary potential of the human body as (an) agent. They rely on comic clowning to bring a new vision, an outside perspective on situations, and thereby question the status quo. They instigate change and place it in a positive light by equating it with renewal and birth. They address their audience as a community and thereby create a sense of community (27).

An audience cannot join a revolution unless they feel invited and are educated on the issues they face. These forms debase the upper class, ridicule hegemonic conventions and show that change can happen when all one has is his/her own body. The actors usually play more than one character and depict their character's identity either through a recognizable physical movement or by use of signs stating the character's name. Lastly, comedy is an effective tool for educating an audience about a political issue, as laughter is a tactic for bringing people together. The first group to utilize a combination of these forms to educate their audience was R. G. Davis's San Francisco Mime Troupe.

R. G. Davis founded the R. G. Davis Mime Troupe in 1959 with the hopes of doing theater that included the mime, circus clowning, vaudeville, puppetry, *commedia dell'arte* and socio-political satire. Originally performing at 11:00 p.m. on Sundays, they experimented using popular performance forms with startling material in order to discover their most

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effective stage techniques. Eventually changing the group's name to the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the company rejected everything about the middle class and their elite theater forms. Davis states, "Unencumbered by party, program or theory we practiced escaping from the bourgeois doldrums. Inevitably, we drifted toward an alternative culture or a culture parallel to the powerful middle class...we actually crossed the divide between us and them—with *commedia* in the parks (and) minstrel shows" (28). Davis's rich history of risk-taking became a weapon as his troupe took over the streets of San Francisco with their exploration of the concerns of the working class or underprivileged citizens.

One of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's most provocative and celebrated productions was a minstrel show staged in 1964 to present current racial tensions in an explosive, unapologetic manner titled *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*. Davis explains his choice for this venue,

The search for relevant material on civil rights continued until one of us happened upon the idea: why not write a minstrel show... We realized that by doing an original minstrel show we would be following the line we had established with *commedia* and, of course, we would get right into the problem of racism—ours and everyone else's—by unearthing those stereotypes, clichés, cornballs and all that Uncle Tom jive (49).

To further the investigation of racial stereotypes, Davis cast three white men and three black men as minstrels and put them all in black face and black fright wigs to keep the audience guessing who was actually black, thus, shattering expectations of how races should behave.

Davis wanted to investigate what constitutes black behavior in American society. What is really behind racial stereotypes and how far can the envelope be pushed to explode those ideas in everybody's faces? The spirit of *commedia* ran through *A Minstrel Show*: stereotypical characters, exaggerated gestures, masks (black face), and the whole show was done in a presentational form based upon the years of minstrel show history in the collective theatrical conscience of the United States (Davis 51-2). To achieve a relevant political message within the traditional form, Davis created a white ringleader thought of as "Mr. America" and placed him in the middle of six rowdy minstrels. But Davis did not want this show to have a singular point of view. He states, "In addition to our social analysis, we had to deal with the personal liberation of each actor; not only to incorporate some material we might find in each performer but also to make sure that the individuals would present the collective point of view" (52). Each actor spoke privately in a tape recorder about

the moment he realized his ethnic or racial identity. Davis noticed that those in the cast who experienced their "coming-of-age moments" early in life understood the show and its intensity, whereas those who had their experiences later in life left the show (52). The production opened after a nine-month process of creating its skits and gags. Davis says of the audience reception:

People thought we were on their side, thought it was a civil rights integration show. Not so, we were cutting deeper into prejudices than integration allowed. We poked not at intolerance, but tolerance. We were not for the suppression of differences; rather, by exaggerating the differences we punctuated the cataracts of "color blind" liberals, disrupted "progressive" consciousness and made people think twice about eating watermelon (63).

Using popular forms to express their social agenda afforded them their boldness. Whereas the San Francisco Mime Troupe used forms from the European seventeenth century and American nineteenth century stages, *El Teatro Campesino* used traditional early twentieth century Mexican vaudeville tent shows (*carpas*) and short improvisational skits (*actos*).

The socio-political works of *El Teatro Campesino*, featuring Luis Valdez's groundbreaking plays, for the United Farm Workers of America started a revolution of Chicano awareness and social unrest awakening the West coast of the United States. In its beginnings, *El Teatro Campesino* performed numerous highly improvisational skits, which expressed the exploitative living and working conditions of farm workers in boldly satirical words and actions (Broyles-Gonzalez xii). Chicano theatre artists were working towards *La Raza* (a Spanish term for "The Race" used to empower and denote their mixed Mexican and Aztec or Mayan ancestry) and were exploring various facets of Chicano identity to get there. The artists of *El Teatro Campesino* cleared a path moving through the 1960's and 1970's, demanding respect and an understanding of Chicano identity in the United States. Because they had been second-class citizens since the beginning of Anglo domination, Chicanos have had to struggle with a variety of (social and political) issues, thus creating an air of urgency that has defined their theater (Huerta 6). The Chicano artists working within *El Teatro Campesino* were angry and resilient.

Highly equipped in the Mexican oral tradition, members treated folklore and traditional performance forms with the utmost respect. *El Teatro Campesino*, which currently exists without Valdez, has focused almost entirely on aspects of its textuality, its topical themes and the political conditions of its founding and evolution (Broyles-Gonzalez 3). The twentieth century Mexican *carpas* used vaudeville-style songs and short

skits to communicate a social message. The performance techniques, forms, language, style, characters, audience relationship, performance sites, and social relations of *El Teatro Campesino* productions emerge from that Mexican/o community context and history (Broyles-Gonzalez 10-11). The power of popular forms as an organizing tool cannot be underestimated. Luis Valdez knew this when he got involved with the Farm Workers Union and *El Teatro Campesino*. To best communicate the struggling farm workers' stories, the *actos* included four essential identifiable characters: "esquidor" (the scab, or strike-breaker), "huelgalista" (the striker), "patroncito" (the grower), and the "contradista" (the middle man who gathers members of his own race to work for corporations) (*El Teatro Campesino*). To portray the characters in the *actos*, performers wore signs with their character's name hand written on them that could easily be worn or removed. Audiences did not have to guess who people were; the focus shifted to the relationships and social issues presented.

Socio-political satirical works by the San Francisco Mime Troupe and *El Teatro Campesino* allowed theater artists to speak of serious issues to a wide range of audiences. American culture needed an outlet to explore the social place of the lower and middle class citizens fighting for their rights. As America moved through the 1980's and into the 1990's, a new form was needed to continue their exploration. Artists Anna Deavere Smith and the Culture Clash group took from the traditions of their predecessors and contributed new methods to make invigorating, socially relevant and radical theater.

