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Beyond the Mainstream
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of the fourth annual conference
of the
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Drama in English

Edited for the society
by Peter Paul Schnierer

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Preface

These essays have grown out of papers presented at an international conference held in June 1996 at the Heinrich-Fabri-Institut Blaubeuren, Germany, under the auspices of the Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen and the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English.

The present volume is not a conference transcript. It has not been possible to represent all papers here, and some of the participants had made it clear from the outset that they wanted to talk but not to publish. Nor can a written record convey the sense of excitement and community that was created by the meeting of academics from around the world, teachers, undergraduate students (who made up almost half the number of those present) and theatre people, including actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, the London fringe and university-based groups. Only a few of the contributions to the conference are documented here, yet in what follows traces can be found of those who ‘merely’ talked, listened, asked, agreed and contradicted.

The conference was made possible by a handsome grant from the German government and additional financial support from the British Council. Thanks are also due to Daniel Ditsche, Prof. Lothar Fietz, Alexander Heilemann, Prof. Kurt Kohn, Svenja Kühfuß, Günter Leypoldt, Tanja Lindl, Sibylle Metzger, Monika Sauer, Katharina von Savigny, Renate Schneider, the University of Tübingen’s Media Service, Langenscheidt KG, and the Tübingen Anglo-Irish Theatre Group. Those who were present in Blaubeuren will share gratitude towards the Bächtle family and their quite spectacular cooking.

P.P.S. Tübingen, April 1997
Introduction: The Marginal Theatre

Theatre is, and always has been, a marginal affair. For the best part of its (European) history theatre people had to live on the fringes of their societies, kept at a distance by authorities and audiences alike. Even the special days set aside for the Dionysia in Greece only served to emphasize that all the others were theatreless, quotidian, normal. And in our own time, with shows available the year round and performed by people who are not ostracized any more, theatre is marginalized by its younger offshoots. Cinema and television have saturated the cultural discourse of the 20th century with drama; theatre has remained a minority’s delight throughout. Even an average British First Division football team is seen by more people in the course of the year than all performances by the Royal Shakespeare Company combined.

In that sense, too often overlooked by practitioners and literary critics alike, “beyond the mainstream” is what defines theatre as a whole. The stage is, to put it bluntly, not part of most people’s world. From this perspective, it seems almost risible to present a collection of essays on marginal forms of theatre and drama. If only a minority appreciates the mainstream, what is the size of the clique that enjoys the little runnels beyond? In directing our attention to a minute theatre in Omaha or a few Aborigines performing agit-prop, are we not turning the arcane into the autistic?

If the voices that follow simply were to enumerate and describe what is happening in some out-of-the-way places, the charge would be justified. But a characteristic common to those voices is their readiness to identify processes and developments, and to demonstrate their relevance to the mainstream itself. If theatre is to address those it does not reach yet, going beyond the mainstream becomes imperative: the marginal theatre thus becomes the crucible of all theatre to come.
That process is not uncomplicated: *embourgeoisement* is ever the risk it runs. Appropriately enough, Margarete Rubik poses the dilemma in the very title of “Fringe or Mainstream? What is Marketable?”, the essay that opens the debate. Her analysis of Sarah Daniels’ *Neaptide*, Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* and Jacky Kay’s *Chiarosuro*, all from the mid-1980s, shows how plays work that address, inter alia, lesbian identity and repressive patriarchal institutions — once the novelty value of these topics has waned. Toning down one’s effervescence or indignation in order to reach a larger section of the market may be deplored from the point of view of pure doctrine, but new voices and new arguments thus become available more widely.

The complementary piece by Jale Abdollahzadeh, also taking *Chiarosuro* and Jill Fleming’s *Rug of Identity* as its touchstones, accepts lesbian theatre’s move towards the mainstream and puts the argument against undue dependance on theory. Starting with the concept of the “gendered gaze” based on Lacan’s and Kristeva’s ideas, Abdollahzadeh demonstrates that contemporary lesbian playwrights refuse to reiterate “the conferred identity or non-identity given to women within prescriptive theoretical discourses.” Thus, leaving the prevailing orthodoxy can actually be a liberation into choice and self-determination.

Reade Dornan’s essay on the Omaha Magic Theatre, one of the oldest theatre companies run by women in the United States, indicates that this liberation can extend the range of phenomena available for appraisal. OMT’s critique of late capitalism, actualized as it is in images that are repetitive, banal, devoid of tension, climax, or mystery, is one of the most disturbing developments in American theatre.

Stuart Marlow’s account of a student theatre production of a play by Caryl Churchill supplements the essays that analyze women’s plays and women’s theatres. Marlow as a theatre practitioner highlights the difficulties a mainstream audience can have even today with a text like *Top Girls*. The “mainstreaming” techniques he describes are intended to make the process of accepting the play easier without unduly compromising its aesthetics.
The essays by Guy Stern, Nicole Boireau and Christopher Innes all deal with individual playwrights. Their claims to a position off centre are as different as can be imagined, yet all of them share a peculiarly indeterminate position between cultures. As Guy Stern shows, the production of Motti Lerner’s *Exile in Jerusalem*, with its sense of not belonging already chiming in the play’s title, derives its energy from the tension between Israeli and American influences, but also from a style of performance that contrasts modern staging techniques with a resurrection of expressionism.

Problems of performance are equally highlighted in Christopher Innes’ piece on Robert Lepage. As a Quebec Canadian, as a writer, actor and director, and as an artist who merges archetypal material with the most advanced stage technology available, Lepage moves between poles. The evanescence of his productions, which evolve, lengthen and contract over the months, seems to stress his work’s ephemerality and marginality, while the sheer technical demands on performance spaces situates it in the big houses. Consequently, Innes’ title, “Beyond Categories (Redefining ‘Mainstream’)”, signals a shift of boundaries. For Innes, “the real divide is within the mainstream itself: between plays or productions still based on nineteenth century principles, and post-modern contemporary work.”

The same yardstick can be applied to the work of Gregory Motton, a young English playwright introduced here by Nicole Boireau. He moves in the spaces the new transnational Europe offers: his splendidly named *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)*, for instance, was first performed at the Théâtre National de l’Odeon in Paris in 1995. Like Lepage, Motton fuses the archetypal with the avantgardist; in his case, not stage technology but the discordant noise and images of 1990s trash culture. A playwright whose work compels critics to invoke both Mervyn Peake and Irvine Welsh in comparison, as Nicole Boireau does, is indeed a phenomenon best described in terms that distance him from the mainstream.

Lerner’s, Lepage’s and Motton’s indeterminate allegiances indicate that in our days a single national dramatic tradition may inhibit the development of the truly new. Where such a tradition is missing, however, exciting developments are as possible as ever. Two
thematically related essays in this collection chart the rise of new dramas. Regina Kneer’s essay on Black Australian drama emphasizes the doubly marginal: a country away from the traditional centres of dramatic production and an almost silenced culture within that country. Kneer traces a trajectory that began with agit-prop, moved on to socio-analytical texts and has now reached plays that accentuate the individual’s consciousness.

Black drama in Australia follows a pattern that frequently is evident when a disenfranchised group begins to gain access to the means of theatrical production. It is paradigmatic for the process outlined at the beginning of this introduction: what begins beyond the mainstream, and thus at the margins of the marginal, acquires an importance that renews the theatre — not for everybody, not everywhere, but for a circumscribed audience that suddenly makes sense of the stage.

This point is made forcefully by Christiane Schlote in her piece on Latino and Asian American theatre in New York. On the basis of dozens of interviews she conducted in recent years, Schlote draws a picture of two emergent — and intertwined — developments. These parallel that of Black Australian drama in one important respect: new voices are heard, and new listeners are available and willing to hear them. Yet there is also a crucial difference: where, in Australia, the grievances of a single ethnic group gave impetus to the first plays, the new American theatres already lay claim to more than the particular: they “focus on [...] conflicts between all kinds of communities in general” such as those generated by class and gender differences.

Here the mainstream is claimed by assertive, self-confident cultures that themselves constitute only a facet of their society. Similar richness, embedded in a much longer and much more varied tradition, characterizes contemporary African theatre. To depict all of it as “beyond the mainstream” requires an explanation, though. After all, Wole Soyinka, the playwright given the highest profile in Eckhard Breitinger’s essay, is a Nobel Laureate — this does not constitute literary obscurity. Yet while the art and music sections of *africa 95*, the great London festival Breitinger takes as his reference, had a world-wide impact, the theatre component was seen in “fringe venues, and particularly the venues in those neighbourhoods with a high
concentration of African and West Indian residents.” Again, what emerges is the move towards the margin in order to reach those who do not consider mainstream theatre as one of their cultural options.

None of the common concerns and strategies that have become apparent so far really are applicable to the curious phenomenon Wolfgang Hochbruck introduces and evaluates in his essay on historical reenactments in the United States. Yet here, too, is a perfect example of a fringe development, as far away from the mainstream as one could possibly imagine, nevertheless drawing huge numbers of people into an activity that, for better or worse, is theatre and nothing else. The communal nature of “autocelebratory” reenactments, as Hochbruck has it, places them into a tradition beginning (at the latest) with 10th century liturgical drama and extending to the community plays that swept Britain in the 1980s.

Beyond the mainstream, then, does neither equal irrelevant nor permanently marginal. If theatre is to remain a viable forum for debate and a source of enjoyment and, ultimately, dignity, then it will have to revitalize itself from its fringes. Some of the most interesting as well as promising lifesigns are assembled here.
Fringe or Mainstream? What is Marketable?

In my paper I want to compare three plays, Sarah Daniels’ *Neaptide* (produced at the National Theatre in 1986), Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* (staged at the Royal Court in 1985), and Jacky Kay’s *Chiaroscuro*, which toured the fringe in 1986. Sarah Daniels is one of the few women dramatists who have become mainstream writers. Although she has tackled a variety of potentially offensive topics, from pornography and witch trials to lesbian motherhood, she has been called “the acceptable face of feminism.”¹ Her female critics are split between devastating criticism and unqualified praise.² Daniels had established a reputation, had had plays performed at the Royal Court Theatre, and had been writer in residence there in 1984, before *Neaptide* was performed at the prestigious Cottesloe National Theatre in June 1986. The play takes up the issue of lesbian motherhood and the disempowerment of lesbians in public life, and has five women characters come out in the course of the action. By 1986, of course, lesbian characters on stage were not in themselves new, and problems of lesbian identity and the fight against repressive patriarchal institutions had been explored by various fringe lesbian theatre groups. Indeed, *Neaptide* is far less radical than some of these other works and obviously designed for the consumption of a mainstream audience. Like many writers who have tried to make a lesbian heroine acceptable to a wider, heterosexual audience, Daniels uses the typical strategy of putting her protagonist Claire

in a context which is likely to be considered so awful by *any* reader that she will be able to identify with the lesbian hero’s rebellion against

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¹ Griffiths, 47.
² Cf. Wandor on the one hand and Goodman, 792, on the other.
this background without having to engage with the protagonist's lesbianism."³

No viewer can believe that little Poppy will be better off with her father Lawrence, who is battling for custody of the daughter merely out of revenge, and whose sneers at Claire’s educational principles are refuted systematically throughout the play. The fact that the law should classify Claire, simply on account of her lesbianism, as an "unfit mother," together with prostitutes, lunatics and drug addicts, must needs seem outrageous to any audience. Daniels was at pains to paint Claire as a perfect mother, the only woman in the whole play who has a harmonious, understanding relationship with her child and never loses her patience. Indeed, Claire is too good to be true, as she is never allowed to make a single mistake: not only is she a wonderful mother, she is also an inspiring teacher, and a human being who will stand up for her beliefs even if this is likely to involve her in difficulties. Daniels herself confesses:

I did not allow myself the luxury of making that woman more real and that was a mistake. ... I forgot in the pressure of trying to put her beyond reproach that we most identify with others' mistakes.⁴

What makes audience identification with her even easier is the fact that Claire is not a militant lesbian, she is portrayed primarily as a mother and a teacher, and her "lesbianism is incidental to her other roles."⁵ This is not to say that Daniels dispenses with polemics, or that there is no radical feminist propaganda in the play, but such programmatic statements are always voiced by minor characters, and the heroine is reduced to making the appropriate gestures of sympathy and solidarity. This strategy, indeed, leads to some structural problems, since Val’s radical rhetoric in the hospital at the beginning of the play raises expectations never to be realized both about the subject matter and about Val’s position in the play.

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³ Griffin, 66.
⁴ quoted in Goodman, 793.
⁵ Goodman, 793.
VAL: The performers in this pit are as old as the witchcraft trials. Center stage. The powerful male Doctor-Inquisitor. In the wings, the subservient Handmaiden-Nurse. Stranded on a mud flat, myself, a Witch-Patient. *(Neaptide, 235)*

Quite typically, psychiatric wards are here addressed as archetypal patriarchal institutions of suppression, yet Daniels fails to dramatise the conflict, and is therefore likely to leave audiences not conversant with radical feminist theory puzzling if Val is indeed mad. Val, after all, turns out to be a very minor character, and for all practical purposes Claire must seem a much more likely candidate for such a complaint, given the respective husbands of the two sisters and the fact that the court and the school, where Claire undergoes her ordeals, are presented as far more misogynist than the hospital. According to radical feminist theory, however, women's discontent is not the neurotic lament of the maladjusted, but a response to social structures in which women are systematically exploited and oppressed.

