

JOHN S. WHITLEY

## Contemporary Drama

## Aspects of Contemporary American Drama

David Henry Hwang, one of the most important American playwrights to have emerged during the past decade or so, is the son of first generation Chinese-Americans and indicates, in various ways, the thematic and stylistic concerns of minority writers in the contemporary American theatre. By 'minority writers' I do not simply mean writers who are members of ethnic minorities in the United States, but playwrights who tackle 'minority' subjects, such as the problems of being gay; drug-taking; Aids and other delicate medical complications; and other aspects of being marginal, wrongly-identified, or, like Chief Bromden and the hero of Ralph Ellison's novel, relentlessly 'invisible.' Hwang has indicated his interest in the writings of Edward Said, who discusses, in his book *Orientalism*, the ways in which colonialising discourse renders the colonised static, safe and manageable through repeated uses of clichés which sound flattering (for Orientals, 'mysterious', 'inscrutable', 'delicate',) but which would ultimately have the effect of emphasising the cultural inferiority of the race discussed.

Hwang's first play, *FOB* (1979), mixes the scorn often felt by first and second generation Americans of Chinese descent for Chinese newcomers who are 'Fresh-off-the-Boat' to America ("Someone you wouldn't want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn't want to marry." [Hwang 1990:6].), with sadness that the warriors and gods of Chinese mythology cannot travel to America also and still remain powerfully meaningful. The jockeying for position in this play between relatively demotic American language and the more formal language of the foreigner trying to express aspects of his culture in a foreign language captures superbly the cultural tensions of a 'melting-pot' society.

In another stunning short play, *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), the ways in which a strike by Chinese railroad workers in 1867 comments ironically on Western-created stereotypes of servile 'coolie' labourers are conveyed by both dialogue and dance. The problems of minorities being persistently cast into particular roles by white American society are suggested both by (as in the earlier play) making the younger of the two ChinaMan railroad workers more (and somewhat anachronistically) demotic in style and hence available to learn from the slightly older, more experienced, more formal, more 'Chinese' man; and by making the vehicle for this learning process the training of a classical Chinese actor. Thus the unusual assertiveness of the strikers is reflected in the attempts to transcribe part of the Chinese cultural identity into the American experience and so the play's power emerges, in the best possible way, from its self-reflexivity.

In *M. Butterfly* (1988), the success of Song Liling's twenty-year masquerade as a woman; a masquerade which apparently completely takes in 'her' lover, Rene Gallimard; depends on Western misconceptions of the East (of the 'Oriental') and on male misconceptions of women:

The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom – the feminine mystique.  
 . . . when he finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything else to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I am an oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man (Hwang 1988:83).

Again, Hwang makes the West's mistakes (for Song is also a spy) much more sharply outlined by referring to Puccini's opera in order to show that Gallimard, not Song, has become the modern-day Butterfly, unable to move out of his fantasy world; and by making such a character as Marc, Rene's childhood friend who moves easily through space and time in the play, a Frenchman who speaks like an American, Hwang clarifies the connections of the play with American foreign policy. In his 'Afterword' to the published play, he quotes Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*: "The idea that the United States could not master the problems of a country as small and undeveloped as Vietnam did not occur to Johnson as a possibility" (99). The United States has clearly not yet learned the lessons that William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick tried to teach thirty five years ago in their 'novel' *The Ugly American*; that the United States would lose most of its battles in Asia unless it started seeing the peoples of those countries as they were, rather than as the United States wished them to be.

Another writer who might claim to be on the 'margins' is Harvey Fierstein, whose *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982), three short plays with a common central character, other characters repeated and some plot development, was a huge, prize-winning success on Broadway. In his recent, valuable survey of *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (1992), Gerald M. Berkowitz sees Fierstein's play as operating "fully within the mainstream tradition of domestic realism" (Berkowitz 1992:205) and, indeed, he sees the arc of American theatrical history as involving a "challenge to the hegemony of domestic realism" followed by a return to "the impulse to describe the real world" (208); an arc made clear in the careers of such distinct American dramatists as O'Neill, Albee and Shepard. This article is of far too small a compass to argue such a point about so large a number of dramatists; but in regard to Fierstein's play, it should be said that it moves closer to domestic realism in its setting, language, and character interactions (including that good old American standby, the truth-telling session with MOM) because, as Berkowitz himself points out, the central character of *Torch Song Trilogy*, Arnold, develops through the three plays so that he finds self-respect, some sense of identity, and a discovery of 'family.' This