Anna Deavere Smith has been creating performances based on actual events since the early 1980's. Her creative process involves interviewing hundreds of people related to a historical or social event, carefully developing a script from selected interviews and performing the people in their candid words. Smith chooses not to create a character from the standard American appropriation of the Russian Stanislavsky System of the early twentieth century but rather mimics the subjects' gestures, voices and mannerisms; thus, working from the "outside-in" (Kondo 96). In a culture where representations of race usually remain on the binary of black and white, what happens when a woman of color portrays other people of color? Smith does not seek a complete character transformation, when she portrays her subjects but rather maintains a slight distance between herself and the person she is playing, allowing the audience to question her depiction of race. If a black woman can fluidly move from playing a white man to an Asian woman to a black man, how much of racial identity is really a social construct based on American politics?

When asked how she gets her subjects to be so open and trusting of her, Smith states,

I have gone to places where people had an accelerated will to communicate because intense things have happened to them. Usually some structure in their society has been turned upside down. Without a traditional identity, they are grasping to put themselves in language (Smith 285).

Smith's talent for writing helps them accomplish this and find an identity through her plays.

One of Smith's most groundbreaking works is *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which premiered one year after the Rodney King trial. Smith portrayed over fifty Los Angeles citizens somehow connected to the riots— from vendors, law enforcement officers, jurors, to Rodney King's relatives. She initially interviewed over 200 subjects and chose to portray a select 25 percent for the purpose of maintaining an appropriate show time. However, due to her respect for her subjects, she portrayed different personas for each performance, so everyone's voice was heard at some time. The experience of seeing Smith perform so many people is riveting. She seamlessly alters her vocal pitch and rhythm while adjusting how she holds her body to move from one character to another. Smith says, "I hope my work suggests to people that there is a possibility of living in someone else's point of view because they see me making the effort to do that" (Smith 288-89).

Although Smith stands apart from the theater community as an African American woman making strong socio-political statements about race, gender and class, Culture Clash has made an impact as three Chicano men using political satire to communicate social messages also related to the struggle of maintaining one's identity in American society. Founded on Cinco de Mayo, 1984 in the Mission District of San Francisco, Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza use a sharp satirical blade as they explore what it means to be a Chicano in the troubling political times from the 1980's to today. Performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena says in the preface of their second anthology, *Culture Clash in America*:

Perhaps their great contribution to Chicano-Latino culture was to dare to turn the gaze inward, become self-critical and put into question everything held sacred by our communities. In this process, they expanded the conceptual repertoire of permissible subject matter and dared to tackle extremely sensitive issues, which up to that point were a mere internal conversation or gossip within "la comunidad" (Gomez-Pena vii-viii).

Culture Clash does not give answers regarding the troubles of being Chicano in an Anglo hegemonic culture. They make it clear that they are struggling for their place as much as the characters they represent and the members of their audience. This allows the audience to identify more with them and search for their own answers as Culture Clash looks for theirs.

Culture Clash employs satire as a socio-political tool and weapon to assert their identity and place in the American landscape. Through an incorporation of political theater, the use of historical figures as characters, and representations of a multitude of races and ethnicities, Culture Clash has made an impressive mark in the promotion and understanding of the Chicano/ Latino identity. Their plays focus on a variety of notions including the struggles Latinos face with assimilation while maintaining their unique identity and representing how cultures interact and live together in specific American regions. Their plays speak of cultural, historical and social concerns for an array of audiences. In addition, their strategic incorporation of spoken word poetry with the clever use of music to establish time, place or culture successfully communicates their social message. These devices also maintain an undeniable stamp on the current cultural condition under which the play was written.

In the beginning of the career of Culture Clash, the audience was almost all Chicano. As the company matured and represented more ethnicities in the American landscape, the audiences are becoming as mixed as the ethnic and cultural types Culture Clash represents. Montoya stated after their first production that focused on an American region, *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami*,

Any time *Radio Mambo's* done, you'll find part of a Black audience there, and they just never came to our other work, and the Cubans...come... Our work in the past has been Chicano...We feel there's room for that. But I can't deny that something new and exciting and explosive does happen in that mix...No, there's something going on: 99 percent of Black audiences...feel a sense of gratitude for us (Kondo 101).

Thus, their audiences value seeing themselves acknowledged in the cultural mix.

*Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami* marks the first play written by Culture Clash that was not about West Coast Chicanos. Herbert Singuenza says in the preface to the play, "*Radio Mambo* is unique among our works and, perhaps, in *Chicano Teatro*, because it has Chicano actors giving voice to the hopes and dreams of Cubans, Haitians, Bahamians, African Americans, Jews and an array of other cultural entities, all struggling together to find identity in a relatively young American city" (109).

Perhaps one of the most interesting components of the show is when the actors move from portraying interviewed Miamians to playing themselves giving commentary on the stories depicted onstage. They make no effort to *transform* into a character and allow the same tension Smith gives her audience for people to make their own judgments on the interconnectedness of different races in heterogeneous communities.

In summary, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Luis Valdez and *El Teatro Campesino*, Anna Deavere Smith, and Culture Clash have allowed audiences to question unapologetically racial, social and political issues affecting communities through their presentation of conflicting ideas regarding race, gender and class. When an audience sees an actor portray multiple roles, as all of these performing artists and groups do, they are able to question objectively what constitutes one's identity and social reality. The works of these artists provide an impetus for awareness leading to social change. As multiple races, ethnicities and classes struggle to find a place in American society, these theater artists will continue to portray the issues most compromising their just and fair inclusion in society.

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## Verbatim Theatre: Mission Accomplished?

KATO BUSS

*"We know what we know, we know there are things we don't know, and we know there are things we know we don't know..."*

— Donald Rumsfeld

Verbatim Theatre is dangerous. It numbs our capacity for critical viewing and shocks us into a state of complacent activism. Verbatim Theatre is risky. Janelle Reinelt warns, "Any time real figures in contemporary public life are impersonated, the risk of being judged by the accuracy of the portrayals is enormous" (303). Verbatim theatre is deceptive. It claims to present authentic representation and valid historicization by giving the viewer *real* text, from *actual* people, involved in *true* events.

As we must not the selective disbursement of information, by both the government and the media, represent the truth; we equally cannot let our eagerness to produce political theatre surpass the necessary examination of tactics used in its creation. Theorist Carol Martin insists:

The paradox of a "theatre of facts" that uses representation to enact a relationship to the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre (17).

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Simply put, the desire to be politically active must not compromise critical capacity.

This paper seeks to disrupt the cogency of verbatim theatre. Its power. Its efficacy. Equally important, this paper will expose the consequence of historicizing the current political landscape. The mission is chancy and the conversation hazardous. Perhaps critical reinforcement can be offered for those venturing into the fray.