According to these theories, marriage is oppressive by definition, regardless of the qualities of the husband, and heterosexuality is criticised as a political institution rather than a personal choice. A heterosexual woman like Val is therefore likely to crack up, when the woman-oriented Claire has the innate strength to fight against oppression. It is characteristic of the play that it should go in for such programmatic oppositions. In the Claire-plot, Daniels concentrates exclusively on the institutional struggle — the repression of lesbians by patriarchal institutions — skirting personal problems and genuine lesbian experience. No lesbian relationship is, in fact, depicted on

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6 In Furse's *Augustine*, in contrast, the psychiatric hospital is indeed a place of male empowerment and female suppression, and the hysterics are exploited, humiliated, turned into objects of scientific enquiry and sexual curiosity, and silenced, while the pseudo-scientific masculine discourse is fictionalized into objective truth. The play was a critical success (*Time Out Award*), but was never printed — since drama is, evidently, unpopular reading material, and the play failed to fall into an easy slot for anthologies. The example shows that, besides theatre managers, publishers contribute to the silencing of new playwrights, since unprinted texts are not available for wider distribution. Furse is artistic director of Paines Plough, a company specialising in productions of plays by new writers.

7 Palmer, 43.

8 Zimmerman, 182f.
stage. Claire is living without a lover at present, the headmistress’ companion only shouts a few words from off stage, and the worst we hear about the two defiant lesbian pupils is a report that they were seen kissing. So, but for some pro-lesbian rhetoric, there is nothing that could actually outrage a squeamish audience, since the question of equal rights in legal affairs and job opportunities is one much less likely to offend than the concrete depiction of a lesbian love relationship and its possible tensions. Lesbianism is only an issue because of its legal disabilities, not a burning identity problem for the women themselves. None of them, not even the old headmistress who hides her homosexuality behind an aggressively patriarchal discourse, is made to agonize over her sexual orientation in private, or suffers ostracism from her friends and family. None of them has internalised repressive social attitudes or has come to look at herself as a deviant or misfit. Although society obviously regards lesbian motherhood as unthinkable, or at least inappropriate, Claire is never made to feel uncomfortable in her role. The militant pupils may complain about the deletion of lesbians from history:

> We are nowhere in history books, sex education leaves us out, the media make us into gross caricatures, when society does recognize us it’s only to oppress .... (Neaptide, 269)

But this lack of role models does not leave the characters stranded. The sense of safely grounded personality is strengthened by the use of the Demeter myth,\(^9\) introduced into the play in the form of a politically correct bedtime story for the child, which assigns to each member of Claire’s family a mythological counterpart, thereby providing them with an archetypal resonance to their problems and rooting them firmly in Western culture. The happy ending of the play in itself proves that Daniels was not out to unsettle the audience unduly. To be sure, “Claire does not win the custody battle, nor is the

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\(^9\) The myth is used here not in its original version but in Chesler’s *Women and Madness* version, giving four daughters to Demeter instead of only one, Persephone, Psyche, Artemis and Athena, in order to illustrate forms of mental illness among women.
state apparatus which discriminates against women overthrown, yet she manages to outwit Lawrence and the patriarchal system by escaping to the United States with her daughter, while her husband is ultimately shown banging at her door in futile exasperation. In fact, all the three strands of action are brought to a satisfactory conclusion: Claire manages to keep Poppy despite the judge’s decision against her; the suicidal Val is taken home from hospital by her mother, who has just proved her mettle by standing by her lesbian second daughter; and the headmistress turns out to be gay herself and settles for a compromise with the lesbian pupils, promising minor changes in the curriculum. Even the offensively macho teacher has received appropriate comeuppance for his misogynic jokes from his female colleagues. The play fully endorses the characters’ decisions to come out as lesbians, and celebrates female bonding as successful and reassuring. The very title, referring to the lowest tide, when the sun (the male principle) and the moon (the female principle) are in complete opposition, already suggests an optimistic reversal, when the waters rise again with the incoming tide. Such optimistic solutions enhance the acceptability of the play, and although suitable enough within the comic context, they also indicate that Daniels avoided addressing the problem seriously.

_Chiaroscuro_ by Jacky Kay offers itself for comparison. It is also a play about lesbians, it premiered at the Soho Poly in the same year, in March 1986, and then went on tour in various art and community centres, including the Cockpit Theatre in London, but it is obviously geared to a liberal fringe audience basically sympathetic to the issue. Performed by an all-black team of four women, the play tackles questions of racial and sexual identity within a repressive, aggressively eurocentric and heterosexual society. Unlike _Neaptide_, _Chiaroscuro_ focuses on a lesbian couple and the reactions of a private circle of friends to their coming out, and although it is also propagandist in

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10 Goodman, 792.
11 Jacky Kay is a Scottish writer primarily known as a poet. _Chiaroscuro_ was her first work for the theatre. It was commissioned by Theatre of Black Women and was later expanded into a full length play, which toured Britain and Europe for three months.
drawing relationships between women as more satisfactory than involvements with men, it does not gloss over the profound identity crises occasioned by the hostility of a prejudiced society. Unlike the characters in *Neaptide*, the black women in *Chiaroscuro* are divorced from any cultural tradition and desperately try to piece together their identities from snatches of memory, or even from their own, haphazard, names:

And so it was that names were also chance things like an old woman’s fancy or a mother’s dream names relating to nothing specific except desire, names with no heavy weight like Aphrodite or Persephone Gauri Sankar or Tara — names hinged casually into some instant liking. Name the nameless ones. Name the nameless ones. (*Chiaroscuro*, 60)

With no role models to lean on, even imagination fails the women — “How do dykes grow old?” (*Chiaroscuro*, 68) — and the English language itself, alien to their ancestry and experience, fails to provide them with words to verbalize their desire. They seek alternative forms of communication in dance, poetry, folklore, pantomime, even stitching and handicraft, rendering the play’s dramatic discourse complex, experimental and difficult. For these women the deletion of their experience from textbooks holds the terror of rendering them into nameless monsters. Bigoted society classifies their love as sinful, perverted and pathological, rationalising their sexual orientation as an inability to attract men, and quizzing with prurient curiosity, “What do they do, what do they do these les-bi-ans? It is easy to imagine what men do — but women, women” (*Chiaroscuro*, 67). Such prejudices occasion profound insecurity and self-hatred in the victims: “What would they say if they all knew? Opal, sweet friendly Opal is a pervert!” (*Chiaroscuro*, 73). Unlike Claire, who receives support from her family and friends, these women fear repercussions not only in their workplace, but in their circle of acquaintances,\(^\text{12}\) and they

\(^{12}\) I shall turn my insides out
when I imagine what they would say
the old school friends, the old home friends
the nurses the doctors and all the anonymous
who should mean
Nothing
agonize over their exclusion from all public claim to a share in the life of their loved ones. At a funeral, for instance,

not one there knows what we meant to each other,
and all her remaining relatives wonder —
who is the sobbing woman in the dark coat
at the back with a pew to herself? (Chiaroscuro, 68)

It is important that rejection comes not only from the jaundiced outside world, but also from one of the black women, who is shocked to watch lesbians kiss and rejects their militant slogans as groundlessly aggressive, yet despite her heterosexist\(^\text{13}\) pose is not drawn as an unlikeable character. To be sure, towards the end of the play she becomes more tolerant, but each tiny step is painful and slow, and the play gives the impression of starting afresh at the end in an attempt on the part of the characters to muster more understanding for one another and more courage to create their own unique identities. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Chiaroscuro did not achieve wide popularity. I am not trying to say that it is a better play than Neaptide, but it certainly offers less facile solutions, does not permit easy identification with one figure, dramatises the conflicts within female communities, and tries to show how external pressure warps the self-image of minorities.

Anne Devlin's\(^\text{14}\) Ourselves Alone, is concerned with an entirely different subject matter, but it also shows that external pressure may lead women themselves to adopt patriarchal norms and internalise repressive gender roles.\(^\text{15}\) Ourselves Alone, co-produced at the

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\(^{13}\) Zimmerman, 201, explains that heterosexism denotes "the set of values and structures that assumes heterosexuality to be the only natural form of sexual and emotional expression."

\(^{14}\) Anne Devlin is best known for her short stories. She has been Writer Assoc. at the Royal Court Theatre since 1985.

\(^{15}\) By contrast, Ann Marie Di Mambro’s The Letter Box (1989), which also deals with domestic violence, namely wife-beating, was only toured locally in Scotland. Di Mambro was Resident Writer at Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh from 1989-1990. The issue of the play, which is likely to be “swept under the carpet” (Cameron, xvii) even today, was not sensational enough to attract producers, and the one-act
Liverpool Playhouse Studio and the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1985, is a play about women in the IRA and the effects of public and private violence on their lives. In spite of her sensational subject matter, Devlin does not go for easy solutions and does not readily allow audience identification with a heroine. The three female protagonists are presented with sympathy and understanding, but we are also made aware of the problematic choices each of them makes, and the author refuses to supply quick recipes as to how their dilemma might be solved. Constant fears of army raids and the internment of their loved ones have become routine for these Irish women, as has the threat of mutilation and death involved even in minor chores for the IRA.

[Aunt] Cora is blind and deaf and dumb and she has no hands, and she’s been like that since she was eighteen. ... She was storing ammunition for her wee brother Malachy — my father, God love him — who was in the IRA even then. He asked her to move it. Unfortunately it was in poor condition, technically what they call weeping. So when she pulled up the floorboards in her bedroom, whoosh! It took the skin off her face. Her hair’s never really grown properly since and look — no hands! (Ourselves Alone, 29)

What makes the women’s situation even worse, however, is the fact that the virtual state of war fosters strictly hierarchical social structures allowing men to exploit and suppress women both politically, sexually and in the family. Since at a time of armed conflict any questioning of authority is tactically dangerous, the women are made to accept their own disempowerment for the sake of a higher good. Josie, the political activist, has been completely conditioned to sectarian thinking, and her assertion that “there are no personal differences between one person and another that are not political” (Ourselves Alone, 23), despite its ring of feminist rhetoric, in fact enslaves her in narrow-minded fanaticism and turns her into a convenient tool in the men’s war. She is nothing but a servant-girl both to her father at home and to the political organisation, and she is exploited emotionally by

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play would have needed a suitable companion piece to make up an attractive London double bill.
the top terrorist who has engendered ten children on his wife, yet persuades Josie he is in love with her, and by the British infiltrator, who makes her pregnant yet betrays her family to the army. Instead of bringing her hope and liberation, the child she will bear increases her dependence on her patriarchal father. Donna, waiting in dumb misery at home for consecutive abusive lovers who are imprisoned for years, is equally unable to free herself from the repressive mechanisms at work in society. Hers is a life of passive suffering and resignation. Ignorant, promiscuous Frieda, the hairdresser who wants to be a great singer and a new Marilyn Monroe, is ridiculous enough in her aspirations, yet her loyalty to persons rather than abstract ideas, her refusal to subscribe to the sectarian thinking prescribed by men, and her final decision to leave the Troubles behind and head for England, small though her chance of success and happiness there may be, seems the most reasonable alternative in a dilemma in which each move a woman makes is likely to end in defeat.

Irish drama has always had a much stronger stand in the London theatres than other regional plays, and the glimpse Devlin allows the audience of the internecine conflicts within the IRA and of the way the British army tries to infiltrate the organization probably make the play more readily marketable, as does its humour, which makes the bleak subject matter go down more readily. Sensational subject matter and comic relief are qualities which can also be found in Daniels’ Neaptide. Nevertheless, the promotion of plays by female writers still often seems a matter of chance and random contacts, not only of marketable subject matter. There are too few playhouses in London devoted to promoting any playwrights, let alone women dramatists. Most of the theatrical activity, both male and female, nowadays seems to be channelled off to television, which leaves the London stage very much impoverished.
Bibliography


Before I started my investigation of some relevant plays by lesbian playwrights, I asked myself a very simple initial question: Does it really matter who a playwright sleeps with? Or — if you put it less bluntly — does a playwright who sleeps with a person of her/his own sex come up with plays different from the material composed by heterosexuals?

In this context I remembered last year’s conference where Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* was hailed as being one of the most extraordinary achievements of our decade — and of course, I remembered that Kushner is a homosexual.

