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The American Theatre since *Waiting for Godot*

When the first American production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* opened in 1956, taxi drivers queued outside the theatre at intermission, anticipating fares from those unwilling to sit through a second repetitive act in which "nothing happens" and "there's nothing to show". The popular critical assessment was not without some basis. Using a spare, metaphoric style that reduced language, time, and action to a minimum, Beckett portrayed the empty hope of humankind through two vagabonds' excruciatingly painful yet comic insistence on waiting, despite all odds, for the arrival of Godot – on waiting, that is, for whatever it is that gives significance to the human experience. Time and again, the action turned back on itself as Vladimir and Estragon, first in self-congratulation and then in silence, together contemplated what they would do next "to give us the impression that we exist". The world of Didi and Gogo is a world of contingency, a world in which one has, at best, a 50/50 chance of salvation, a world in which the systems that validate and sustain human experience have disintegrated, leaving the incoherent Lucky as their spokesperson and the decadent Pozzo to pronounce benediction: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more".

Clearly, American audiences were not ready for such a despairing vision of contemporary life or such a radical deconstruction of dramatic form. But those who wrote plays could no longer ignore the discrepancy between European drama and their own.

Throughout the period between the wars, while American dramatists contented themselves with producing and reproducing realistic social plays, drawing their characters and their plots with indelible ink, European playwrights were erasing the frame, refusing to accept even the most fundamental premises of language and form. German expressionism, Pirandello, French avant-garde drama, and the less radical but influential plays of Paul Claudel, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus were all part of the line of development that led to the postwar phenomenon Martin

Esslin has called the Theatre of the Absurd, plays characterized by a shared vision of the world as one of nagging despair, reflecting a breakdown in the constructs and patterns once assumed inviolable. In England, the menacing undercurrents of Harold Pinter's *The Room* (1957) and *The Homecoming* (1965), created through a spareness of language, an abundance of punctuating pauses, and a refusal to articulate motivation, best exemplifies one strain of the genre, while in France the self-conscious artificiality of Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947) and *The Balcony* (1957), the linguistic ridicule of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1958), and the spare style of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952/1953) suggest ways in which "absurdist" drama yielded its boundaries in order to accommodate a persistent and pervasive postwar vision of contemporary life.

But it was not until the first Broadway production of Beckett's landmark play that American playwrights were roused from their lethargy and reminded of what they themselves might have been attempting for decades. After 1956, mainstream dramatists Lillian Hellman, William Inge, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams were compelled to yield their positions to a new generation of American playwrights, a generation that felt obliged to chisel away at the solidified boundaries of the realistic form that had so long defined their art. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* made postmodern drama in America possible.

Among the first to react to the Beckett production were Jack Gelber and Edward Albee, who took the lead in redefining American drama. Gelber's *The Connection* (1959) drew both thematically and structurally from the Beckett play, through the portrayal of a drug culture equivalent to the circumstance of Beckett's expectant tramps. In the American play, a group of heroin addicts, allegedly collected from the streets of New York and asked simply to improvise while they were being filmed, wait for Cowboy, their contact with the "connection", who will provide their fix. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the junkies engage in a variety of interim activities but consistently direct their energies toward the arrival of that which enables them to endure. Their presumed improvisations find a complement in the jazz that accompanies the play, conveying the flux and the intensity of those needing the fix. Acutely conscious of itself as theatre, as was the Beckett play, *The Connection* functions on several levels of illusion, recalling Pirandello's earlier concern with the interplay between the fictive and the real and endorsing that continuing inquiry as central to the contemporary stage. During the intermission, characters from Gelber's play – the street junkies, who may or may not be genuine – ask audience members for handouts, disregarding conventional barriers between spectators and stage.

Some months later, Albee's *The Zoo Story* appeared, first on the Berlin stage (1959) and then in New York (1960), to be followed by *The American Dream* (1961). The earlier play constructs story within story told by a painfully lonely New Yorker whose park bench efforts at communication culminate in suicide; the later play is a ruthless, relentlessly comic attack on American values and dramatic form that celebrates through imitation the anti-theatre of Ionesco. Unlike Gelber, whose subsequent plays – *The Apple* (1961), *Square in the Eye* (1965), *The Cuban Thing* (1968) – received little critical attention, Albee remained a significant figure in American drama and may well be credited with establishing postmodern American drama.