9/11 and the subsequent "Global War on Terror" have galvanized contemporary political theatre, with the verbatim movement as its spearhead. Interestingly, while the United States is very comfortable playing leading man on the global stage, the main player in recent political theatre is Britain. Plays such as Jonathan Holmes' *Fallujah*, Robin Soans' *Talking with Terrorists* and Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* are all examples of verbatim theatre. However, the juggernaut of the genre is undoubtedly David Hare's *Stuff Happens*.

This essay will present a three-pronged attack on Hare's play. First, the issue of authentic representation will be interrogated. Verbatim theatre purports to offer a word-for-word account of actual events; a docu-drama backed up by the facts. Using Stephen Bottoms article, "Putting the Document into Documentary," the question of what constitutes our sense of "real" in *Stuff Happens* will be dissected.

Second, the intention behind writing recent history must be questioned. As Carol Martin observes:

Verbatim theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history, the events that shape the landscapes of our lives (11).

How events are remembered determines the history they eventually become; verbatim theatre attempts to shape the record, because it gives form to how we remember.

Finally, the paradox between performance and politics will be exposed. All theatre is political and all politics are theatrical. Diana Taylor stands witness:

Declarations of war are instances when saying something does something...in the build up to the invasion of Iraq, Bush's language acted (5).

Indeed, the tension between language/text and politics/performance is critical to this discussion and provides valuable insight into the power of political rhetoric to mobilize art.

*Stuff Happens* was inspired by Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld's response to the widespread looting in Baghdad, "Stuff happens and it's

untidy, and freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things" (4). Little did Rumsfeld know that his astute rationalization of anarchy would become the poster child of contemporary political theatre.

In *Stuff Happens*, Hare re-creates actual speeches, meetings and press conferences, as well as, fictionalized scenes at the highest levels of government. One of these behind-closed-doors scenes captures a John Wayne-esque meeting between George Bush and Tony Blair at the Crawford Ranch in Texas:

BUSH: Nobody's looking you can undo your tie. And it's an open agenda; you need to be in good faith.

BLAIR: It's important to me.

BUSH: I've been clear with you. We're just discussing the options (35).

Hare defends created scenes like this as part of a longstanding tradition of fictionalizing historic events. "Nobody says of Tolstoy: What right has he to speculate on Napoleon," Hare said referring to *War and Peace*, "But my problem is that because I write about recent events, it's always assumed to be journalism. And it isn't" (NYT). Journalism or not, scenes like this raise a red flag regarding truth in representation and create a conflicting sense of reality by presenting a fictionalized account under the guise of "verbatim."

*Stuff Happens* is about power. In the *New York Times*, Hare said, "It's about power, and it's about the exercise of power and it's about people who think they can make an accommodation with power" (NYT). In the play, power works at an individual, micro level, as well as, the collective, macro level; within this dynamic, Hare illuminates a distinction between cunning and intelligence, illustrating how power is employed within each. Again, from the *New York Times*:

I wanted to write the story of how a supposedly stupid man completely gets his way with two supposedly clever men. How powerless intelligence is against cunning really is one of the themes of the play, and I think Bush is very cunning (NYT).

Inasmuch as *Stuff Happens* is about the invasion of Iraq, it is also very much about George Bush. To be sure, Hare does not make Bush stupid; in fact the character of George Bush comes across as a calculating ringleader and mastermind of the entire scheme. Speaking in direct address, Bush says, "I'm the commander, see, I don't need to explain" (10). These chilling words transform Bush from a presumably ill-informed puppet to messianic architect.

*"All revolutions in art, are a return to realism."*

—David Hare

David Hare has acquired an almost theological presence in contemporary political theatre. Thankfully, some of the veneer has begun to wear off and dramatic theorists have begun to take the playwright to task. From this, we are able to distance ourselves from an empathic stance and take a more critical view of the play.

First, tackling the issue of authentic representation; creating performance from found material is problematic; the developmental dramaturgy of verbatim theatre produces a unique complication on the nature of the truth. Stephen Bottoms takes this on, "What makes verbatim theatre proactive is the way it strategically employs an appearance of truth, while inventing its own particular truth" (61). Indeed, this is witnessed by presenting a character, such as the President of the United States, having that character deliver fictional lines that are seemingly *his own* and then labeling the whole formation as *true*.

The approach is provocative, because we are dealing with two conflicting realities: first, the reality of circumstance; the person, text and environment strategically employed by the playwright. Second is the reality of an aesthetic: the theatrical conventions used to present the representation.

Bottoms suggests that the attempt creates multiple understandings of these realities. In his words:

A kind of theatrical self-referentiality is required of documentary plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both document and play (58).

In this case, self-referentiality describes theatre that employs references to a personal experience or character. Considering this, a contradiction occurs in having George Bush say,

BUSH: My faith frees me. Frees me to put the problem of the moment in proper perspective. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer (09).

The paradox is that you have a public figure, using his own words to describe himself in a theatrical performance. As much as these words are true and come straight from the horse's mouth, it is still happening onstage. It is both the truth and an illusion of truth. Verbatim theatre needs to be held accountable for such a dichotomy.

From here not only Hare's play, but more specifically, his dramaturgy must be called into question. Hare is manipulating found-text in order to

create his representation of a recent historical event. In journalism and politics the practice is known as "spin." The dramaturgical techniques of verbatim theatre must be viewed as "theatrical spin" if critical perspective is to be maintained.

In attacking the same argument, Bottoms quotes Jacques Derrida's famous essay on Artaud, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," referring to traditional text-based theatre as "theological" in that the god-like author, "...armed with a text...regulates the meaning of representation" (59). Verbatim theatre purports meaning-making that is word-for-word verbatim. This pits Derrida's theoretical construction of text against the document driven construction of verbatim texts, exposing a tension within the origin of dramatic art.

The verbatim playwright applies public documents to the creation, thus generating a *fetishized* notion that somehow the playwright has slipped one past the government's Orwellian control of information and we, the audience, are able to congratulate each other on getting the truth. However, the irony is that the verbatim playwright, in this case David Hare, is not that different than Derrida's "god-like author," in that Hare is just as culpable in regulating representation and attempting to spin recent political events in historical truth.

*"I have opinions of my own, strong opinions, but don't always agree with them."*

— George Bush

The "Theory of Great Men" was formulated by the Scottish philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, who wrote that "...the history of the world is but the biography of great men." Carlyle believed that a few, powerful males have shaped our collective destiny through their valor, leadership and divine inspiration. Thankfully, Karl Marx gave Carlyle's theory a thorough beating with his own "materialist conception of history," stating in *Critique of Political Economy*.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx).