Given the fact that our society is still male-dominated and partly misogynist, many people find male homosexuality more acceptable than lesbianism. Some of the plays written by homosexual men seem to continue the old tradition of barring women from performance and indulge in a theatrical discourse which in some cases reinscribes the phallic order in the “name of the father” as Lacan would put it. But I feel this might get too polemical now. So let me approach my subject from a different angle. I found it quite surprising that some of the very influential and famous British playwrights of the eighties and nineties are lesbians. Amongst them, e.g. Bryony Lavery, Debby Klein, Tasha Fairbanks, Sarah Daniels and even the number one feminist theatre critic Michelene Wandor. Britain’s first lesbian play was staged at London’s *Institute of Contemporary Arts* exactly 20 years ago and entitled *Any Woman Can*. It was a collaboration of *Gay Sweatshop* and Jill Posener, Kate Crushley and Mary Moore. This play marks the decisive break-through for lesbian theatre. Three years later, in 1979, the women of *Gay Sweatshop* formed several single sex companies, e.g. *Hormone Imbalance*, and *The Siren Company*. In those years, lesbian theatre was primarily concerned with political

Looking at these plays, it struck me that all of them deal with much larger issues than mere sexual preference. Many of the plays by lesbian playwrights owe much of their impact to the fact that they can be read as manifestations of one particular key area of female playwrighting: they all discuss the concept of the gaze and the concept of the stage as a mirror. In the past years, much has been said about unconscious perception habits and about the stage being a mere projection of male desire. Bearing in mind one particular psychoanalytical approach, namely the phallocentric theory of the French follower of Freud, Jacques Lacan, many critics have tried to question the nature of the mirror as an accurate representation of life.¹ Lacan’s assumptions about the formation of men’s and women’s identities have provoked radical and vehement responses. Julia Kristeva, for example, has come up with a theory of subversion, which might prove very useful for literature and modern art’s attempts at deconstruction. Since

¹ It might be useful to bring swiftly some of the basic Lacanian principles back to your memory here. Lacan explicitly denies the notion of a coherent identity. Especially for women, there is no independent identity at all, since we have no penis. Drawing on the notion of Freud’s famous penis-envy, Lacan develops the concept of the mirror-stage or phase, not to be confused with the theatrical stage, but serving as an important analogy for the theatrical stage in dramatic theory. During the mirror-stage, the child sees himself or herself for the first time and realizes that he or she is actually a separate being from his/her mother. The little boy, of course, realizes that he has a penis, which his mother has not. He therefore feels superior to his mother and develops a castration complex: If mum is also aware of the fact that her little boy has got a penis, she will certainly want to deprive him of this precious organ. So the little boy is unconsciously driven away from his mother and turns to his father, who represents the symbolic order. The symbolic order’s signifier — of course — is the penis which also stands for a whole system of language the little boy now is in a position to acquire.

So much about the little boy. But what about the girl? She is watching from the outside, she will never enter the symbolic order, she has subsequently no identity of her own, no language.
a woman cannot be — from a Lacanian perspective at least, and Kristeva adopts this perspective — she has no access to the phallic system. Therefore art — according to Kristeva — should refuse the notion of sexual difference, should neither represent only him nor her as the “thing” which can’t be represented — art should dissolve sexual identities. Connecting those theories and views to the study of drama seems quite useful. Many feminist critics have done so in the past, amongst them e.g. Elin Diamond, Sue-Ellen Case and Jill Dolan. My intention is also to connect Lacan’s and Kristeva’s views to a certain type of theatre, but I would like to emphasize the problems involved in an artistic concept which completely denies the actual existence of two separate types of gender. A lesbian artist aiming at a critique of the status quo might at least sometimes like to use fixed identities as a reference point for her arguments in a play. Dissolving sexual difference on stage could also mean ignoring the extent to which nowadays sexual differences are still inscribed in the female psyche and in the female experience.

What I observed when studying the plays I want to discuss in some detail now (which are Chiaroscuro by Jackie Kay and the Rug of Identity by Jill Fleming) was not a refusal or dissolution of but a craving for an identity. The reasons for this search for identity seem very clear: According to Freud and Lacan, lesbians must be people who are deprived of their identities in a doublefold way. First of all, they are women and obviously ‘lacking’ a penis, secondly they don’t even bother to make up for this so-called lack by allowing a man to insert his penis into them. But having confronted you with the above interpretation, I also seem to follow Lacanian lines of thought, talking about a ‘lack’, centering around the penis-envy. Therefore I should like to introduce a different approach here, namely the view of the French psychoanalyst Christiane Olivier. In her extremely illuminating book Les enfants de Jocaste she demystifies and severely criticizes Freud and Lacan for establishing the phallus as the centre of all human activity. She writes:

This organ, declared as being so desirable for women by Freud, is only reflected by men in literature and arts: you can see it in Greek sculptures, Etruscan pottery, in the paintings of Picasso, Chagall, Dali, in the novels
of D.H. Lawrence, H. Miller and others.²

Olivier argues against the penis-envy and tries to establish the female subject within the realms of her own female body, which is complete and giving, not lacking: giving birth to a child, feeding the child with her breasts. Monique Wittig also attempts to break away from the so-called "primary signifier", the penis. Her poetical text Le corps lesbi en is a very good example of this. Namascar Shaktini calls Wittig's attempt at the deconstruction of phallic meaning and the establishment of a lesbian body even a "revolutionary signifier".

Meaning is constructed in this poem in a nonrepresentational way. [...] The lesbian body affirms, through its very existence in literary discourse, the concept of a female subject of desire.³

Wittig writes of the need to disrupt language and genre by opening new spaces which privilege lesbianism as the place of new alterity. But yet, this otherness needs to be defined too and in most cases (compare the work of Irigaray, Wittig, Kristeva) this definition involves a refusal of the binary structures of male/female, of presence/absence, of subject/other. In Wittig's writings, lesbian is a word which denotes a new positioning of female desire, of the lover and the beloved, of the subject and the object. In her experimental poetic texts, Wittig succeeds at confusing the boundaries between subject and object and undercuts the heterosexuality which is based on this dualism.

Can the same thing be achieved in the theatre too? In the theatre, the exclusion of the phallic gaze in most lesbian plays might bear the potential to escape the problematic dynamics of that male gaze. Nevertheless the very notion of the lesbian gaze is inherently complicated by the dynamics of sexuality itself. This can be seen in the plays I'm going to discuss. Sexuality and desire only develop out

De-constructing and Re-constructing the Gendered Gaze in Lesbian Theatre

of a certain tension between two opposite poles, between two contrasting personalities. Christiane Olivier expresses this tension the following way:

Here in bed we come to rediscover the multiple emotional states we encountered during our childhoods: desire, love, hatred, ambivalence.\(^4\)

The negation of the phallic principle cannot necessarily entail a negation of the sexual principle itself. Sexuality always develops out of a relationship between subject and object. Therefore, we can observe sexual patterns of objectification and subjectification in lesbian theatre, too. While ideally the lesbian gaze would be different from the phallic gaze and would therefore be liberating and not objectifying, such a concept does not work in the sexual world. Desire may manifest itself also in a woman-to-woman gaze. The only way to free desire of the objectifying gaze would be to reduce women’s sexuality to a biologically determined pattern, that is, to assume that women are less aggressive and less demanding in their sexuality.

In *The Rug of Identity*, Jill Fleming clearly shows that there is no difference between a phallic and a lesbian gaze when this gaze occurs in a sexual context. In *The Rug of Identity* the two female protagonists construct an identity for themselves. At the basis of this identity lies an independent kind of sexuality, which of course is no copy of male behavioural patterns, but which relies on a sexuality the women develop on their own. *The Rug of Identity* is a cross between feminist drama and political satire: thus the characters take on several identities, the scenario is unrealistic and the events in the play are reminiscent of the plots constructed by Joe Orton in the 1960’s.

Laurie and Joanna are lovers, but they want to hide their relationship from Joanna’s mother, Mrs Proctor. As the completely hilarious plot develops, Mrs Proctor reveals herself to be Laurie’s father and mother at the same time, since Mrs Proctor is a transsexual transvestite who has gone through the experience of having had both genders. Therefore she can mock traditional gender stereotypes:

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\(^4\) Christiane Olivier, *op.cit.* p. 35, my translation.
MRS PROCTOR: I've always wanted to father a child. All those bits of me going to waste, I used to think. But twenty-five years ago, in that very toilet, I made the decision to return to womanhood, for the sake of my husband and my little girl. I should never have done it. Sex hasn't been the same since. (p. 108)

Joanna is shocked to find out that her mother is actually her father and of course she wants to know who the person was who actually gave birth to her.

JOANNA: You were responsible for the death of my mother, I can give you no credit for that.
MRS PROCTOR: I was responsible for your birth too. You couldn't have done it on your own.

No response from Joanna to plea.
I am your father, for fuck's sake!
JOANNA: I must expose you, don't you understand, or I'll live in an identity crisis for the rest of my life. (p. 109)

As the title already indicates, The Rug of Identity presents women in search of a definition of their own personality and sexuality. Both the desired and desiring subjects are women, but the perspective permanently shifts from a neutral to a sexual gaze:

LAURIE: And I turned to lesbianism to find normality.
JOANNA: I don't mind sleeping with you tonight. It would be good for my identity. But I can't make any promises.
LAURIE (takes away bottle): Are you willing? (taking off Joanna's shoes).
JOANNA: Will doesn't come into it. My body is beyond control.
LAURIE: Already? Never mind, I've learned how to stagger it.
JOANNA: But I must tell you I won't be able to make love on kitchen cupboards massaging in coconut oil in time to Joan Armatrading. My mind's otherwise engaged.
LAURIE: Then you must free your mind. Listen to your body...the ebbs and flows of physical desire (touches Joanna) (p. 99)

Clearly we have an example of a subject-object relationship in this lesbian text, too. But via the means of comedy, the protagonists in this play are freed from the confines of playing only one role, of putting on only one single identity. The audience is presented with a multitude of different versions of lesbianism. Sometimes Joanna's and Laurie
relationship reflects aspects of the so called “butch/femme dynamic”, sometimes the relationship changes to a more balanced form of communication. What I want to stress here is the notion of a constant interplay of subject (desiring) and object (desired) in *The Rug of Identity*. These two positions are interchangeable and reversible — playfully occupied or abandoned at the protagonist’s own will. They can also be observed in a number of other lesbian plays, e.g. in *Her Aching Heart* (1991) by Bryony Lavery or in Nina Rapi’s *Ithaka* (1991).

In Jackie Kay’s *Chiaroscuro*, which examines the nature of both lesbianism and race, the sexual relationship of two of the characters is at the centre of the play. The desire between Beth and Opal is intense and mutual, but there is always a kind of struggle for power which again is the result of the sexual relationship itself. Nevertheless, the power is interchangeable: power relations are repeatedly redistributed, which is of vital importance for the discussion of the lesbian gaze. Although there can be no doubt about the fact that there cannot be seduction or sexuality without the subject/object difference, the lesbian gaze allows for a reciprocity, for an interplay of the subject/object positions. This reciprocity challenges preconceived notions about lesbians and about the conventional dynamics of male-female relationships. The patriarchal dualistic and hierarchical divisions into acting subject and acted-on object are interchangeable in lesbian theatre, each partner conceives the other, is subject and object at the same time. In *Chiaroscuro* Jackie Kay uses songs and poems to emphasize this idea of shifting tensions:

**BETH:** Yesterday the sky was white bright white
I couldn’t see anything not even outlines then, without warning, splashes of black and red, fire flies in the sky
inside me was a glow-worm glowing the sky darkened so grey.
I never expected to be anything other than alone — I am wishing well somewhere at the very bottom, I echo when touched but I am hollow and it’s a long way down
her need sucks like mosquitoes, my need is camouflaged
I am all green and brown inside my leaves laugh and whisper: you call yourself a risker?
Then I see another picture we lie close talking tongues
she is under my skin, we are each other’s dream me and her opalescent eyes me and my fire flies we are dawn and dusk together she is the first woman to see all of me and keep holding, holding. (p. 69)

The play’s primary stress is on the two women’s explorations of their sexual lives: The audience witnesses women’s desire for each other expressed in dances, songs, poems and gestures reminiscent of African performance devices.