Albee's vision, in both *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*, departs from Beckett's more philosophic analysis of contemporary man in assuming the sterility that Beckett questions. His drama acknowledges the forms of the values that have sustained American culture but refuses either to lament their demise or to endorse their recovery. Though critics trained in moral interpretation claim Albee's plays hint at the possibility of restoration, both *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* presage the posthuman mode and vision of Sam Shepard. Grandma, after all, in packing bogus lunches and entering baking contests with day-old cakes, is just as unconscionable as her opportunist daughter, who lets Daddy "bump his uglies" in order to earn her inheritance. And this representative of earlier times is hardly shocked by the commercialism of Mommy and Daddy, who complain of their defective adopted child and chop it to pieces in protest. Nor does Jerry in *The Zoo Story* have any hope of filling his empty picture frame or of establishing contact with Peter; he is looking instead to communicate through the technology of the evening news, where he will become an electronic image in homes across the nation. His park bench "improvisations" are carefully designed to culminate in the suicide that he has been planning, through indirection, all day.

Albee's first major full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), is a sophisticated foray into the nature of illusion and reality. It raises fascinating questions about George, who is clearly responsible for the death of the couple's imaginary son and who may or may not be responsible for the deaths of his parents. As in Albee's other works, the interplay between fiction and fiction never reveals a truth but instead becomes an endless play of contradictory meanings, moving toward a post-modern vision of the world as a network of indeterminacies that never achieve a determinately present meaning.

Unfortunately, critics reacted violently – and parochially – to Martha's venomous tongue, paying little attention to the play's more provocative concerns. Even more unfortunately, the play appeared on Broadway, where it was

applauded as a model of realism, and where it could not have the impact it might have had had it been staged at the Caffè Cino or La Mama's or any of the lofts, garages, churches, or other spaces that were coming into their own in the 1960s and being referred to collectively as off-Broadway.

But by the 1960s, playwrights – and the public – were already associating Broadway with commercialism, and a number were refusing to take their places on the gravy train. William Gibson, who achieved modest fame through the Broadway production of *Two for the Seesaw* (1958), referred to his success as a hollow achievement, complaining that the contemporary American theatre (meaning the commercial theatre, or Broadway) was primarily a place not to be serious but to be likeable. In the 1960s, the price of a living wage was accession to popular taste, and a generation of playwrights were opting for an alternative stage. As a consequence, off-Broadway over the next two decades became the forum for such playwrights as Jean-Claude Van Itallie, Arthur Kopit, Israel Horovitz, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Lanford Wilson, John Guare, David Mamet, David Rabe, Christopher Durang, Ntozake Shange, Megan Terry, a host of feminist and ethnic playwrights, and, surely most notably, Sam Shepard, the one writer who has done more than any other American in defining postmodern drama.

A Southern California transplant, for whom rock music, hallucinogenics, pop culture, and high tech are a way of life, the Who and the Stones heroes, and John Cage mentor, Shepard emerged in the 1960s as America's most brilliant and most exciting contemporary playwright, an electronic greyhound who continues to set the pace for New York's alternative theatre. Shepard's subject is contemporary America, created through a mixture of the plastic artifacts of popular culture and the hallowed remnants of the legendary West. His is an unrelenting vision of distortion, of an America that perpetuates the forms of its myths without connecting them with their essence. The Cowboy becomes Shepard's symbol for the death of the American West, which has been replaced by freeways and shopping centers and the Hollywood mystique. In *True West* (1980), Hollywood writer confronts desert bum in a modern day battle that ends not in the victory of one brother's value system over the other but in a reversal of roles. The Gangster, the Rock Star, the Millionaire, all part of the contemporary American fabric, weave freely in and out of Shepard's plays – most notably *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) – creating a sense of surface and vacancy yet curiously celebrating the persistence of an American mythology.

With Joseph Campbell, Shepard maintains that when a culture loses contact with the truth of its mythology, it degenerates. In *Buried Child* (1978),

Shelly, expecting apple pie, turkey, and a Norman Rockwell setting, encounters the diseased remnants of a family, who years earlier murdered what may have been an incestuous child. During the course of the play, Shepard evokes – and subverts – several cross-cultural myths, including those of the Fisher King and the Corn King; Tilden ceremonially buries the wounded king Dodge, the family’s decrepit, impotent, alcoholic head, and later exhumes the muddied corpse of the buried child. Shepard stops short of implying healing, however, balancing textual signs of redemption – Halie’s sighting of the cornfields, for example – with theatrical signs – fading lights, silence – that fight against them.