However, Carlyle's theory, while dated and offensive, can still be of some use in interpreting the methodology of our current political leaders and certainly offers insight into the dissection of Hare's play. The narrative of *Stuff Happens* can be viewed from a couple perspectives. First, it portrays the "leader of the free world," George W. Bush, and his two

cronies, Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld, manipulating political rhetoric, in order to shape history:

RUMSFELD: I liked what you said earlier, sir. A war on terror. That's good. That's vague.

CHENEY: It's good.

RUMSFELD: That way we can do anything (24).

Second, admittedly on a far more benign level, *Stuff Happens* is David Hare's attempt to do the same thing. In his introduction to the play Hare writes,

*Stuff Happens* is a history play, which happens to center on very recent history. The events within it have been authenticated from numerous sources, both public and private. What happened happened (SH).

This is a very brave statement, which tries to *concretize* the events of the play into the history books, but this is a highly problematic and perhaps the most troubling aspect of verbatim theatre: there is no distance from *what happened*. Inasmuch as we need distance from our own politics in order to view verbatim theatre critically, we also need distance from *what happened* in order to place it properly in historical context.

In the same way that historians are just now starting to put into perspective the world-wide revolution of 1968, the ramifications of 9/11 and the lead up to the war in Iraq are far from understood in 2008. Verbatim theatre blurs the line between history, journalism and fiction; without distance, verbatim theatre runs the risk of becoming nothing more than politically bias reportage.

Yet, another contradiction arises which complicates the discussion: the source material. Hare openly admits to using transcripts from meetings, briefings and press conferences. It seems to me that Hare has forgotten a basic tenet of critical thinking: "Don't believe everything you read." His application of the very same verbiage employed by political speech writers is all the more reason to question its authenticity.

Moreover, if critical thinking must question the "coach speak" presented by the White House, then, with a good conscious, the same rhetoric when it's presented in the theatre cannot be believed and even championed. Morettini backs this up:

The verbatim theatre of *Stuff Happens* is never unmediated, it is endlessly massaged by political speech writers and designed to be delivered and received as authoritative (314).

The use of unmediated political rhetoric in performance must be challenged; the alleged authority of verbatim history-makers must be resisted;

and, the right to question all dogmatic representation, theatrical or otherwise, must be preserved.

*"When the cat shit gets bigger than the cat, get rid of the cat."*

— Dick Cheney

Five days after September 11th, President George W. Bush stood onstage and proclaimed to the nation, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (TWH). Since 9/11, a dramatic campaign of fear and accusation has dominated socio-political theatre. Of course, the line between politics and theatre has always been razor thin, but since 9/11, the two have bled into one. The effective tactic of challenging the patriotism of anyone who dares question the validity of "the war on terror" is also employed upon the rank of spectator. Post-9/11 verbatim theatre utilizes the same tactic.

Terrorism attacks thought. It shocks the citizen-spectator into a state of critical inability. It also enables those in a position of power to control the collective psyche. In February 2003, the Department of Homeland Security launched a national campaign which sought:

To reduce fears and provide information by providing individuals specific actions they can take to protect themselves, their families and their communities in the wake of an attack, or another emergency situation (TWH).

Americans were urged to create a "panic room" stocked with three days of food and water, duct tape and pre-measured plastic sheeting. Of course, the name "panic room" was all wrong and ironically exposed the very emotion the government was seeking to manipulate, so it was changed to "safe room." Heeding the alarm, the citizen-spectator, armed with rolls of duct tape, plastic wrap and bottles of filtered water, prepared to tape up the cracks of their lives and seal themselves off from the impending, unknown danger.

Verbatim theatre has launched a similar campaign. It plays upon the political anxiety of the audience by providing information which reduces critical awareness, thus shocking the citizen-spectator into a state of complacent activism. We must not let our theatres become "safe rooms." We must not seal the threshold of our sacred space. We must welcome the dangers of the outside world.

The most reckless facet of the politically active is a blind desire to accept any information, so long as it appears to speak out against the opposition. The notion that there is a *right* way to demonstrate needs to be revised; consent of the status quo eradicated. The citizen-spectator must be mindful that the bond between politics and performance is a tightly



braided knot; the two are inseparable and we, as participants, are part of the knot. However, our inclusion in this bond is our greatest power in mobilizing political theatre against our government's incomprehensible rhetoric and unjustified policy. Diana Taylor reinforces this notion:

This war performative is not simply an act; it is a pact. It requires that the "audience" believe. In other words, the government needs to obtain the consent of "the people" in order to get away with the invasion. Providing or withholding that consent is the people's role, and the people's power (6).

It is our duty to question not only the policy makers, but policy haters. As our government routinely shifts the goalposts of victory in the "war on terror," the tactics of political theatre should shift as well. The recent trend of verbatim theatre is a result of this shift, but the battle cannot stop there. The bigger fight is to examine constantly the efficacy of the tactics and techniques used in producing contemporary political theatre, to interrogate vigilantly the information presented to us onstage as authentic and at all times maintain a critical distance from representation, *historicization* and the dangerous space in between.

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## Anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and the Modern Audience

ALICIA E. JAMES

A single death can bring life into focus for the people left behind. Many deaths can increase this focus, drawing the attention of many. The Holocaust caused the deaths of six million Jews in Europe (Austin, "Final Solution" par. 1). The horrors of these murders amplified sympathies towards Jews worldwide and lowered tolerance of anti-Jewish sentiment. Not even Shakespeare, one of the world's best known playwrights, was immune to this intolerance. The Holocaust increased world awareness of the Jewish community and resulted in the censorship of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (*MV*) for anti-Semitism.

This supposed anti-Semitism stems from the character in *MV* called Shylock. One of only two Jewish characters in the play, Shylock is a villain. He works as a usurer, or moneylender, and loans money to his rival, Antonio, with the provision that the money must be repaid by a certain date. If Antonio fails to repay the money by the deadline, Shylock can claim a pound of his flesh. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Antonio is unable to repay the money. Shylock attempts to collect the pound of flesh but is eventually thwarted and punished by being forced to give up his money, property, and convert to Christianity. Many people feel that the portrayal of Shylock characterizes Jews in a bad light and encourages anti-Semitic beliefs (Sova 174-175).

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Prior to the Holocaust, *MV* was not a play embedded in controversy. The play was not originally considered anti-Semitic. The first time the play was censored had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. In 1701, the text was altered by George Granville, because it was believed the play promoted homosexuality (Dobson 138-139). It was not until the decade just prior to the onset of World War II and the start of the Holocaust that Shakespeare's classic would be perceived as anything other than a comedy (Epstein 100).