*Chiaroscuro* was produced by the Theatre of Black Women and therefore issues of gender and sexuality are linked to issues of ethnicity in the play. Jackie Kay herself is one of Britain’s most powerful black women writers. Her natural mother was a black British woman and her biological father was from Nigeria, but she was adopted and raised by white parents in the predominantly white context of Glasgow. Kay writes from the perspective of a black lesbian woman who is a mother (Yomi, the only heterosexual woman in the play also has a seven-year old daughter) and who has two mothers herself. Therefore Kay, like the characters in her play, also embraces several identities. In *Chiaroscuro*, a song performed by Aisha, who is of Indian origin, might well illustrate this:

Aisha: *(sings)*: My dreams are in another language my heart is overseas, a need is stretching like the water to meet and meet and meet I want to pull it all together these different bits of me show them to my mother and all my family my family My dreams are deep as dangerous waters my heart is beating at the rocks a longing is spinning like a whirlpool round and round and round I want to travel over there and join my past to now be welcomed, not a stranger for who I am and feel at home. (p. 63)

Once again, there is this urge to create an identity for oneself, to come to terms with *différance*, with being different, with having various origins. And on the other hand, it appears that lesbian desire can very well be represented on stage through heightened language as in *Chiaroscuro*. It is also very well expressed in the lesbian comedy of manners as Jill Davis, the editor of the first anthology of lesbian plays in Britain, chooses to call *The Rug of Identity*. 
The lesbian perspective on gender emphasizes theatre’s representational bias. Nevertheless, even in lesbian drama the very nature of sexuality itself cannot be changed. Performing desire includes the representation of a subject/object relationship. But while the “straight mind” (to borrow an expression from Monique Wittig) continues to perceive and represent sexuality in predictable and rather limited ways, lesbians introduce the idea of a sexual relationship where the power is interchangeable and the context of sexuality is playful and funny i.e. gay.

As Adrienne Rich puts it: “[...] we begin to discover the erotics in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself.” I have shown that lesbian theatre represents active and equal subjects demonstrating active desires on stage. Playwrights like Kay and Fleming don’t accept the conferred identity or non-identity given to women within prescriptive theoretical discourses. The playwrights transform codes and categories like the ‘gaze’ and offer an alternative position for others to take up as a self-conscious cultural choice. Thus the stage becomes a proper place to explore gender ambiguity and to play with gender categories. By shifting and altering traditional categorizations of gender in performance, lesbian plays playfully destabilize traditional social constructions, playing one construction off another, affirming some configurations while ridiculing others, and helping to forge new relationships in the process.

Bibliography

The Jewish Ensemble Theater of Michigan and its American Premiere of Motti Lerner’s *Exile in Jerusalem*

My paper, more by design than accident, not only abandons the mainstream, but dives into a tributary no larger than a rivulet. And yet, I am willing to predict, the narrow trickle may expand into a respectable river some day. We are discussing here theater imported from Israel to the United States as exemplified by Motti (Mordecai) Lerner’s play *Exile in Jerusalem*.¹

The drama, as other Israeli theater imports, is exotic cargo indeed. It deals with the last years of Else Lasker-Schüler, one of Germany’s luminous, eccentric, original, divinely inspired Expressionist poets, seen through the eyes of a fourth-generation Sabra. The play was translated into English by a fellow Israeli,² transplanted after a successful year in Hebrew in the author’s hometown of Jerusalem to London,³ and then had its American premiere at a small, but respected Jewish community theater in Detroit, produced, directed and performed by theater people who had never before heard of Else Lasker-Schüler nor of Motti Lerner.

To begin with the playwright. Lerner was born in 1949 in Jerusalem, lives in his hometown with his wife and two children, is

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¹ The drama, copyrighted by Motti Lerner, 4 Hanotea Street Ramat Hasharon, Israel 47401, has not yet been printed. Evelyn Orbach, Director of the Jewish Ensemble Theater, kindly allowed me a reading of her copy.

² The play was translated by Hillel Halkin and edited by Stanley Price.

³ The cover page of the MS states: “The play was originally produced by the Habima National Theatre in Tel Aviv during the 1989-90 season under the title *Else.*” The London performance is mentioned in an interview with Lerner: “In 1991 ... [the play] was premiered in English by the Royal National Theatre in London, starring the well-known British actress Doreen Mantle as Lasker-Schüler.” See Lawrence DeVine, “Poet’s story is a welcome theatrical surprise”. *In: Detroit Free Press*, 26 February ‘93, p. 1D.
Guy Stern currently the president of the Israeli Playwright Association, teaches street theater at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a director of the Khan Theatre of the same city and has written seven previous dramas. He describes himself as quite ordinary a person, but several of his statements and activities belie his purported ordinariness. At first glance the combination of playwright, director and professor certainly does not set him much apart from the mainstream. But street theater as his scholarly speciality? Also the Khan Theatre, at which he directs, is no ordinary stage. In an article in *The Drama Review* Lerner describes it as follows:

The Khan Theatre company was formed in 1972 in Jerusalem by Michael Alfreds, an English-Jewish theatre director and teacher. Alfreds has worked in Israel since 1968, staging several successful plays such as *The Mandrake* by Machiavelli and *The Donkeys* by Plautus in the Haifa Municipal Theatre. Despite his success he still had difficulty working in the more well-established theatres. Therefore, he accepted an invitation from the Jerusalem Municipality and formed a group of six young actors who where tired of seeking a comfortable milieu. They moved to Jerusalem and found their home in a renovated ruined Turkish inn — a 750-year old khan. With government and municipal aid they formed the Khan Theatre Company to be the only repertory theatre in Jerusalem.

As to his plays they follow in general the current Israeli trend of social concern and criticism. An Israeli publication speaks of "the growing preparedness of the Israeli theatre to grapple with the complete Israel experience with sensitivity, honesty, and occasionally with daring. The inclination of the contemporary Israeli theatre expresses the uniqueness of the art of theatre as a social act, which makes it the focal art in Israel."

All of Lerner's plays follow this current mainstream trend. But he

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4 See Michael Taub, "Motti Lerner (b. 1949)" in his *Special Issue of Israeli Drama*, an anthology in *Modern International Drama*, 27 (Fall '93), Nr. 1, p. 35f.
5 Motti Lerner, "The Khan Theatre Company" in *The Drama Review*, 24 (Sept. '80), Nr. 3, 79-92. A brief editorial note, p. 92, identifies Lerner as the Director of Khan and as a drama teacher at the Hebrew University.
6 This observation appears in the decision of the 1986-87 Meskin Prize Jury, reprinted in Taub, p. 37. The prize was awarded to Lerner for his drama *Kassner*. 
The Jewish Ensemble Theater of Michigan 37
takes the grappling with internal problems beyond superficial analyses. In his breakthrough play of 1983, entitled Kassner, he pinpricks all platitudinous answers to the inherited burden of the Holocaust. Not unlike the drama Joel Brand by the German dramatist Heinar Kipphardt, who juxtaposed the pragmatic need to save Hungarian Jews against the ethical problem of bargaining with the German persecutors, i.e. trading trucks for lives, Lerner traces the life, devil's pact, and tragic death of Rudolf Kassner, who bartered with Adolf Eichmann and saved 1500 Hungarian Jewish lives. Accused by a fellow Hungarian of collaboration, he was exonerated, not without tarnish, by an Israeli court, only to be assassinated in March of 1957 in front of his house in Tel Aviv. Lerner's play is a courageous, if controversial attempt to exonerate Kassner. The drama, successfully performed at the Kameri theatre in Tel Aviv, brought Lerner the prestigious Aharon Meskin Prize of the Israel Center of the I.T.I.

His next drama was equally unsparing. It centers around the lives of a family, farmers on the West Bank, threatened with expulsion from their hard-won lands as a result of Israeli diplomacy vis-à-vis its Arab neighbors and foes.

And then came Else, translated into English as Exile in Jerusalem. On one level it is the traditional story of an aging or aged woman, her passion and her creativity undiminished, who is unrequited in her love for a much younger man. Lerner postulates that Lasker-Schüler re-meets, on a park bench in Jerusalem, a young Berlin theater critic, half forgotten since her flight, but then recalled down to their brief personal encounters in Berlin's Café Größenwahn. She falls in love with him and tries to bring about a physical relationship. But he, while willing to share his meager meals and his squalid one-room apartment with her, can only offer her his respect and admiration and, occasionally, his skills at practical things, such as arranging a poetry reading for her. But his love is reserved for his Christian wife and

7 Kassner, one of the three Israeli plays in Taub's anthology, appears on p. 37-98.
9 Taub, p. 37.
10 The plot of Waiting for Messiah is summarized by Taub, p. 36.
children, left behind in Berlin. The thwarted affair is the motor that drives the play. As Motti Lerner put it in an interview:

It is a very personal play about how it is to love someone, knowing that you have no chance to be loved in return. There is the elation, the daring that you might love and be ridiculous. [...] She demands love from him. Love is something you can expect, maybe, but not demand, so this is about boundaries, about people who do not recognize boundaries. Other people recognize boundaries — of age, of imagination, of expression, of convention — but she refuses to.¹¹

On a second level the drama is about poetry. In the above-named interview Lerner admits to an epiphanic insight into his own work:

In Israel at the Habimah Theatre I participated in the rehearsals and while the actors worked, I found a line — that I had written — that made the whole work worthwhile. One line. It is when she says: ‘Don’t you believe the riddle of life can be solved by poetry?!’ That is what she thought poetry was all about. I thought, why do I spend all these days and nights writing ... now that I’m talking about it, it may sound stupid ... but what is the riddle of life?
The whole function of art is to deal with this riddle.¹²

Indeed the play can be understood as an apologia, a rescue mission of a great poet, wrested away from her audience and her language. When in the play her friend from Berlin offers to translate her poetry into Hebrew to make it marketable, she will not hear of it:

My poems are the word of the living God. Yes, the word of God. This is the way He wanted them written. In these very words. In these very lines. He chose me and sent me His angel from the clouds, bearing gifts wrapped in the softest silk, He watched me through the window as I sat at my typewriter ... Whenever I wrote anything He disliked, He tapped on the pane with His ring ... I won’t change the tail of one comma for these Philistines.¹³

The words sound true to Else Lasker-Schüler. Amidst the sordidness

¹¹ See DeVine, p. 1D.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Exile in Jerusalem, MS p.21. Henceforth cited as Exile.
of her life she could still proclaim the old-fashioned vision of the poet as prophet. Lerner reifies her brilliance by the only means possible. He intersperses, in a quiet faithful rendering, translations of her two most famous exile poems, "Mein blaues Klavier" and "Ich weiß".14

Lasker-Schüler was a totally apolitical poet. Yet on a third level, as indicated in the introduction, the drama reflects Lerner's predilection for writing socio-political drama. Its agenda already thrusts out from its title. For many Jews who came to Palestine, a sentiment reflected even in the studies of exile literature, emigration to the Holy Land was not exile but a homecoming. 'Alijah', the Hebrew word for going to Palestine — or to present-day Israel, for that matter, — meant an end to the diaspora. Given such a pervasive attitude of Zionists and Sabras, it is scarcely surprising that they had little patience with those who came to Palestine as 'exiles' especially with the 'Jäckes', clinging to the language and culture of the enemy. Lerner, while a Sabra himself, castigated this intolerance and nationalism. As he put it in the above-mentioned interview:

The easy answer to why I wrote this play is the political aspect [...] A woman living as an exile in Jerusalem reflects one of the major problems of our culture in Israel — why so few Jewish writers immigrate to Israel and live there. Are they recognized? Are they cherished there [...]15

This criticism becomes integral to the drama when Lerner imaginatively links Lasker-Schüler's non-acceptance in Jerusalem to Jewish nationalism. Already in the above asseveration of her role as a poet Lasker-Schüler intermingles a subtle reference to the monolingualism of the inhabitants of Palestine: "A Jewish poet knocks on their door — and they shut the bolts and sit inside jabbering in their own oriental patois...".16

But it is given to Werner to strike out most unambiguously at Jewish nationalism. Reacting to an adverse criticism of his friend, lumped

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14 The poems appear on MS pp. 11f and 40f. They were translated by Andrei Durchslag and Jeanette Litman-Demeestere.
15 DeVine, p. 1D.
16 Exile, MS p.22.
together with other immigrants from Germany as a "German invasion", insulted as "garbage thrown out by the anti-Semites" and an affront to "our own treasures", Werner comments:

He [the critic] doesn’t write anything about your poems. They’re in German, and this fool refuses to look at a Gothic letter .... We were driven out of Germany because we’re Jews, and here the door is slammed in our face because we’re German .... ... I can’t understand such chauvinism. We were exiled here against our will, and we’re not wanted here either.17

A short article on Lerner also highlights this aspect of the play:

In the case of Else and many German Jews, leaving Germany meant leaving a culture in which they thrived, a lifestyle they loved, a language they spoke and created in. For these intellectuals Jerusalem was a cultural wasteland, an Asian city, a foreign place.18

Perhaps Lasker-Schüler’s attitude to Palestine was not all that unequivocally negative nor Palestine’s to her. Her close friend Werner Kraft, from whom Lerner borrowed the background and first name of her unresponsive lover — rather than that of Ernst Simon, whose love she craved —, tells us that many people in Palestine helped her.19 She, in turn, speaks in one of her numerous, not yet published postal cards of 1939 of her beloved Jerusalem.20 But as every playwright Motti Lerner had of course every right to modify her life to the demands of a conflict-filled drama.