journey of discovery could be said to be mimicked by the changing styles and locales of the play. At the beginning, Arnold is preparing for his drag act in his dressing room and delivers a longish monologue "against a black cyclorama" (Fierstein 1988:23). This opening mimesis of loneliness is mirrored in Arnold's subsequent telephone conversation with Murray and then in the painful and funny scene in the backroom, where the isolation of Arnold's sexual act is vividly underlined by the absent presence of Murray and the 'lover' (Arnold mimes the whole of this scene and there is no lonelier profession than that of a mime artist) and by the fact that the lover is represented as not wishing Arnold to talk. Even sex has become coldly impersonal: "No, I don't have to talk. No, that's perfectly all right. I mean, it's no part of my fantasy or anything, conversation, that is" (43).

Even in the more Albee-like strained weekend of the second play, *Fugue in a Nursery*, Fierstein splits the play into the musical notations of a fugue and a full score was composed for the original production in which each of the characters was represented by an appropriate instrument. A fugue is a contrapuntal musical composition in which a theme is introduced and then subjected to complex developments through various repetitions. At one point the two couples, Arnold and Alan; Ed and Laurel, are both reading a paper in the same position but with their separation clearly discerned on the stage and their two dialogues are intertwined in a fugue-like manner while the integrity of each conversation is maintained and a kind of joint rhythm is built up. The prose, that is to say, has a musical analogy to emphasise the slow movement toward some kind of mutual understanding. This is, I believe, something quite other than domestic realism, even if the third play, *Widows And Children First!*, is more obviously Ibsenesque.

Another example of theme and form cohering in a way which stresses both the marginal nature of the experience offered and the development from isolation to some form of self-regard and understanding is Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). I was about to call this a 'wonderful play', but it might with more reason be called a 'wonderful evening in the theatre' because it is a show of poems, with music and dance, which charts a young black girl's progress in life in a way which chronicles both the development of black self-discovery and, as Shange herself says, "our struggle to become all that is forfeited by our gender" (Shange 1990:xvii). Seven black women, dressed to represent (more or less) the colours of the spectrum, the 'rainbow' of the title, dance, move, freeze and recite parts of what Shange calls her "choreopoem" (xvi) and gradually make the marginalised, even 'invisible' black woman

*this must be the spook house  
another song with no singers  
lyrics/no voices*

*& interrupted solos  
unseen performances (3/4)*

emerge into words

*'she's been dead so long  
closed in silence so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty (4)*

and move from an 'outskirts' position

*i'm outside Chicago  
i'm outside Detroit  
i'm outside Houston (5)*

to the centre of the stage

*i found god in myself  
& loved her/I loved her fiercely*

All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'i found god in myself and i loved her.' It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle. (63/4)

Ntozake Shange's slightly later play, *spell # 7* (1979), is called "A Theatre Piece" (65) and, as the audience enter, they are confronted with a "huge, black-face mask" (67) which hangs down from the ceiling; an awesome reminder of the ways in which white American society has forced minorities to adapt themselves to stereotypes not of their own making; to act parts which the white majority has tailored for them. It is, then, no surprise that the first character on stage is dressed as "Mr Interlocutor" (71) or that the audience is reminded how most of them think of blacks as people with rhythm:

they begin a series of steps that identify every period of afro-american entertainment: from acrobats, comedians, tap-dancers, calindy dancers, cotton club choruses, apollo theatre du-wop groups, till they reach a frenzy in the midst of 'Hambone, hambone, where you been . . . (73)

and black women as feisty whores.