The first of these instances occurred in 1927. Under pressure from Jewish organizations, the play was removed from the syllabi and curricula in secondary academic institutions across Los Angeles, California (Sova 175). Similarly, in 1931 the play was also removed from the curricula in high schools in Buffalo and Manchester, New York (Haight and Granis 18). Local Jewish groups protested the inclusion of the play on the grounds that its content promoted bigotry (Sova 175).

Also, during the years leading into the Holocaust, in contrast to the banning, an opposite reaction was occurring in Germany. German theatres were encouraged to have performances of *MV* (Armstrong 46). In 1933, eighty-six different productions of the play occurred in Germany (London 245). After two days of riots in Germany targeting Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses, which has become known as *Kristallnacht*, or "The Night of Broken Glass" (Austin, "*Kristallnacht*" par. 4-5), a radio version of the play was also broadcast throughout Germany (London 245). In a 1943 production, Werner Krauss, a popular German actor at the time, was ordered by Hitler's primary propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, to reprise the role of Shylock (Epstein 100). While his initial portrayal had been "cheeky," Krauss portrayed Shylock as unintelligent in this second performance (London 245). This alteration may have been at the strong insistence of the governmental propaganda office. Thus, the change in characterization from mischievous to stupid was probably intentional and meant to support the Nazi agenda of Jewish inferiority (Epstein 100).

In the years post-Holocaust, prohibitions against *MV* have become more frequent. Unfortunately, the play has been banned from more schools than any other Shakespearean work (Epstein 100). In 1949, a case in a New York court ruled that teaching *MV* in high school English classes "...violated the rights of children to receive an education free of religious bias" (Sova 175). In Ontario, Canada the board of education banned the play for anti-Semitism in 1986. One year later, the Human Rights Commission overruled the school board's decision stating that the play was not anti-Semitic. In 1988, schools in the Ramapo Central School

District in New York were forbidden to teach the play after a substitute teacher claimed the BBC film adaptation of the play was damaging to students. It was not until 1995 that the play was reinstated to the curriculum in the Ramapo Central School District. Ironically, even though the play is now allowed in the curriculum, it is not taught by any teachers in the district. All copies of the play were thrown away during the seven year period the play was banned (176).

Considering all the relatively recent controversy surrounding *MV*, the question arises about whether the play actually is anti-Semitic. The answer for many people is that the play is not. Scholars often use the life of Roderigo Lopez, a prominent figure in Jewish history, to support this belief. A Portuguese Jew who converted to Christianity, Lopez served as the physician to Queen Elizabeth I (Stirling, "1594" par. 2). Lopez lived under constant scrutiny as the genuineness of his conversion was debated (Brown xxiii). He was accused of plotting to assassinate the queen and executed publicly in 1594 (Stirling, "1594" par. 1). While not documented, some scholars contend that Shakespeare knew Lopez personally (Bloom 172) and based the character of Shylock on Lopez's life (Brown xxiii).

A more popular theory is that Shakespeare wrote *MV* as a response to the Lopez trial. After Lopez's execution, the popularity of Christopher Marlowe's anti-Semitic *The Jew of Malta* was renewed. Some records indicate the play was revived within ten days of the execution (xxvi). The play's central figure, the Jewish Barabas, is a murderous villain of epic proportions; he "...embarks upon an orgy of slaughter in revenge (which includes the poisoning of an entire nunnery)" (Stirling, "1589" par. 1). In the wake of Barabas, Shakespeare may have written *MV*'s Shylock as a contrast. While Barabas is brutal and exaggeratedly farcical, Shylock appears more human. Shylock is a villainous man but still a man (Brown xxvi).

A second source frequently used to illustrate that *MV* is not anti-Semitic is the text itself. The play does contain anti-Semitic characters, and many people claim Shakespeare shows his disapproval of these anti-Semitic attitudes by having Shylock utter one of *MV*'s most powerful speeches of condemnation:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? – fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? (Shakespeare *MV: Pelican Edition* 3.1.54-61)

Called "...one of the most eloquent statements of human dignity" (Mazer par. 2), this speech is seen as evidence the *MV*, and Shakespeare himself, advocate acceptance and compassion for all humankind (Armstrong 198).

A third argument used to show the play is not anti-Semitic is that it only presents two Jewish characters, Shylock and Tubal. Almost nothing is known about Tubal; he is in one scene and says little (70-71). There is more information about Shylock; however, there still is not enough information to form a clear opinion. Some scholars purport that without a more diverse sample of Jewish characters, one cannot suggest that the treatment of the two Jews depicted in *MV* is representative of how all Jews were treated. In support of this theory, other characters in *MV* claim that Shylock and Tubal are not good examples of Jews. The character of Soliano states, "A third cannot be matched, unless the devil himself turn Jew" (Shakespeare *Merchant Pelican Edition* 3.1.71-72). This means that the devil would have to become a Jew to find another one like Shylock and Tubal (Brown xxxix).

*MV* is also seen as an anti-Semitic work. Scholars point out how all Jews had been expelled from England in 1290. Jewish individuals living in England during Shakespeare's lifetime would not have been practicing openly for fear of death or deportation; therefore, in all probability, Shakespeare would have had to base Shylock on stereotypes (Stirling, "1290" par. 1-3). This is reflected in Shylock's love of money and his fierce desire for the pound of flesh. It was a common Elizabethan belief that Jews were greedy and bloodthirsty, sacrificing children during Passover (Stirling, "1144" par. 1).

Historically, Shylock's appearance during performances of *MV* was also based on stereotypes. The first description of Shylock occurs in the funeral elegy of Richard Burbage, a contemporary of Shakespeare and a prominent actor in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, of which Shakespeare was a shareholder. The elegy describes an unnamed play with a plot very similar to *MV*, and states that Burbage played the part of the "red-hair'd Jew" (Shakespeare *Variorum* 370). In Elizabethan England, it was custom to represent Jews onstage as red haired with large noses. The red hair may have been an attempt to connect Jews with Judas, the betrayer of Jesus in the Bible. Judas, by tradition, was depicted as having red hair. Visually linking Jewish characters with Judas also reinforced the credence that Jews were the killers of Christ (Lelyveld 8).

The text of *MV* is also regarded as further evidence that the play is anti-Semitic. Ironically, the same speech used to claim the play promotes

religious tolerance is also used as proof that *MV* promotes intolerance. Many academics state that the speech is often misinterpreted and taken out of context by stopping it at its midpoint (Armstrong 198). The rest of the speech in Shakespeare's *MV* illuminates the character of Shylock's true purpose:

And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.61-67)

Shylock uses the speech not as a plea for compassion, but rather as a rationalization for murder, as "...a self-serving justification of his own desire to wreak a horrible, inexorable, unrelenting, bloody revenge" (Mazer par. 2). Further critics of the speech as a plea for compassion state,

What's so admirable about admitting that a Jew has flesh and blood, appetites and vulnerabilities, just like a Christian? ... You could say almost the same things about a monkey! Where's the spiritual dimension, the acknowledgement that Shylock has a soul and a right to his beliefs and practices? (Armstrong 199).