Another aspect that lifts Exile in Jerusalem beyond the mainstream is the circumstance of its American premiere. It did not see the light of an American day on Broadway or Off-Broadway, nor even at Detroit’s Fisher Theater, but at the much smaller Aaron DeRoy Theater of the Jewish Ensemble Theater, housed in the Jewish

17 Exile, MS p. 45-46
18 See fn. 6
19 Werner Kraft, “Erinnerungen an Else Lasker-Schüler”. A copy is in the Lasker-Schüler file of the Leo-Baeck Institute without a biographical reference. An editorial note points to 1951 as date of publication.
20 The postcard, written to Carl Seelig on 15 July 1939, is part of the Else-Lasker-Schüler file of the New York Leo-Baeck Institute. Location B. 26/2, S. 49/2
Community Center of a large Detroit suburb. JET, as it is usually referred to, is a thoroughly professional company, producing in the main dramas that mediate specific, but not narrowly focused topics of Jewish life for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. It wishes, as its mission statement puts it, “to broaden and enrich everyone’s understanding and appreciation of Jewish cultural life”.21 To show the range of its offerings it has in the past featured the obligatory dramatization of Anne Frank’s diary, an annual competitive and endowed ‘Festival of New Plays’ in staged readings, as well as Jules Feiffer’s *Grown-Ups*, a spoof of contemporary family life.22 As many of such Jewish community theaters, most of them members of the National Council of Jewish Theaters, it can trace some of its roots to the once vibrant tradition of the Yiddish theater. A recent article on JET took pains to point out their roots and history:

It was seven years ago that a dedicated group of professional actors, lovers of the stage and committed community leaders discussed the possibility of adding a powerful tool to the battle to preserve Jewish continuity. This group was fully conscious of the magnitude of its objective — to serve as a bridge which would bring a community together, to establish a link between members of a society whose origins reflected the diverse countries from which they had come and to encourage an understanding of the Jewish component of their own lives. And so the Jewish Ensemble Theater (JET) was founded, providing the Jewish community — and the general community — with an artistic experience of the highest quality and an opportunity to explore the profound depths of the Jewish heritage, its contributions over the centuries to the development of modern mores and ideals, and to do so in English, which had become the Jewish *lingua franca* [rather than Yiddish] of the continent.23

By the standards of these descriptions and self-definitions, *Exile in Jerusalem* was clearly within the limits of JET’s envisioned repertoire. But it was also by all odds the most ambitious and daring of its

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21 See “JET’s Mission Statement” in [Program for] *Exile in Jerusalem*, [i.e. Feb. '93], p. 8
23 Ibid., p. 5
undertakings, all the more so against the background of the fiscal problems of the arts in America, problems that also affect JET. Nonetheless to an American audience largely attuned to Naturalistic plays it presented, in the words of Dinah Lynch, the director, a resurrection of expressionism: “As expressionism dominated Else’s poetry, so does this production of Exile, in line, form, and shape.”

To viewers accustomed to traditional Jewish women figures, Exile portrayed an utterly unconventional prototype.

What impelled JET to take such a risk? True, the American premiere of a recently translated Israeli play, with the author in attendance, “marks a milestone in our life as a theater” as Evelyn Orbach, the Artistic Director of JET put it. But in an interview with me of 10 March '96 she added other compelling motives. “Our director — incidentally not Jewish — and I knew nothing of this fascinating authentic poet and her struggle to survive through her works. When I first got hold of Motti’s script I read her poetry and became determined to make her known to an English-speaking audience. And as an actress I immediately saw the potential of playing a brilliant, sensitive, erratic, exotic and erotic woman. Lerner liked my interpretation of her; he approved of me as being younger, more earthy, more sexual than the previous stagings. He appreciated my catching the admixture of deep religious feelings and worldliness, of turmoil and strength, of being somewhat meshugah and inspired. I knew I wanted to play her the moment I read the script.”

The reviews following opening night contradicted each other. Lawrence DeVine, who had written the superb interview with Lerner and a glowing preview of the performance for the Detroit Free Press, found flaws on opening night and particularly criticized the decision to have the two-person cast speak with German accents. “Staging blunts poetry of Exile in Jerusalem” was his sub-heading. Barbara

24 Dinah Lynch, “Director’s Notes” in [Program for] Exile in Jerusalem, [i.e. Feb. '93], p. 3
25 Evelyn Orbach, “Artistic Director's Notes.” in [Program for] Exile in Jerusalem, [i.e. Feb. '93], p. 3
26 See Lawrence DeVine, “Misplaced Accent. Staging blunts poetry of Exile in Jerusalem”, in Detroit Free Press, 1 March '93, p. 3E
Michals, writing for a widely read suburban paper, praised the performance, but found fault with the play: "The actors surpass their material; the play has a message well worth telling, but its unrelieved intensity eventually becomes tedious". Yet it speaks for JET and this particular performance that all area newspapers reviewed it and that, moreover, all recognized the drama’s multiple levels. As Kenneth Jones, the reviewer for the Detroit News, put it in his report, this one totally laudatory:

Lerner’s goal is to document an artist’s struggle to regain her creative voice in a maddening personal and historical period ... Lerner’s refugee play is as much about emotional, spiritual and artistic exile as it is about being physically stranded. The play is ripe with subtext and motivation.

Equally telling are Evelyn Orbach’s observations on the reaction of the audience: “Yes, we made some converts when showing yet another color in the spectrum of Jewish personalities. But some influential people were shocked; some elderly women walked out.”

Previous to its Detroit American premiere of 1993 Exile in Jerusalem was staged at the Habima Theatre in Jerusalem and in 1992 in the Studio Space of the Royal National Theatre in London. And subsequent to Detroit it was given a reading at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York and was reviewed for Hadoar, a bi-weekly Hebrew journal published in New York by the eminent Harvard Germanist Dorrit Cohn. Cohn called it a “sensitive and touching play”. Finally it was performed by no less an American actress

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27 Barbara Michals, “Strong Cast in Powerful Drama” in Birmingham Eccentric, 4 March ’93, Entertainment Section, p. 1
28 Kenneth Jones, “JET’s ‘Exile’ of a poet is a soul-burning experience”, The Detroit News, 2 March ’93, p. 8D.
29 Our interview took place at Director Orbach’s office, housed in the Jewish Community Center of West Bloomfield, Michigan.
30 An announcement of “A Festival of New Israeli Play Readings in English [at the Joseph Papp Public Theater]”, scheduled for March 6, 1996, is part of the (sparse) Motti Lerner file at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Also see Dorrit Cohn “An Israeli Theater Festival in New York”, in Hadoar, 14 March 96, p. 23. The article was called to my attention by my colleague Edith Covensky (Wayne State University) who also kindly furnished me with a translation of the Hebrew text, including its title.
than Julie Harris at the Williamstown, Massachusetts Playhouse.\footnote{As stated in a brief announcement in the Motti Lerner file [see fn. 30]} But those performances and reviews belong into the mainstream of drama and theater history; they are decidedly not beyond the mainstream and that is a story for another context.
The ‘undersea kingdom’ of Gregory Motton

Gregory Motton is a thirty-five-year-old English playwright and a provocative new voice. His plays were written and produced between 1987 and 1995. In England, they were premiered in such off-West End venues as Riverside Studios, The Bush Theatre, The Royal Court Upstairs, BAC (Battersea Arts Centre).

The contents of Motton’s plays are just as baffling as the titles are intriguing. *Chicken* (1987), *Ambulance* (1987), *Downfall* (1988), *Looking at You (Revived) Again* (1989), *A Message for the Broken-Hearted* (1993), *The Terrible Voice of Satan* (1993) have caught the attention of audiences and critics, never leaving anyone indifferent. *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)* was first performed at the Théâtre National de l’Odéon in Paris in 1995. Gregory Motton has taken France by storm with all his plays, obviously filling a gap with his captivating unconventional style. His works have been translated into French, Danish, Hungarian and Finnish. He seems to have captured an enthusiastic audience everywhere.

If such a concept as the ‘mainstream’ exists, Motton is way beyond it. Gregory Motton has chosen to inhabit uncharted waters “beyond the mainstream” literally and figuratively. Indeed, he has developed his own individual dramatic style, based on a distinctive poetic idiom. The sea is one of his most frequent metaphors. The reader/spectator is taken on a visionary initiation voyage to a sleazy “undersea kingdom”, but whether Motton’s individual current is a ripple or an undertow remains to be seen.

1. The underworld

The plays are stylized and non-naturalistic, yet highly suggestive of a squalid urban underworld. *Chicken*, described as “deliciously original
and touchingly funny”\(^1\), takes place in an abandoned working men’s café, where a slop bucket and rubbish are seen lying about. In *Ambulance*, “a swirling urban nightmare”\(^2\), the pavement outside a launderette — the icon of city life — is cluttered with bundles and cardboard boxes. The much criticized *Message for the Broken-Hearted*\(^3\) takes place in various nondescript locations. In all the plays, the de-naturalization of time and space is made possible by a flimsy narrative line and an elusive dramatic pattern. The plays are built on short sequences, on surreal glimpses, where the action proper is hard to focalize. *Downfall*,\(^4\) an extreme example of fragmented action, is made of fifty-six short scenes, randomly juxtaposed like a pack of cards. The overall emotional impact of the sequences is cumulative.

Linear time is obliterated and history seems to go backwards in the “undersea kingdom”. *Looking at You (Revived) Again*\(^5\) shuttles back and forth in space and time, from past to present, from Ireland to England and back, outside an invisible house, or on a balcony. *Downfall* adds linguistic playfulness, by suggesting a place between “Arsenal” and the world across the sea: “from Arsenal to Guatemala”\(^6\). In *The Terrible Voice of Satan* the action alternates between the Irish soil and an imaginary “undersea kingdom.” *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)* switches from a greengrocer’s shop to the palace of Gengis Kahn and again back to “the undersea kingdom.” In terms of

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\(^1\) Giles Gordon, *London Daily News*, 13 April 1987. The play was first performed at Riverside Studios in 1987.


\(^3\) Battersea Arts Centre, May 1993. “A perverse elliptical and embarrassing play about parturition. [...] It is at once stark and slapdash” says Michael Coveney in *The Observer* of 16 May.


\(^6\) London: Methuen, 1989, p. 12. Special thanks to Werner Huber for his eye-opening interpretation of Arsenal as a reference to the football team. ‘Arsenal’ carried warfare connotations for me. Werner’s idea is more likely.
time and space, much is left to the spectator’s imagination.

Motton’s plays convey a sense of universal suffering, physical and spiritual. In the “undersea kingdom”, the only sound and fury to be heard comes from flayed human beings. Sick and broken bodies haunt the underworld. In Ambulance, characters walk on crutches or have a limp, like Abe in Looking at You (Revived) Again. Tom Doheny, the Irishman of The Terrible Voice of Satan, shares the same fate, with his wife Nellie, who is seen cutting her foot with a piece of broken glass and has to be taken around in a wheelbarrow, like Tom when he is old, at the end. In the same play, a child goes through an epileptic fit. In Ambulance, Ellis jumps out of the window and breaks her legs. In scene fifty-five of Downfall someone pretends he is a cripple. He finds it comfortable and safe, for cripples do not get mugged quite so often.

A Message for the Broken-Hearted is a painful love story between a man and two women. Each protagonist of this not quite conventional triangle is slightly deranged in their mind, particularly the man, Mickey, irresponsible yet haunted by the permanent desire to procreate. The wife, Linda, is seen by her own father as being neither “normal” nor “healthy”.7 Suggestions of incest also run through the play. Jenine, the “other woman”, suffers so badly from being neglected that she is reduced to washing her heart, like a piece of meat (literally), in a stream. All characters are described with sympathy, but a tinge of irony makes sure a proper sense of distance is maintained all along.

Emotional cripples are dispossessed of their homes, of their families, of their bodies, of their sense of identity. Individual history is wiped out. A sort of entropic stasis paralyzes whatever humanity is left on the face of the earth. There is no recognizable social structure, no technology, no progress in Gregory Motton’s dramatic world. The characters have no social roles to play. No models to follow. No social pattern applies to the underworld. We meet a couple of ambulance people in Ambulance, a jazz musician in Chicken, a grocer in Cat and Mouse (Sheep); a magician as well as a terrorist in The

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Terrible Voice of Satan, which offers also a Catholic priest who dances very tightly with Tom’s wife, obviously an iconoclastic Bunuel type of priest presented with “doctrinal hesitations”.  

Family connections are loose and replaced by a sense of togetherness, the need to belong, the tribal instinct. Fatherhood or motherhood is a major preoccupation. In Ambulance, Ellis is obsessed by the child she says she lost twenty years before. In that same play an infant is found dead in a cardboard box. Human beings experience raw emotions and look for animal-like warmth. The primitive underworld is haunted by animals, like Macbeth’s diseased imagination: a magic bird, human spiders in The Terrible Voice of Satan, rats, dead chickens and a turtle coming from under the icy sea. Networks of related images run through the plays like an invisible umbilical cord. The characters express their obsessions in fantasies. Fantasizing is an organic necessity and a predominant activity. Storytelling is the main action. The stories are outrageous fables, told with sympathy and a wry sense of humour.