For my purposes, however, Shange's 'foreword' to *spell # 7* is of equal importance to that of the play. She insists that she finds most American theatre

“shallow/stilted and imitative” (67) particularly in its efforts to create “the perfect play” (67); an idea coming from European drama (does she have a notion of the ‘well-made play’ here?). She feels that an endless series of musicals about black entertainers, like *Eubie* and *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, merely confirm white prejudices. She feels that the language of black playwrights needs to free itself from the encrusted biases of ‘white’ language.

in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate/I haveta fix my tool to my needs/i have to take it apart to the bone/so that the malignancies/fall away/leaving us space to literally create our own image (68)

in order to express the emotions of rage and frustration which the coldness of the white vocabulary is unable to summon.

Ntozake Shange’s view should, perhaps, be borne in mind when one comes to examine the great success of the plays of August Wilson. Gerald Berkowitz calls Wilson “the most important new American dramatist of the 1980s” (194) and certainly his project of writing one play for each decade of the history of black Americans in the twentieth century is the most ambitious (if not the most hubristic) undertaking in the contemporary theatre. He has won many awards, including Pulitzers, Tonys and New York Critics’ and the ferocious drama reviewers of the major American newspapers and magazines seem to have taken him to their bosoms. A play like *Fences* (1987), Wilson’s play for the 1950s, is undeniably powerful and very well-structured, but rather old-fashioned and therefore, arguably rather ‘white.’ It surely owes more than a passing debt to Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The central character, Troy Maxson, has his status as the hero of the play confirmed early by the admiration of his friend, Bono, just as Willy Loman is made to seem significant by the unobtrusive devotion of his next-door-neighbour, Charlie. Troy’s wife, Rose, is also a signification of Troy’s value, just as Linda is for Willy.

She recognises Troy’s spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognises. (Wilson 1988:23)

Like Willy, Troy dreams of past glories (“I was hitting 432 with thirty-seven home runs” [27]). In a minor key, his older son, Lyons, is a victim of the failure of the Dream:

Naw, Pop...thanks. That ain’t for me. I dont’t wanna be carrying nobody’s rubbish. I don’t wanna be punching nobody’s time clock. (35)

Troy sarcastically remarks of Lyons that “[t]he boy is thirty-four years old” (38) and hasn’t much to show for it. Curiously, that is also Biff Loman’s age in Miller’s play (Willy remarks that “Not finding yourself at the age of

thirty-four is a disgrace” Miller 1965:11). The younger son, Cory, is trying to become a football star. Unlike Willy Loman, Troy does not approve of this; but his failure to understand his relationships with his two sons contributes to his tragedy, as it does for Willy; and, for both men, the tarnished state of their dreams is mirrored in the dilapidated state of their houses. A crucial point of tension in both plays is the inability of the father to listen to what the son is saying and Act Two scene five of *Fences* serves, like the ‘Requiem’ in *Death of a Salesman*, as a coda which establishes the memory of the dead central character; which stamps his importance in the memories of members of the audience. For Biff, Willy is remembered as the man who built the stoop and, for Charlie, as the man who *had* to dream. For Rose, Troy “meant to do more good than he meant to do harm... I thought... here is a man that you can open yourself up to and be filled to bursting” (15).

Of course, I am not suggesting any borrowing here and we have to remember that Miller’s play has become deeply etched into the American consciousness during the past forty-five years. I am merely suggesting that August Wilson, in seeking to apply to black Americans in the 1950s that old American theme, “the sins of the fathers” (7), conforms too well to the dictates of domestic realism; awakens too many memories of American theatre in the 1950s and allows the audience the comfort of a compelling and closed story which might be about people of any race. This is, perhaps, less so of his play for the 1920s, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), where the notion and rhythms of the blues counterpoint a somewhat less naturalistic black speech which allows for a more melodramatic momentum.