Indeed, such subversive unpredictability typifies the progress of Shepard’s plays, which use paradox, discordancy, and grating juxtapositions, connecting and disconnecting fragmentary moments in a seemingly arbitrary, even capricious design that respects neither consistency nor reason. As Bonnie Marranca remarks in “Alphabetical Shepard”, Shepard’s drama “captures a reality that disregards realism’s supposition of the rational.” It converts the causal structure that so long dominated American drama into “explosions and contradictions”, “disruption”, “simultaneity”, “anomalies”.¹

Nor do Shepard’s irreverence and innovation limit themselves to dramatic structure. With names like Galactic Jack, Star-Man, Sloe Gin Martin, Spiderlady, and Hoss, Shepard’s characters are at once familiar figures of pop culture but dramatically strange, assaulting as they do the consistency of character that may be essential for the attribution of moral responsibility in drama. The playwright’s note to actors in *Angel City* (1976) indicates the extent to which he repudiates the concept of character on which realistic drama depends:

Instead of the idea of a “whole character” with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of characters flying off the central scheme. Collage construction, jazz improvisation. Music or painting in space.²

These collage characters are accretions not of recognizably real people but of billboard faces, *People Magazine* smiles, and Hollywood celluloid, of surfaces without substance, of repetitive vacuity. Pirandello’s teasing foray into the nature of identity, his bold “dissolution of the ego”, clearly anticipates the

¹ Bonnie Marranca, “Alphabetical Shepard: The Play of Words,” in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981), p. 15.

² Quoted in Richard Gilman, Introduction to Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. xiv.

ravaged remnants of character in a Shepard play. With Shepard, American drama, finally, could be compared productively with the work of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Handke, and other Europeans for whom causal construction and consistency of character were anachronisms.

Shepard's plays stand as precis of postmodern drama, embodying the indeterminacies – “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation” – and the deformations – “decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition” – that Ihab Hassan has identified as central to postmodernism.³ So also do they occupy a central position in that period of immensely vital theatrical activity that began with the Cage-Cunningham performance at Black Mountain College in 1952⁴ and found its most exciting expression in the off-Broadway theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. As Richard Gilman observes of Shepard's plays, the relationship between art and life “shows itself as a rambunctious reciprocity in which the theatrical, as a mode of behavior, takes a special wayward urgency from life, while the living – spontaneous, unorganized and unpredictable – keeps breaking into the artificial, composed world of the stage”.⁵

Gilman's observation is instructive in that it identifies a fundamental characteristic of postmodern texts and performance, the celebration of art as artifice and theatre as process. In such a theatre, fidelity to text, that sacred tenet that had so long governed performance, becomes irrelevant, as postmodernism, both as critical inquiry and as theatre, begins to challenge whether any text is authoritative, whether, indeed, a dramatic text can be anything more than performance script, whether the play even exists before it is staged. In *Blooded Thought*, Herbert Blau concedes that “so far as performance goes, the Text remains our best evidence *after* the fact, like the quartos and folios of the Elizabethan stage”. But what, he asks, is “the nature of the Text *before* the fact?” “The *idea* of performance,” he suggests, “has become the mediating, often subversive third term in the on-again off-again marriage of drama and theatre”.⁶

³ Ihab Hassan, “POSTFACE 1982: Toward Postmodernism”, in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 269.

⁴ At Black Mountain College, John Cage lectured on Meister Eckhart and Merce Cunningham danced, while others played piano, played records, showed a film, and commented on the lecture, creating an anti-art event.

⁵ Gilman, p. xvi.

⁶ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 37.

Blau's remark takes us back to the cafés, the lofts, the garages, the churches of off-Broadway, to the generation of playwrights that Shepard best represents, but also to the Caffè Cino, La Mama, the Happening, The Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Theatre of the Ridiculous, Bread and Puppet Theatre, guerrilla theatre, environmental theatre, poor theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin, Peter Brook, and a host of performance groups and directors who brought vitality to theatre not through innovation in text but through performance. It takes us back to the twenty-seven year period, from 1952 to 1979, from Cage-Cunningham to the closing of Richard Foreman's environmental theatre, that Richard Schechner assesses as a preservable moment in theatrical history, to be included alongside the sixty-seven years that produced all the extant Greek tragedies and the thirty-five years of the Golden Age of Renaissance Drama.⁷ And it takes us back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the off-Broadway child who had shown signs of infant life in the late 1950s not only learned to walk but proceeded to run, cartwheel, and somersault its way through two decades of one of the Western world's most exciting theatrical spectaculars – a spectacular that still glows.

The non-literary nature of the earlier years of the off-Broadway movement was its single most disturbing characteristic. In the 1960s, performance scripts were regularly replacing literary texts, and performances were occurring that were intended to occur only once. The notion of the primacy of the text and authorial authority deferred to directorial and acting impulses, making the created event a collaboration quite independent of text. As a consequence (or perhaps this new perception was a cause), the play-life metaphor so prevalent in Shakespeare, in Pirandello, and in Beckett expanded into the recognition that if all life is performance, no event in a performance space may be said to be imitative. Hamlet's mirror shattered, the theatre recognized theatricality as a primary human activity: "It is not a mirror, but something basic in itself."⁸

Out of this new spirit of theatrical primacy there developed "A Bunch of Experimental Theatres" – as the organization Schechner headed called itself – and a bunch of theories and theatres outside that organization, each riding its own hobby horse through the sacred gates of the Thespian city.