2. Fables

The Terrible Voice of Satan starts with a Shakespearian prologue. A man at a urinal announces the story of Tom Doheny, who came on a boat from across the Irish Sea. He is supposed to be either a plain Irishman or the devil. In the course of his lifetime he meets a priest, a woman in white and a magic bird. He has to face his parents’ death, the diseases of the world, a child going through an epileptic trance, as well as his own death. A woman announces herself as the Magic Bird, who cures all ills. At one point, they all tumble into what is called a “hole” in the stage directions, vaguely reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland, or of the grave-digging scene in Hamlet. Tom is given a Kalashnikov and turns into a revolutionary. He is taken to court and

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told by the usher that “the undersea kingdom” is awaiting him. After his hanging, he speaks from beyond death, from the “undersea kingdom.” In the mythical undersea world, he meets the undersea emperor and the Dry Man. Lurid visions of a heavy sea, a green ocean and foamy waves come over Tom’s imagination. Yet, the solemn tone is not sustained for very long. It is facetiously undercut by Motton’s zany sense of humour:

DRY MAN: You madman! You liar! You’ve drunk my undersea kingdom dry!

TOM: Puny liquor it is too. And me almost a tee-totaller.

Tom speaks of the “waves” of his “unconscious”, which the priest analyzes as his fear of his wife’s “well of emotion”. Tom fights against the undersea emperor and sees himself as “a herring floating headless on its back, this way and that on the ocean’s tides…. At the end of the play, Nellie, his wife, is the Magic bird, who turns into a magician and makes everyone vanish.

Looking at You (Revived) Again carries the same nightmarish quality. A man called Abe is telling a story, perhaps his own. He is on a road with a girl, called Peragrin’s Daughter, who could well be his daughter, although no information is given about their exact kinship. Abe tells us the story of an Irishman. He resorts to vivid direct speech, with dialogues interpolated within the dialogue, between Abe and himself or between himself and Peragrin’s daughter. We understand that he is probably telling his own story, how he was led to abandon his family in complete destitution. Poetic evocations introduce a tale of guilt and deception, with Abe at sea on board a ship. The intertextual reference to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner points to a nostalgic return to the romantic roots of postmodernism.

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10 Ibid, p. 42.
11 Ibid, p. 46.
13 Ibid, p. 49
14 The name ‘Peragrin’ can also be found in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings.
Also, possibly, to a nostalgic journey back to a primeval state of innocence.

Echoes of the sea metaphor can be found in all the organic fluids that are either seen or suggested in the “undersea kingdom.” “There’s blood between us” says Miss Julie to Jean, in Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, which Gregory Motton has re-translated. Variations on the blood image and on lavatorial obsessions run through the plays, often combined with vomit, snot or mud, as is the case in *Ambulance*, or with what is referred to as “liquid shit” in *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)*. In *Looking at You*, Peragrin’s Daughter wets herself almost permanently. It might well be a haemorrhage or possibly a miscarriage, unless it is all happening in her mind. It is difficult to say whether the foetus she says she is carrying in her suitcase is real or imaginary. In *Ambulance* and in *The Terrible Voice of Satan* the Dry Man has froth on the corner of his mouth and forces Tom to lick it. The Dry Man is also described as “a piss-soaked cripple”. Nellie sings “deep red sea, deep red sea” while sitting “astride” the priest. Her face and clothes are covered with blood after she has been slapped for being too intimate with the priest. All traces of violence are always immediately toned down and subverted by Motton’s deliberate travestying of serious themes. Milk, beer and blood, as well as other body fluids mingle in the icy sea, the communal amniotic liquid, the too obvious life symbol, where everyone is dissolved and born again.

An organic link is thus being re-invented for the members of the tribe. Motton tells us fables of death and rebirth, as well as a story of origins. The cat and mouse question of origins is amusingly raised in *Chicken* with the never-ending quest for chickens and eggs. Who comes first? The chicken or the egg? Stanley Webber was bludgeoned with that particular question in the interrogation scene of Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*. What has probably led a critic to describe Motton as “a sparkling urban surreal poet owing something to Pinter and to

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18 *Ibid*, p. 28.
The 'undersea kingdom' of Gregory Motton

Heathcote Williams’s *The Local Stigmatic*, as well as to the lyricism of Jacques Prévert" has obviously much to do with his absurdist treatment of philosophical questions. In the “undersea kingdom”, intertextual games are inseparable from the farcical and make the sense of doom bearable.

3. Ripple or undertow?

Time has now come for an assessment. How far beyond the mainstream does Motton push the boundaries of the predictable? Not quite politically correct, Gregory Motton goes anticlockwise and bypasses all familiar discourses, whether absurdist or naturalistic. Paying no lip-service to the orthodox anti-establishment tradition, whether it be “angry”, “radical”, “political” or “catastrophist”, Motton steers a different course altogether. Critics in search of a reference tend to pigeon-hole him in an unsatisfactory way. “Motton wants to become the Howard Barker of the under-35s”, claims Paul Taylor in *The Independent*, obviously looking for a safe comparison, but getting it all wrong. Indeed, if taken seriously, any intertextual sign is doomed to peter out in a quagmire of irrelevance. Motton’s fables have more to do with King Ubu than with a clear picture of what the world should be or should not be. His poetic idiom and zany humour are not conducive to any fixed dramatic form. Nor are they signalling any ready-made ideology. Furthermore, his iconoclastic irony creates a sense of distance, which precludes the making of myths. Distance and myth are mutually exclusive. Motton’s drama serves no myth, or better still, it undermines them all.

Critics have rightly spotted a Swiftian flavour in his plays. Jonathan Swift is indeed one of the influences Motton acknowledges. “This

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20 13 May 1993 (Review of *A Message for the Broken-Hearted*).
21 The French press was unanimous about it. Motton confirms the Swiftian influence in an interview in *Le Figaro* of 4 April 1995.
is You-Know-Who’s Britain”, says Lyn Gardner, confirming the satirical spirit that dominates some of the plays. Yet, if the Swiftian touch applies to the clear anti-Thatcher bias of *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)*, one can say that on the whole Motton remains closer to Mervyn Peake’s eccentricity than to Swift’s articulate statements. If *Gormenghast* conceals more than it reveals, so does, in many ways, Gregory Motton. Indeed, the apparent symbolism of his plays is barely supportive of a broader vision. Symbols, like bubbles, tend to explode on the surface of the “undersea kingdom”.

The graphic quality of the plays turns them into visual events, into what a critic rightly described as “action painting”. Surreal juxtapositions bear the hallmark of Dada. But they can also be considered within the framework of “trash culture”, even “excremental culture”. Present-day aesthetics seem to recycle and foreground trash more forcefully than Pop Art did in the Sixties. An alienating and often unsettling trash culture is being produced, monitored and confronted head-on by those who produce it. Such is also the predominant dynamic of Motton’s dramatic art.

As Arthur Kroker and David Cook suggest in *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper Aesthetics*, there is “danger everywhere,” sited between “boredom and terror”, between “ecstasy and decay”, inscribed on “the text of the flesh”. If Motton’s drama marks a return to the organic, so does present-day culture. Piles of rubbish and excrements have been brought centre stage in recent London visual events. In those exhibitions each sequence is a disturbing interactive experience. Brian Eno, Laurie Anderson with “Self-Storage”, Bob Wilson and the “Clink Exhibition”, Gilbert and George in their “Naked Shit Pictures”, all play with our perception of space and time.

Gregory Motton’s dramatic art is made of the same mix of crude

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22 Lyn Gardner about *Chicken in City Limits*, 16 April 1987.


hyperrealism and jubilant fantasy. Juvenile scatology is part of the game. In *Cat and Mouse (Sheep)*, Auntie, a character of highly fluctuating gender despite his/her name, makes sculptures with dog excrement (like sandcastles). We are now very close to the world of *Trainspotting*, Irvine Welsh’s cult novel, play and film. Hanif Kureishi, Martin Amis are also possible references lurking behind the scenes of the Motton universe. In order to be confronted head-on, the fragments and ruins of the century have to be made humorous, resonant and slightly distasteful.

In Gregory Motton’s “undersea kingdom” our space and time are re-processed beyond recognition. Polarities are inverted. The world is unhinged and keels over. Section 55 of *Downfall* is entitled “Up in a hole, Down on a Hill”. A critic has aptly noted the “punkish swagger” of Motton’s “young voice of urban displacement and unlocated grief”. Chekhovian sorrow is resurfacing with other fragments of the literary heritage, alongside Joycean monologues, modernist collage and cartoon-strip playfulness.

Simultaneously and paradoxically, Gregory Motton is also moving away from the postmodern concept of the empty subject. In his plays, reality is made of essential basic needs, not of codes and images. A definite emphasis is laid on individual subjectivity. The impenetrable self is fully restored as a nexus of creative organic forces. It is therefore possible to say that Gregory Motton pushes the boundaries inwards. Such is the power of the undertow, far beyond the mainstream, way below sea-level, down in the labyrinth of the human psyche where the past has a future.

Although difficult to pinpoint, Gregory Motton is definitely committed to emotion and imagination. His taste for the bizarre qualifies him for the kingdom far beyond the mainstream, for that part of the kingdom that will for ever resist any attempt at correctness. Each ripple on the surface of the void is a potential undertow. Motton is both: a whimper and a bang.

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Beyond Categories (Redefining ‘mainstream’)

To discuss what’s ‘beyond the mainstream’, we first have to decide what we mean by ‘mainstream’. Is it matter of bricks and mortar — the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, or the West End and Broadway? Or is it defined by type of spectator — large audiences, or those looking for cultural affirmation and entertainment versus small artistically or politically motivated coteries? Alternatively, we might look on certain types of play and production as ‘mainstream’ — say, naturalistic revivals of Oscar Wilde, historically accurate performances of Shakespeare, all mega-musicals, or anything by Neil Simon? All of those definitions carry derogatory connotations: establishment theatre, traditional, conservative, conventional — what Peter Brook labelled “deadly theatre”. Indeed, in itself a title like “beyond the mainstream” implies that renewal has to come from outside. This may have been an accurate assumption when Osborne wrote *Look Back in Anger* in the 50s, but how true is it today?

‘Mainstream’ has become a very elastic concept, and the pace of change has accelerated over the last decade. What counts as “beyond the mainstream”? Feminist drama? Gay and Lesbian theatre? Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker appear on Broadway and in the West End, even a ‘way out’ piece like *The Skriker* was staged by the National, and is currently (1996) running at Joe Papp’s Public Theatre in New York, while explicitly gay plays proliferate everywhere and win Pulitzer, Tony or Evening Standard awards. Indeed AIDS drama is now a well-established critical category.

What about Black theatre? With an almost exclusively white theatre establishment, surely that counts as ‘beyond the mainstream’? Yet the Black experience has long reached centre-stage in North America; and even Adrienne Kennedy’s fragmented-expressionistic radical Black-feminist plays are treated with the same critical respect as Albee or Mamet. Could anything be further from the mainstream than ‘autistic
theatre'? Yet Robert Wilson's early chamber pieces like *Golden Windows* or *Letter to Queen Victoria* were greeted as major theatrical events; and he has since been invited to impose his unique directorial style on the most prestigious international stages. Even text-based theatre is no longer a dividing line, since groups like the Théâtre de complicité have appeared on West End stages and Simon MacBurney has been invited to direct for the National Theatre.¹

It might be easy to assume that all these artists have simply been subsumed — that once they move into the mainstream they adopt conservative, traditionalist values, while the theatre 'outside' retains its distance. But this is clearly not accurate. Robert Wilson's art may have developed in complexity and sophistication, but his approach remains exactly the same as in his earlier work. Much the same is true of, say, Sam Shepard, whose work was once synonymous with the most extreme experimental performance. In fact, it could be argued that what was once 'beyond' or 'outside' the 'mainstream', and defined itself by opposition to any establishment culture, has increasingly taken over the centre, to the extent that there's no longer any significant difference.

Over the last decade, the theatrical mainstream has come to incorporate 'alternative' acting methods, unconventional styles of production, and new dramatic material. As a consequence, 'fringe' artists move into the 'mainstream' without compromising their principles. Experimental performances take place, alongside more conventional work, in the bastions of official culture like the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre, even on the commercial stages of London's West End. And one of the most striking instances of this symbiosis is Robert Lepage, a young Canadian from Quebec, whose first production appeared only just over

¹ For example, Théâtre de complicité's *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* not only played a West End season in 1995, but won drama prizes, while other pieces were staged at the National Theatre (*The Visit, Street of Crocodiles*) where McBurney will be directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1997.
10 years ago, in 1983.2 Lepage is, almost by definition, ‘beyond’ the English-language mainstream, since he works primarily in French, though all his pieces are also performed in English; and his career offers a prime example of this integration of ‘mainstream’ and avant-garde.