It is, perhaps, inevitable that minority writers will search for and mix dramatic modes in an effort to find an appropriate form and voice to present theatrical images of their culture’s attempts to find a niche in the wider culture of the United States whilst yet retaining a measure of their culture’s own, possibly ancient, identity. Estela Portillo, a Chicano playwright from El Paso, exemplifies such attempts. *Morality Play* is about a five thousand year struggle between institutionalised values and the capacity of the individual to dream and hope, presented in the typological manner of medieval morality plays. *Black Light*, like the early plays of David Henry Hwang, deals with the sense of displacement felt by a Chicano in the United States who carries with him the memory of his Mayan gods and heroes. As often in such plays, music and dance form an important part of the theatrical experience. In *The Day of the Swallows*, Portillo creates an almost timeless Mexican world of grace, heat, hacienda community and church power. The central character, Josefa, is a highly respected lady of the hacienda who is part-Aryan, part-Indian, who seems to embody old-world values and responsibilities, but who, as a lesbian, mutilates a small boy in order to prevent him betraying her secret. In the end, predictably, she commits suicide. Thus Portillo confronts older values with a ‘newer’ problem; the poetry of

sensitive people with the brutality of basic human selfishness; rather in the manner of Tennessee Williams.

Other kinds of 'minorities' are placed in marginal positions because of factors not related to ethnicity. One such group, sadly increasing, are those who suffer from AIDS. This terrible disease, no respecter of age, sex, class or race, has made, as yet, a greater impact in the United States than in Europe and hence has, since the middle eighties, generated a larger body of plays concerning its effects on victims, families and friends. One might mention William M. Hoffman's *As Is* (1985); Terrence McNally's *Andre's Mother* (1988) and, particularly, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985). But Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, subtitled 'A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,' is much more ambitious. It consists of two plays, and the first, *Millenium Approaches* (1991), is a wide-ranging work, involving representations of real historical personages, like Roy Cohn; two people who inhabit each other's fantasies; an Eskimo; two ghosts, one from the thirteenth century and one from the eighteenth; and Ethel Rosenberg, who might be a ghost or possibly some emanation from Roy Cohn's conscience. Minimal scenery; scene shifts involving actors as well as backstage staff; an emphasis on what Kushner calls "wonderful theatrical illusion" (Kushner 1992:2); these aspects confirm his determination to create a form of epic theatre. The play begins with the burial of an old Jewish lady and the presiding Rabbi's notion that nothing has really melted in the 'melting pot'; and then goes on to find that AIDS has provided a melting agent; the disease creates a means of linking unlikely people. The Angel who descends into Prior's room at the end of the play will have his/her work cut out.

Of course, all the while, mainstream American drama (and the division between 'mainstream' and 'other' is increasingly difficult to make) soldiers on and, indeed, flourishes. Arthur Miller has recently had some success with *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991) and David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992), a ferocious two-hander about the complexities of sexual harassment, is enjoying a successful run in London. Mamet and Sam Shepard remain the outstanding American playwrights of the past fifteen years, though both are now heavily involved in movie work. Lee Blessing (*A Walk in the Woods* 1988); John Guare (*Six Degrees of Separation* 1990); Beth Henley (*Crimes of the Heart* 1979); Neil Simon (*Brighton Beach Memoirs* 1983); Alfred Uhry (*Driving Miss Daisy* 1987); Wendy Wasserstein (*The Heidi Chronicles* 1987) and Lanford Wilson (*Burn This* 1985) have all made significant contributions to the American theatre over this period; but I have wished to concentrate on something other than Broadway's 'domestic realism' in order to demonstrate the abiding richness of American plays and the manner in which those plays have tried to embrace the heteroglossia of multicultural voices.

## References

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- Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Routledge 1978.
- Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf and spell # 7*. London: Methuen 1990.
- August Wilson, *Fences and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1988.

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## Some bestselling plays by contemporary dramatists:

Published by Faber and Faber:

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*  
 Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Translations*  
 Trevor Griffiths, *The Comedians*  
 Christopher Hampton, *Savages*  
 Peter Nichols, *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*  
 John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*  
 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker* and *The Birthday Party*  
 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Published by Methuen:

Caryl Churchill, *Plays One* (includes: *Owners; Vinegar Tom; Traps; Light Shining in Buckinghamshire; Cloud Nine*)  
 Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey*  
 Arthur Miller, *Plays One*, (includes: *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible; A Memory of Two Mondays; A View From the Bridge*)  
 Joe Orton, *The Complete Plays*  
 Willy Russell, *Shirley Valentine*  
 Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*  
 Theatre Workshop, *Oh What A Lovely War!*