Among the earliest, most applauded, and most maligned of the avant-garde groups was the Living Theatre, whose productions of *The Connection* (1959) and *The Brig* (1963) proved seminal in the experimental theatre move-

⁷ Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 21.

⁸ Schechner, p. 72.

ment. The Living's politically radical, pacifist leaders, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, found a theatrical counterpart for their political anarchy in a form of production that insisted on the continuity of theatre and life; that celebrated nudity, sex, and freedom; and that employed provocation, intimidation, seduction, and shock. Its 1968–69 productions of *Mysteries – and Smaller Pieces*, *Frankenstein*, *Antigone*, and *Paradise Now* reflected a demolition of conventional forms too irreverent for contemporary critics to endure. The Living thrived on a physical and a verbal freedom so thorough that it was years after the staging of *Paradise Now* before the public knew that amid the riot of theatrical sex witnessed and participated in by the audience, Malina was raped.⁹ The event, ironically, perfectly embodied the absorption of life theatre, symbolically, though unholily, consummating the marriage between life and art. Even more ironically, the aggression inherent in rape became an operating principle for the experimental theatre, which intruded upon its audience's personal space through verbal and physical assault.

Intent on achieving an audience participation that would obliterate the line dividing theatre and life, the experimental theatre of the 1960s and 1970s created performance spaces in places where no one suspected theatre could take place and repealed the law of audience passivity. Mainstream theatre became historical sub-text, the framework for frustrated expectation. The dramatic text that remained no longer demanded fidelity but served as impetus for a range of performance that found fullest expression in the context of the tradition against which it revolted. No longer representative of sustained segments of everyday experience, theatre became insults hurled at an audience, a recitation of aphorisms, the amplified breathing of a man masturbating, the sounds of a woman walking in a room or rocking in a chair.

In the other-arts, meanwhile, Claes Oldenburg was digging a hole in Central Park, Christo Javacheff was erecting a 24-mile nylon fence in California, John Cage was giving a 4'33" piano performance in silence. And John Simon was asking, "When . . . is any so-called work of art not a work of art but a piece of trickery, a hoax, a nonsensical game, a fraud?"¹⁰

If the cry of narcissism was shrill in the plastic arts, in theatre it was deafening. Playwrights, directors, actors, plays, and performances were being accused of self-absorption, and those who had felt themselves a part of the

⁹ Ross Wetzsteon, "The Living Theatre at the Pittsburgh Station." *Village Voice*, April 21, 1975, pp. 1, 73–75.

¹⁰ John Simon, *Uneasy Stages: A Chronicle of the New York Theatre, 1968–1973* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 366–67.

community of actors which the improvised performance had created left theatres feeling not integration but distance. Memories, of course, tend to be short, and that generation of playgoers may have forgotten the mass exodus American audiences made from the 1956 *Waiting for Godot*.

If *Godot* managed to survive the uncertainties of public reaction, though, and become a permanent part of the dramatic repertoire, many plays of the experimental theatre movement did not, and for good cause. The fact is that the theatre's commitment to non-literary performance proved, not surprisingly, to be self-defeating: after the performance, no text remained, and re-creation, even if it were desirable, was unlikely. The experimental theatre's material legacy consisted of only a few scattered scripts and the memories of those who had participated and since moved on.

Experiment in American theatre is far from moribund, however. Ellen Stewart remains the indomitable earth mother of La Mama, nurturing new and provocative American playwrights and importing groups, directors, and works from countries as diverse as Portugal and Japan. Productions of Beckett and Pinter directed by the late Alan Schneider continue to thrive, as do Andrei Serban's interpretations of Chekhov. For some time now, Joseph Papp has devoted his talents not to Lincoln Center's more conventional Vivian Beaumont Theatre but to The Public, where he hosts The Mabou Mines. And even the Beaumont's conventionality yielded a few years ago to Peter Brook's *Carmen* and, more recently, to work by contemporary American playwrights. Indeed, the American theatre of the 1980s is a theatre in which all things are possible. As Schechner observes in *The End of Humanism*, the activity of the 1960s and 1970s redefined "what a performance was, where it could take place, who it involved, how it could be constructed, who or what could generate it." As a consequence, "the field remains permanently enlarged..."¹¹

New York's theatre today remains responsive to those who reject realism as an accommodating form and commercialism as a prevailing mode. Heir to the legacy of the non-literary experiments of the 1960s and 1970s and beneficiary of the generation of playwrights since *Waiting for Godot* that Albee and Shepard have fathered, the off-Broadway theatre stands as our measure of postmodern American drama. Over the past two decades, it has with certainty identified those characteristics of drama and theatre – fragmentation, indeterminacy, spontaneity, theatricality, pluralism, paradox, performance – that urge us toward a definition of the postmodern.

¹¹ Schechner, pp. 23–25.