Lepage has been frequently compared to both Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, leading avant-garde figures, who have long occupied a central position in mainstream theatre. Like Brook, his aim is to evolve a radically non-traditional form of theatre, and he too has founded his own theatre company (which includes members of the ‘fringe’ group with whom he staged his first pieces). The connections with Wilson are even closer. Wilson’s theatre was hailed by the Surrealists as fulfilling their ideals: Lepage has used Surrealists as figures in his work, and acknowledges the influence of European Surrealism. And when Lepage was developing his most recent piece, he discovered that Wilson was working on exactly the same material. According to Lepage:

In the spring of 1994... Bob Wilson told me he was preparing a show based on Hamlet, which would take the form of a monologue that he would interpret himself. A few hours later, I informed my collaborators that we would have to abandon the project of Elsinore, a new solo show based on themes from Hamlet on which we had already started to work.3

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2 The major events of Lepage’s career to date are:
1981 begins acting career with THÉÂTRE REPÉRE (Montreal)
1983 Circulations
1984 Vinci (One-man show)
1986 The Dragon’s Trilogy
1987 The Dragon’s Trilogy
becomes Artistic Director of THÉÂTRE REPÉRE
1989 Tectonic Plates
1991 Needles and Opium (One-man show)
1993 Erwartung (Schönberg) & Blaubart (Bartok)
1994 Midsummer Night’s Dream (Shakespeare) RSC
1995 founds EX MACHINA Theatre Company
The Seven Streams of the River Ota
Confessional (FILM)
1996 Elsinore (One-man show — after Shakespeare)
(Unless otherwise noted, all scripts are by Lepage.)

As this example shows, Lepage's work may indeed overlap Wilson's — but he is concerned to define his own path; and in fact Lepage's work is very different. Where Wilson's art tends to stasis, Lepage is acrobatic and kinetic. The contrast can be summed up by comparing one particular image. In Wilson's *Quartet* there is a scene in which a male figure hangs almost motionless upside down, suspended by a rope round one ankle, gradually revolving as a woman pushed — very, very slowly — at one outstretched arm. By contrast in Lepage's London production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* a female Puck, also upside down on a rope, whirléd and twisted in a flashing contortion of movement and circus tricks (so energetic indeed that she actually severed a thumb in an accident during one performance). The difference between Lepage's work and Peter Brook's is even greater. Where Brook is primitivist, searching for a universal, pre-cultural form of theatrical expression, Lepage's trademark is the use of highly contemporary, cutting-edge technology in his performances.

Like Brook and Wilson, by most accepted criteria Lepage's work is indeed 'mainstream'. It has been performed at the Edinburgh Festival, at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin, on Broadway as well as in the Lincoln Centre at New York, and in Tokyo officially supported by the Japanese government, in addition to Theatre Festivals at Toronto and Montreal. Lepage has appeared at the National Theatre in London, and has directed productions at the RSC and for the Canadian Opera. He was even offered the position of Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre theatre in Ottawa. And in fact, almost all his work requires the elaborate production resources that are only available in mainstream theatres.

From Lepage's viewpoint, Peter Brook and Robert Wilson represent the old-guard, the out-dated 'mainstream' that his new form of theatre is intended to supersede. And indeed some of Lepage's performances have been literally 'outside' the standard theatre: for instance a 1987 *Romeo and Juliette*. Lepage staged this in the middle of the trans-Canada highway (one stretch of the road was closed for the performance) and the actors used cars and trucks as (moving) platforms. To add to the unconventional nature of the piece, the two cultures of Canada were represented by having the Montagues speak
Beyond Categories (Redefining ‘mainstream’)  

their line in English, while all the text for the Capulets was in French. In general the scale of Lepage’s work also transgresses standard theatrical expectations: instead of two-to-three hour performances with the standard number of actors, he switches between highly personal one-man ‘chamber pieces’, and mammoth (7-hour, 9-hour) productions. And most are also multi-lingual (including at times up to 6 different languages). In short, Lepage does not fit any normative definitions of ‘mainstream theatre’. Even the standard hierarchies don’t apply, since he is a theatrical auteur, combining the functions of director, dramatist, designer, lighting-engineer, and actor. Indeed Lepage is consciously attempting to reshape the whole theatrical experience. He has spoken of being very much aware that we are at the end of the millenium and the close of an era; and on the surface his work presents an audio-visual collage of apparently disconnected images, which deconstructs conventional representations of reality: a deconstructionism that aligns his approach with literary Post-modernism. At the same time on a deeper level, his aim has been to reintegrate the fragmented experience of Modernist cultural dislocation into new forms of meaning.

Perhaps the most striking quality of contemporary life is its rapidity: the sheer pace of cultural and scientific change, transcontinental travel and instantaneous communication — and high-speed movement is a central image in several Lepage pieces. Airplane flights are physically evoked in The Dragons’ Trilogy, Needles and Opium and Vinci. Railway trains appear in Vinci, The Dragons’ Trilogy and Tectonic Plates. Cars functioned as performance-areas in his Romeo and Juliette where the Trans-Canada highway served as both setting and controlling image. A road-map provided the structure for his first piece, Circulations, in 1983, while the programme for Vinci listed its scenes as an “Itinerary”. For Lepage, movement is both an action and

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4 For instance, Lepage commented that Bluebeard and Erwartung were “two operas at the end of the century. When they were written it was the end of the rule of kings. Now it’s the end of totalitarianism and communism. In many ways, it’s the same.” Interview with Simi Horwitz, Theaterweek, 15 Mar 1993, p.15
a metaphor: “My shows are usually about travelling, about culture clusters,” Lepage has said, and

If you want to know how a culture thinks, look at maps of cities. New York’s map is made up of a series of squares. The streets of Paris, on the other hand, form winding spokes.⁵

The geography is psychological, and each journey through space is also simultaneously a move through time (decades and generations in *The Dragons’ Trilogy* and *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, centuries and continents in *Tectonic Plates*). It is also always a voyage into the depths of the self.

At times this psychological focus becomes programmatic, as with Lepage’s direct dramatization of the subconscious in his production of two operas by Bartok and Schönberg. Emphasizing the connection with Freud, whose first psychological studies coincided with their original performances, Lepage described his aim in Schönberg’s *Erwartung* as “trying to treat it in a... hyper-realistic way, trying to get inside the woman’s id, as if it were a close-up of what’s inside the singer.” But more usually this subconscious level is the revelation of autobiographical resonance in exploring a broad cultural context. (The title of Lepage’s recent award-winning film, *Confessional*, could also be applied to his theatre.)

The best example of the way this works is his one-man show, *Needles and Opium*, first performed in 1991, which sets up parallels between drug-addiction, psychological obsession and art. The figures of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau, caught at a moment in 1949 when each visited the other’s country, are linked through Lepage’s own personal experience forty years later of making frantic transatlantic telephone calls from a Paris hotel to an estranged lover who never answers. On the surface placing the American jazz-trumpeter and the French surrealist poet together is an image of disjunction and displacement; and this sense of separation — of things falling apart — is intensified by the figure of the young Quebecker who literally

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⁵ Lepage, cit. Nigel Hunt, *TDR* 33 No 2 (Summer 1989), p.115 & Horwitz, p.16
cannot connect at all. Miles Davis was on his way to Paris, where he fell hopelessly in love with Juliette Greco and then spiralled into self-destructive heroin abuse. At exactly the same time Cocteau was flying to New York, high on opium and mourning the death of his lover (the novelist Raymond Radiguet) while writing Lettre aux Americains. Each is moving in the opposite direction — while Lepage’s alter-ego (named Robert, which of course is Lepage’s own name) is cut off in his hotel room, as well as suffering from the disorienting effects of hypnosis therapy. Yet underlying this geographical and psychological fragmentation is a net of coincidental correspondences. Cocteau made a film with Juliette Greco immediately after her relationship with Miles Davis broke up; both Cocteau and Davis were high on derivatives of the same drug; and the art of each changed in response to meeting an alien society for the first time; while their music and poetry are integrated in the cultural context of the present. As Lepage put it:

It’s important to see all these old European surrealist roots and newer things like jazz and black culture that’s actually embedded in everything [now].

This cross-cultural focus is one of the defining elements in Lepage’s work, which is also trans-generational. Typically, his pieces combine the experience of people from completely different eras as well as widely separated countries — for instance, Chinatowns in Quebec, Toronto and Vancouver during the period from 1910 to 1986 in The Dragons’ Trilogy. Or take one of his most recent pieces, Seven Streams of the River Ota, where the life of a disfigured woman, one of the survivors of Hiroshima, is intertwined with that of a Jewish photographer, whom we first meet as a young girl in one of the Nazi death camps (where she survives through a conjuring trick she has learnt from a magician). The Japanese woman has a son by an American serviceman — new life arising from the ashes — and in the 1960s the son befriends a young Quebecker in New York, where both are living in an artists’ commune. Then in the 1980s, when he catches

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AIDS, the son holds a suicide-party in Amsterdam, which brings his artist-friends together again. Forming a theatre-company, they go on a tour of Japan (sponsored by the Canadian government), and in present-day Hiroshima the Quebecker meets the photographer (who now lives in the house of his dead friend’s Japanese mother). The Jewish photographer, who has taken on the outlook of the dead Japanese woman, gives a radio-interview about her memories; and the play ends with all the characters reunited for the 50th Anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, where the Jewish photographer presides over a ceremony of casting ashes on the water. This is a chronological transcription of the narrative: in performance, however, the sequences are arranged in a non-linear order, switching time-frames back and forwards, so that Nazi death-camps, atomic warfare and the modern plague of AIDS are paralleled. And the fusion of experiences signifies that different worlds are being forced together in a late-20th century equivalent of nuclear fission, out of which reconciliation and new life can emerge.

Extending this cross-cultural basis, Lepage also combines anything from two to five, or even six different languages in a single show — not only French and English, but Chinese, German, Italian, Catalan and Japanese. The effect is to give speech a physical, objectified texture, emphasizing musicality by removing linguistic meaning. However, as Lepage has underlined: this is also specifically “in reaction against a word-culture.” The weight of communicating is thrown onto the non-verbal language of action, requiring imaginative participation by the audience to piece together a holistic interpretation. Lepage’s definition of his linguistic technique is,

> I have an idea, I say it in a language people don’t understand so they’re interested to know what it’s all about. So I say it again, but in another language they don’t understand... It’s very active. It’s like saying the same thing over and over again, but with different images. People associate words and senses and objects and imagery. ⑧

Such a technique produces a radically non-linear structure. Lepage’s

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narratives are designed to draw spectators into the creative process. But they are also intended to destabilize and supplant conventional modes of thinking. The first scene of Lepage’s “Itinerary” in Vinci is titled “Decollage” (in French: point of departure, but also colloquially ‘coming unstuck’); and the “journeys” his audiences undertake in his shows are multi-media montages where the action is aligned with cinematic principles, specifically mirroring a contemporary mind-set.

Since today’s society has a film education, Lepage insists theatre must “use the capacity of an audience to read things in fast-forward, jump cuts… People have a new language, and it’s not all linear.” In Needles and Opium there are two moments that together could stand as an emblem for this approach. In the first Lepage appears to be in free-fall, suspended on wires and revolving vertiginously against a disorienting spinning disk: destabilization. The second is when Lepage reenacts the famous photo in Life magazine where Cocteau appeared with multiple arms, each holding a different object: reintegration. And that Cocteau image highlights another aspect of Lepage’s structure: the use of cross-media intertextuality. Reviewers noted cinematic cliches in the surreal vision of Schönberg’s Erwartung. Seven Streams of the River Ota plays off Alain Resnais’ film Hiroshima Mon Amour. Tectonic Plates specifically evoked both Delacroix’s paintings and the novels of George Sand, as well as Hamlet.

The essence of Lepage’s cinematic structure is complex interconnections, which require rapid mental activity for the spectators to synthesize them; and the characteristic quality of his work is speed. The text of Vinci announced:

imagination allows you to soar to liberating heights and, in the final analysis, the difference between flight and the force of gravity is simply a question of speed.¹⁰

And the final moment of the play is an image of Lepage, outfitted in Leonardo’s wings, jumping off a cliff to reappear behind a screen as a shadow that rises out of sight in a soaring illusion of transcendence.

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As with all his work, the appeal here was entirely to the audience’s imagination: there was no attempt to imitate actual flying.

This focus on imagination explains the centrality of objects in Lepage’s work: objects being the ‘Resources’ to which the first syllable in the name of Lepage’s Théâtre Repère refers. (‘Repère’ is an acronym for REsource, Participation, Evaluation, REpresentation.) The point is that very ordinary objects — such as children’s shoes in The Dragons’ Trilogy — undergo continual transformation in performance. Take the simple iron bedstead, which served as both the setting and the dominant stage-prop in Midsummer Night’s Dream: with the stage covered ankle-deep in thick, gooey mud, this bed became successively an island of civilization in the muddy sea of sexuality, a boat, Titania’s bower and the bush under which the lovers fall asleep, the stage on which “Pyramus and Thisbe” is performed, and a marriage couch. In place of mimetic realism Lepage presents what might be called ‘virtual’ reality; and this computer-analogy is not coincidental.