Regardless whether a person believes the play to be anti-Semitic or not, how the play is performed has changed over time, especially since the Holocaust. The originator of the role of Shylock is unknown. Scholars debate whether the part was initially played by Burbage or Will Kempe. Shylock was intended as a comedic role, so some scholars give credence to the Kempe theory; Kempe was an actor of physical comedy (Gross 105). Other scholars believe Burbage the more likely originator, as the only documented reference of either actor playing the part is Burbage's own funeral elegy (Shakespeare *Variorum* 370). However, because there is dispute about the funeral elegy's authenticity, a conclusion cannot be drawn (Lelyveld 7). Perhaps both actors performed the role (Stirling, "Richard Burbage" par. 1).

The first undisputed actor to play Shylock was Thomas Dogget in 1701. Specializing in comedy, Dogget took on the role in an adaptation by Granville. Censoring the material he found inappropriate while adding additional scenes, Granville's adaptation changed Shylock into a miserly clown more in love with money than anything else (Shakespeare *Variorum* 370). As a result, Dogget's Shylock was probably a farcical villain, almost to the point of absurdity. Exactly how Dogget handled the part is unknown, because the only document mentioning him in the role is a list of the actors and their roles (Gross 109).

The next noteworthy performer of Shylock was Charles Macklin in 1741. Macklin made an attempt at historical authenticity by researching Jewish dress in Venice. He learned that Jews wore yellow hats and incorporated a yellow hat into his costume (Gross 111). His characterization also moved Shylock away from slapstick comedy towards a harsher depiction (112). Macklin stressed the evilness of Shylock while still being larger than life (Stirling, "Charles Macklin" par. 1).

In 1814, the portrayal of Shylock was moved even farther from its origins by the actor, Edmund Kean. By wearing more modern clothing and using a black wig and beard in place of the traditional red, Kean contemporized Shylock (Stirling, "Edmund Kean" par. 1). This departure from Shylock's *normal* look attracted lots of attention, allowing scholars to hypothesize that this was the first time a change in appearance had been attempted (Lelyveld 8). In addition, Kean tried to show Shylock to be more than a villain by beginning to express the character's humanity (Gross 128).

Shylock's humanity was developed more fully in Henry Irving's portrayal of the role in 1880. Irving presented Shylock as the embodiment of a persecuted religion (Stirling, "Henry Irving" par. 1). Irving made Shylock into a victim rather than a villain by stressing how the other characters wronged Shylock (Gross 146). Irving's Shylock was seen as a "martyred saint" (159).

In the time since the Holocaust, portrayals of Shylock have veered from its comedic origins sharply towards the tragic. *MV* is often seen as having an anti-Semitic *problem* that needs to be solved. To *fix* the play, directors often try to show the Christian characters as highly prejudiced (Gross 329). The play becomes "*about* anti-Semitism" (Mazer par. 6) or "xenophobia" (Newman par. 12), and Shylock becomes the central figure, the tragic hero "more sinned against than sinning" (Edelstein par. 2). It is not unheard of for the fifth act of the play to be cut so that the play ends with Shylock (Armstrong 57).

The first of the productions to attempt to make the play about anti-Semitism was in 1970. Directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Laurence Olivier as Shylock, the duo collaborated to create their adaptation (Gross 327). Large parts of Shylock's dialogue were cut in order to show him in a more sympathetic light (328), and other characters were revealed as "...corrupt, cold-hearted frands" (327). Audiences responded well to Olivier's Shylock, but his performance was most famous for a moment not even included in the Shakespearean text. During Shylock's final exit, Olivier exited, paused, and then gave a heart-wrenching cry from offstage,

effectively keeping the audience thinking about Shylock. Reviewers could not stop talking about it (Armstrong 57), although they claimed that the changes to the script and the cry from the wings weakened the production by giving too much focus to Shylock and not enough to the rest of the play (Sova 175).

After noticing that it had become standard for Shylock to overshadow the rest of *MV*, the Peter Hall Company attempted to reverse this trend by relegating Shylock back to minor character status. Directed by Peter Hall with Dustin Hoffman in the role of Shylock, the production kept its focus on the romantic and humorous storylines. Hoffman's Shylock was a man, nearly accustomed to the bigotry around him, who was driven to revenge by the betrayal of his daughter (Rich C15). Opening in London in 1989, with a revival on Broadway later that same year, the production was met by lukewarm reviews (Gilman 24). Hoffman was sympathetic in the role but was criticized as being too cautious. Audiences had come to expect Shylock to be more integral to the plot and were left "...thinking about this endlessly debated play without for a second being challenged or moved by it" (Rich C16). In spite of the criticism of his portrayal, Hoffman received a Tony nomination for Best Actor (Play) for his work (Maltin par. 36).

More recently, the role of Shylock has been performed by Al Pacino in a 2004 film adaptation. Pacino combined the styles of Hoffman and Irving by showing Shylock in a sympathetic light while being a symbol of Jewish suffering. Reviewers liked the portrayal (Edelstein par. 2-3) but said that it detracted from the rest of the film. Once again, the character of Shylock overshadowed the rest of the play as "...the pain Pacino makes us feel for the character is so powerful that it works against the good feelings Shakespeare wants us to have for the other stories" (Arnold par. 5).

This dilemma of how to portray Shylock in the post-Holocaust world is troubling for many directors and actors. "If nineteenth century audiences found it difficult to give a Christian meaning to *The Merchant*, post-Second World War ones have become, understandably, utterly unable to read in *The Merchant* any message other than the prefiguration of the Holocaust" (Gross 345). In addition, in his book *The Genesis of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice* Christopher Spencer argues:

During the last two centuries there has been increasing sensitivity to the persecution of minorities, as well as increasing sympathy with the underdog and with sociological and psychological causes of behavior that often seem to justify what is unjustifiable in any other terms. With these changes Shylock has been in an extraordinarily advantageous position to take on a symbolic reality that extends beyond what his creator created (152).

An attempt to avoid this problem altogether has resulted in a few theatre companies trying to produce *MV* as it was originally intended. Harold Bloom states in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* that Shylock should be played as "...a hallucinatory bogeyman" (172), and this is what the reconstructed Globe Theatre tried to do in their 1998 production of *MV* (Sirofchuck par. 5). Audiences were encouraged to shout obscenities at Shylock, and many did (Greenberg par. 5). While a few people have expressed their shock and revulsion with the Globe's production, the majority found the production refreshing. One audience member claimed to have felt a "...strange sense of liberation – why, here it is, out front, the very thing itself, and no liberal horseshit in the way, while at the same time the egregious anti-Semitism did not diminish my love of Shakespeare one whit" (par. 5-6).

With so much controversy surrounding *MV*, it is no wonder that Shylock is the second most written about Shakespearean character after Hamlet (Armstrong 51). Modern directors and audiences are faced with the challenge of how to approach *MV* in the post-Holocaust world; portray Shylock in a positive light and lose much of the play's cohesiveness, or try to view the play in the spirit of the times in which it was written? Regardless to the option chosen, "There are things in this comedy...that will never please" (Shakespeare *Midsommer* 3.1.8-9). People are educated in the travesties incurred during the Holocaust, and those horrors are hard to disregard while watching a play where a Jewish character is targeted for abuse. *MV* will continue to be subject to censoring as long as the Holocaust is remembered.

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## Western Influences on the Theatrical Movement in Jordan

GHASSAN HADDAD

The contemporary era of Jordanian theatre began forty-two years ago when the first foreign trained director, Hani Snober, returned from his study in the United States. Western theatre was almost unknown at that time. There were a few amateur actors and no professionally trained actors. Playwrights were unknown. Snober found himself the sole source of information on how a play should be selected, produced, rehearsed and presented. As a result, the Jordanian theatre has been greatly influenced by Western ideology through translation, adaptation and Arabization, becoming a mixture of Arabian thoughts and values. These qualities are obvious in the works of Snober and many others who spent a great deal of time and effort attempting to transplant European theatre to Arabian soil.

It is almost impossible to separate the history of the director from the history of contemporary theatre in Jordan. In a very real sense, they are almost the same history. For the most part, a close examination of the foreign trained director, his specific techniques and problems as he undertook to transplant an almost unknown art form into Jordan will give a clearer picture of Jordan's contemporary theatrical history for individual treatment.

The first significant theatrical movement in Jordan started in 1964 (Rahee, 1980). The Arabian theatre in adjacent countries, such as Egypt and Syria, was more advanced since they can be dated as early as

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1848, when Maroon El-Nakash presented in Egypt the first Arabic play, *Al-Bakheel*, based on Moliere's *The Miser*. The birth of the Jordanian theatre was a continuation of the Arabian theatre movement.

Hani Snober was born in Palestine in 1936. After completing his high school education, he left for the United States to complete postsecondary education. Snober has never addressed the precise reasons, nor under what circumstances, he became interested in theater. However, Snober admitted in a very recent interview with the author of this article that his interest was sparked by the long established western theater movement in nearby Syria and the newly developed movement in Palestine (Snober, Interview 16 July 1996).

Hani Snober, returned from his study in the United States with a Master of Arts Degree in directing from the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago in 1959. Convinced that Jordan could not sustain an active theater, he worked as a director in Syria until 1964, when his longing for home drew him back to Amman. His return in 1964 marks the real start of the Jordanian theatrical movement (Zyoodi 93).

At the same time, Abdul Hamid Sharraff, the Minister of Information in Jordan and a relative to the Royal Family of Jordan, was known for his love for literature and fine arts. Sharraff was born in Iraq, raised in Jordan and studied politics in England. Under Sharraff's supervision the Information Ministry established in 1965 the Arts and Culture Department. In the same year the Ministry of Information also founded its first official theatrical group, named the Family of the Jordanian Theater (FJT). Its twelve members received a monthly salary of fifteen Jordanian dinars (Rahee, 80). The exchange rate at the time made the sum equivalent to forty-two American dollars, approximately one fourth the average monthly salary in Jordan (Shamma and Shogom 53). The small salary gives the impression that the FJT was not entirely serious in supporting theater.

The Information Ministry authorized Snober to supervise and train the group. He was the only trained director at that time. Snober found himself the sole source of information on how to produce a play from its selection to performance. In February 1966, the FJT presented in its first season *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde, *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen and *The Trap* by Robert Thomas. Snober directed all of the plays. The set designer for the three was Gamil Awad, a Jordanian amateur, who later became a famous national actor, writer and director (Hawamdeh, *Al-Masrah* 31). The plays were performed in the auditorium of the University of Jordan which lacked adequate technical support. Abdulatif Shamma and Ahmad Shogom in their book, *Al-Masrah fi al-Ordon (Theater in Jordan)*,

believe that these three plays did not generate sufficient positive response from the public, since they were translated from another language and did not relate to Jordanian society (61).

During its second season in 1967, the FJT presented five more western plays including *Home and Beauty* by Somerset Maugham and *Man and Superman* by George Bernard Shaw. The second season also failed to attract a large audience. Jordanian amateur critic, Osama Yousef, believes that the reason behind its failure was that again the plays did not reflect the reality and the aspirations of Jordanian society (56).

In 1967 the Seven Days War brought about a significant change in Jordanian theatre. The loss of the West Bank of Jordan and East Jerusalem in the war between the Arab countries and Israel greatly influenced Snober's script selection. He began looking for plays that reflected the occupation and changing political circumstances affecting Jordan and the rest of the Arab world. In the FJT's third season he presented *The Moon is Down* by the Nobel Prize winning American writer, John Steinbeck, which calls for resistance against the Nazi occupation. The schedule also included *The Flies* by Jean Paul Sartre, which illustrates the struggle between the Nazi occupying forces and the French underground. Both productions were well received. Hawamdeh believes the season's success was a result of selecting plays that made a connection with the general popular consciousness. After the success of that season, the group toured *The Moon is Down* in Iraq and Syria (Hawamdeh *Al-Masrah* 33).

However, 1969 the FJT presented its fourth season of six different western plays directed by Snober including *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. Osama Yousef described the play as a non-political work (87). It seems that Yousef did not dig deeply in the theme of the play. *A Doll's House*, especially in an Islamic Arab society, is a political play. Nora, the main character in the play, tries to open a gate of independence for women, and she proclaims the revolutionary message that only freedom, without lies or shame, makes a true bond between man and woman. The right of a woman to question her expected role in society would be a powerful topic in an Islamic country.

In the same season, the FJT produced *Algarad (The Locust)* by Abu-Hamdan at the Damascus Second Theater Festival in Syria. In 1971, it presented *The Prespan Immigrant* by the French writer of Arabic descent, George Shehada. This was the last Jordanian production directed by Hani Snober before he left for Qatar in 1973 to work for ten years in the Qatar government theater (Zyoodi 67). Little information exists on these productions. However, we do know that the FJT faced many problems in

the years from 1971 to 1973. They did not have their own theater space and had to use the auditorium at the University of Jordan. They also lacked artists to design costumes, sets and lights.

After Snober departed to work in Qatar, many actors changed their profession to directors in order to fill the gap. These individuals included Salah Abu Hannood, Nadim Sawalha and Sohail Elias. Elias directed in the same year *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller and *Artha Bridge* by George Theotoca (Hawamdeh, *Al-Masrah* 41). However, the untrained directors were not able to produce at Snober's high level of professionalism. In addition their presentations were random, did not consider the general audience taste and failed to reflect the concerns and problems affecting the audience. The theatrical movement continued forward very slowly but still managed to motivate a small number of people to take interest in the theater (Zyoodi 101).

Hani Snober presented works translated from western theater mostly owing to the lack of more fully developed Arabian scripts. In many cases, due to their lack of experience, the untrained indigenous playwrights were unable to write scripts that were suitable for serious production. In some cases, they had been influenced by the entertainment values of Jordanian theater at the time, or because they were closer to mundane activities than to more significant theater (Zyoodi 101).

Snober varied his styles and subject matter in presenting his work. He chose from classical, realistic and sometimes Absurdist theatrical genres. Osama Yousef identifies two reasons for Snober's choices: first, the absence of influence of Arab culture on theater at that time, and, second, the absence of committed Arab playwrights (67). Yousef contends

...our problem in theater is similar to a problem in our daily lives. Our economy, literature, morals, politics, and values diverge. We have to search for our private avenues that fit our identity (102).

Yousef goes on to point out, that some Arab countries were still strongly influenced by colonial powers, which continued to leave their imprint on Jordanian daily life and culture.

In spite of the shift by several directors away from western plays to Arabic plays after this period, adapted western plays were still being produced. This practice indicates the different views on the desirability of using Arabian scripts. To this day, the Jordanian theater continues to produce such the works of western authors including *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco, *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare, *The Broken Pitcher* by Henrik Von Kleist, *The Bear* and *Uncle*

*Vanya* by Anton Chekhov, *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg, and *All My Sons* by Miller (Hawamdeh 1993, 34-5 and Khraiwish 21-8).

The continued use of translated plays in Jordanian theater remains a matter of concern. Some in theater see the importation of foreign scripts as a sort of barrier that continues to separate the Jordanian people from theatrical productions, since the plays, in effect, represent an alien culture. Proponents of western plays argue that universal issues occur in all societies. Hawamdeh notes that Snober's productions of *The Flies* and *The Moon is Down* following the Arab-Israeli war "...touched the popular consciousness and were well received" (*Al-Masrah* 30). However, Snober said, "In 1973 we had 8,000 regular viewers attending our plays. We did not feel a crisis in the relationship between the theater and the audience in spite of presenting western plays" (Interview, 16 July, 1996). Hawamdeh and Snober seem to imply that western plays, when properly selected, will not negatively affect the development of the Jordanian theater movement.

Although Jordanian directors, like many of their western counterparts, have accepted their guiding role as principal artist in the theater, they have yet to grasp firmly the basic concepts of the western theatrical practices to inform their directing. Director Hani Snober has adopted the psychologically realistic style of Stanislavski in all of his work. Snober, as has been previously mentioned, graduated from the Goodman School of Drama in Chicago in 1959 and would have been taught primarily Stanislavski at that time. According to Christine Edwards, who gives one of the most exhaustive histories of the entire Russian theater, the Stanislavski System was the dominant method used in American college and university classes in 1950's (249).

Snober, and others to follow, believes that the script is the framework used to realize the theatrical presentation, and he well understands the purpose of the *super-objective* and playing the subtext. However, it is also clear that Snober neglected some of the essential elements of Stanislavski's System, choosing, for example, to give his actors line readings based upon his own analysis of the play without helping his actors develop their characters and relationships from within. Additionally, Snober either forgot or ignored totally that Stanislavski developed a number of rehearsal and performance techniques such as imagination, units, objectives and emotion memory. Accordingly, the directing styles used in Jordan are a photocopy of the western theatre, having been influenced by Stanislavsky's System and Snober's application of it.



Until new Jordanian literature begins to influence well-educated and capable playwrights and performance forms, the primary source for scripts will remain translated or adapted plays. And until Jordanian playwrights are able to produce scripts worthy of performance, little can be done in the search for an accurate depiction of Jordanian culture.

In selecting a play from another culture for production, whether adapted or translated by the director, consideration should be given to the play's cultural message, dramatic values, artistic challenge, production costs and audience appeal. As the tradition of theater in Jordan and the Arab world has developed, it has been faced with certain absolutes. Two of the most prominent are the role of religion in determining societal values and the prevalence of the political power structure.

Theater, like all the other fine arts, often plays the role of social critic by examining the issues and problems within its culture. Theater in Jordan will continue its delicate balancing act between its functions as social critic and its cultural obligations to political and religious ideologies. When a play is selected from another culture, the morality of the content must be careful not to contradict any of the prevailing cultural, political and religious ideologies, while at the same time still providing a thought provoking examination of contemporary life.

As the "global village" grows closer together and as people find greater value and interest in plays from other cultures, the theater artists must recognize that plays don't transfer on the stage through words alone. While there may be different opinions regarding the value of adaptation, if the artists who serve as the translators of scripts respect the author's ideas, Jordanian theater will continue to improve. However, there are highly regarded scripts in western literature that include some elements that are unacceptable by the standards of Jordanian religious values or traditions. For example, *Angels In America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes* by Tony Kushner, examines topics which cannot be discussed in Islamic society. Without considerable alteration, this influential play could never be produced. However, since the subject matter is essential to the plot, theme and character of the play, any serious attempt at adaptation, whether legal or not, would so irrevocably change the script as to render it a totally different work. In many such cases, it is better not to select the plays at all. Ultimately, audiences will make the final decision through their attendance or nonattendance. They support what appeals to them and generally fail to support what they find distasteful, offensive, irrelevant or incomprehensible.

In order to achieve greater progress in the development of the Jordanian theatrical movement, directors must research and develop solid, well-organized plans to understand their audiences' needs, concerns and desires before they choose a play for production. That does not mean theater in Jordan should be bound exclusively to the audiences' temperament or desires. But if artists do not consider these desires, they may lose the public's interest in theater completely.

In a society which has certain social and religious restrictions like Jordan, it is necessary that a director be judicious in his selection and handling of the text. The choice of the play is important and should have an idea behind it. Without these initial goals, the production will lack conviction and will find difficulty in succeeding with the audience.

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