Though Lepage sometimes conjures up imaginative effects from the simplest of objects on a bare stage, most of his work is highly technological. Needles and Opium, for instance, surrounds the live actor with trompe-l’oeil, shadow play, documentary and doctored film footage, projection, voice-over and strobe lights, as well as presenting recorded music as a character (Miles Davis’ trumpet) in interplay with spoken dialogue. The significant factor here is that all this comes from the modern media, rather than mechanization: no lifts, revolving stages or mechanized scenery, which mark the industrialization of theatre at the end of the nineteenth century, and would represent a technological throwback. By contrast, the context of Lepage’s later performance-art is the high-tech world of rock-videos and the internet. Indeed according to Lepage, it was seeing a Genesis concert in Montreal at the age of fifteen that first interested him in staging; and one of his recent productions has been a rock-show for Genesis. In fact the name of his new Quebec theatre company, Ex Machina, puts technology front and centre: specifically the cutting-edge ‘interactive technology’ of Softimage computer animation, CD Rom and 3-D TV. The aim of Ex Machina is to explore new ways of devising pieces by
bringing creative technicians, including video artists, computer programmers and sound engineers, together with actors, musicians and stage directors; and Lepage envisages “virtual rehearsals” that would link his theatre-company in Quebec with artists “in Barcelona and in Toronto, live by satellite, in real time... The whole goal is to find a way for art to be on the internet.”

In fact, the dominant subject of Lepage’s work has been art itself. This corresponds to the self-reflexivity that has become one of the defining marks of Post-modernism. But Lepage has turned it into a continual interrogation of artistic form and function. From his earliest one-man show, Vinci, where the actor announces that “the plot follows the creative evolution of a visual artist” and the slogan of “Art is a Vehicle” appears as a toy train circles the screen, to the seven distinct styles of theatre (including Brecht and the Wooster group, as well as Feydeau-style farce and Naturalism) in which The Seven Streams of the River Ota is acted out, the focus is on defining art and exploring the way performance communicates. In Vinci, the narrator (played by Lepage) — who introduces himself as a constructed character “played by an immensely talented actor” — states: “At the outset, the cars of a sentence, like those of a train, are empty. They must be loaded with meaning.” He goes on to compare this type of communication to the sub-titles of a silent film; and he concludes that since “art also serves the function of casting light on the chaos of our society, it is to a certain extent a SUB-TITLE.” That speech has turned out to be programmatic for Lepage’s career as a whole.

Lepage’s progress has been an on-going search for the kinds of meaning that will both reflect and express contemporary consciousness. And a central aspect of this is the deliberately unfixed quality of his work: performance as process. Only one of his texts has been published, stage photos are restricted, and each theatre-piece exists in a state of constant evolution and re-evaluation. The Dragons’ Trilogy expanded from a 90 minute performance in 1985, to a 3-hour version in 1986, ending up as a 6-hour piece in 1987. There are two

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completely distinct scripts for both *Vinci* and *Needles and Opium*. With major changes in the cast as well as the cultural context for its three separate productions, performances of *Tectonic Plates* altered radically from Montreal to New York to Glasgow, mirroring the content of the show, which Lepage summed up as being “about expanding and contracting.” The 7-hour (but still incomplete) *Seven Streams of the River Ota* is explicitly labelled “a work in progress.”

This exclusive stress on process, and the deliberate avoidance of reproducibility would seem to be as far away from usual ‘mainstream’ standards as it’s possible to go. However, the technical complexities of Lepage’s productions alone require the resources of mainstream or festival stages; and his most recent work *Elsinore* (eventually developed despite the parallel to Robert Wilson, and first performed in Paris) epitomizes the cross-over between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’.

Few English-language texts could be as canonical as *Hamlet*, and Lepage performs almost the complete text. All the major speeches retain their integrity, though some scenes are transposed, the figure of Fortinbras is cut, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reduced (appropriately enough) to two pairs of empty shoes. Yet, at the same time this is a one-man version, in which Lepage fills all the parts, including Hamlet’s mother and Ophelia — though for some scenes there is another non-speaking actor, made up as Lepage’s double. Thus, in the final duel, which takes place partly behind a centre-stage screen, there are two swordsmen, but Lepage always switches positions to appear as the character who speaks. The effect is to transfer *Hamlet* into a monodrama, but the technological complexity of the production distances it from Lepage himself, removing any autobiographical element.

For *Elsinore* Lepage uses three screens, which can fill the whole stage area, or move into different configurations, and onto which film can be projected. In the centre of the acting area stands a square frame, which revolves vertically like a great wheel — Gertrude’s bed

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when flat, a window or door when upright, a web in which all the characters are caught, with a throne suspended in its centre for Lepage as Claudius, or with white lace stretched across it, through which Lepage puts his arms and head to appear as Ophelia. Electronic music, composed on the spot during each performance, exactly matches rhythms to Lepage’s movements, while Lepage’s voice is reproduced simultaneously on different notes (deeper bass, or high treble) as he speaks, creating distorting echoes. Multiple video images, showing Lepage from different angles as he acts, fill the screens — and there are even miniature video cameras on the sword-points in the duel scene (so that the projected images sway and weave, swelling or retracting as the fencers move). As Lepage put it:

the technology available to me this time enabled me to ‘X-Ray’ certain passages of *Hamlet*, and while the action apparently only takes place in the protagonist’s head, it occasionally has the look of an electro-encephalogram. I also wanted — a bit like Delacroix, who would sometimes make over a dozen preliminary studies before executing a picture — to make a sketch, prior to one day creating the real painting.\(^\text{14}\)

As well as being an exploration of *Hamlet* as a classic, Lepage’s production is also a redefinition of what theatre is in the current post-modern context. And again what Lepage stresses is its provisional quality: performance as process. Directly comparable to, say, Marowitz’s “Collage Hamlet” in the 1960s, though defined by contemporary technology, *Elsinore* symbolises ‘alternative theatre’. Lepage’s work corresponds to all the qualities of Post-modernism — cross-cultural, self-referential, intertextual, deconstructionist, and emphasising process. Yet it plays in mainstream theatres to mainstream audiences. Perhaps one should suggest therefore that the real divide is *within* the mainstream itself: between plays or productions still based on nineteenth century principles, and post-modern contemporary work. Indeed, the example of Lepage might be said to call the concept of ‘mainstream’ as such into question.

\(^{14}\) Programme Note to *Elsinore*, 1995.
Revisiting *Top Girls*: Mainstreaming the Alternative

After local reaction in Essen to the Schauspielhaus 1995 production of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* turned out to be rather lukewarm, I felt that the play’s politically ambitious exploration of wide ranging critical ideas in a dramatically experimental mode did so at the cost of a coherent and clear sense of identifiable dramatic action. Furthermore, and most relevant to the central thematic orientation of the 1996 CDE conference *Beyond the Mainstream*, the play does represent the rapid death of an era. By the mid 1980’s, the innovative drama of the post 1956 movement was already starting to be displaced by commercially viable mainstream theatre.

The opening scene of *Top Girls* centres on a surrealistic dinner party held to celebrate the promotion of Marlene, the play’s Thatcherite meteoric career woman, to managing director of the aptly named *Top Girls* employment agency. Marlene surrealistically invites five prominent high achieving women from various cultures and historical epochs to a 1980’s style yuppie gathering. The five historical figures include Isabella Bird, an intrepid and childless Victorian world traveller, who remained tough and determined despite ill health and personal loss. She is followed by Lady Nijo, a Japanese medieval courtesan, whose total subjection to male power deprived her of children and led her to become an itinerant nun, who wandered through Japan on foot. Next to arrive is Dull Gret, a simple defiant peasant woman who has emerged from a Breughel painting after leading a female attack on Hell and all its demons. The four are then joined by Pope Joan, a legendary rather than proven historical phenomenon, who reputedly disguised herself as a boy in order to become Pope in the Ninth Century. She was said to have been exposed after she had given birth to a baby. The guest list is completed by the late arrival of Chaucer’s Patient Griselda, an icon of passivism and subordination to the medieval male hierarchies depicted
in *The Clerk's Tale*. After the long opening scene, the play reverts to conventional realism set in the early 1980's. The chronological structure of the realistic scenes is, however, of a non-linear nature. The final scene is set one year prior to Marlene's biological daughter Angie's visit to London. Angie's suspicion, that her 'Aunty Marlene' is in fact her mother, is aroused in the last scene. The ending of *Top Girls* thus provides a retrospective explanation of the relationships portrayed in the play up to that point. The realistically drawn scenes cover Marlene's career success, the practices of a ruthless employment agency aimed at promoting competitive women, and the conflicts of her own family background. The parallels with the surrealist opening scene are thematically central. The dislocated and emotionally impoverished historical figures shape-shift into the empty embodiments of a mode of feminist thinking, which embraces male competitiveness as a behavioural norm. Marlene herself has abandoned her retarded daughter Angie to the care of her working class anti-Thatcherite sister Joyce who, like Dull Gret and Griselda, has remained rooted in the relative poverty of her social origins, struggling to survive. Marlene shares with Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, and Lady Nijo the values associated with ambition, high social status, and elitism. Marlene's abandonment of her child is reflected in the various autobiographical representations of the dinner party quintet, who for various reasons have all been deprived of motherhood.

As the dictates of conventional historical master narratives have frequently come under attack from feminist and postmodernist critics as being a male oriented, positivist, historical representation, the long opening scene can be clearly located within the postmodern movement. Here, Churchill presents historical accounts as dislocated individual anecdotes, recounted within the familiar rivalry of a dinner party atmosphere. Any expectation that the figures may represent a cohesive challenge to class and gender biased historical narrative is quickly disappointed. They remain deprived of self-definition, and appear disjointed and tragi-comic rather than co-ordinated or historically challenging. Pope Joan, Nijo, and Isabella Bird all accept their positions within their respective social hierarchies. Griselda wholeheartedly accepts the
hierarchical conventions of her day, which require her totally passive subordination. Only Dull Gret is able, from her position of the downtrodden disposessed, to rise and challenge both demons and the more historically concrete Spanish invaders. Gret is the only figure not to have been defined by any form of written discourse. Churchill is able to bestow upon her the power of self-definition through protest. Gret shows no reverence for the forces which are out to destroy her community, and has nothing to lose by turning to violence in self-defense.

Whereas the first scene effectively deconstructs the assumptions of a stable historical discourse, the subsequent scenes represent, within the framework of realist theatre, a Marxist critique of American orientated feminism. The play thus combines two radically opposed theatrical approaches. Whatever the thematic link may be, staging such a complex intellectual exercise can be problematic. Audience expectations raised by each form are different. The opening scene represents highly parodic historical satire, taking its dramatic form from both the absurd and expressionist theatrical traditions. It presents two-dimensional tragi-comic figures from whom the audience, in the Brechtian sense, are alienated or historically distanced. The structural problem is the link to the subsequent sequences of cohesive fast running realism, culminating in the powerfully charged dialogue of the closing family scene. The realistic scenes, in stark contrast to the opening scene, are peopled with three-dimensional characters with whom the audience are able to identify emotionally.

The playwright thus deliberately employs structural genre switching, in a process which Christopher Innes has referred to as “a model of alternative ways of thinking”.¹

Many of the problems of audience reception to such radical attempts at formal hybridity centre on the tendency of each form of theatre to generate its own sets of expectations and associations. Mainstream audience responses tend to be built upon a certain cohesive dramatic build-up of sub-textual, as well as verbally mediated, associations. As

Caryl Churchill interrupts this process in order to shake up conventional expectations of theatrical form and thematic content, *Top Girls* falls within the sphere of experimental rather than mainstream theatre. Thus amongst those sections of the theatre-going public whose expectations are based on a clearly identifiable cohesion, the play has often generated a sense of disorientation, rather than any penetrating grasp of interconnecting themes.

It was the challenge of identifying and intensifying the dramatic expression of these thematic elements within a more conventionally cohesive structure that brought the Essen project into being. The resulting tightened-up and re-arranged version proved to be an enlightening experiment, which thus served to highlight the conventional distinctions between the mainstream and so-called alternative forms of theatre.

The Essen adaptation maintains the central thrust of Caryl Churchill’s political critique of gender definitions within historically specific socio-economic contexts. The drama course experiment centred on narrowing the dramatic focus, in line with the kind of strict guidelines propagated in most current professional script-writing courses. According to these increasingly dominant conventions, dramatic action should focus on empathic audience involvement with one central figure.

Commercial pressures on film, television, and stage producers has led to the pin-pointing of central factors that enable mass audiences to identify with the plot and action of any given performance. In this context, a comparison of *Top Girls* with one of Caryl Churchill’s early radio plays, *The Ants*, is very useful. Since the 1950’s conflicts between career interests and domesticity have remained, whereas gender politics have shifted. The frequently absent, career minded father figure of the 1950’s has been replaced in *Top Girls* by the career driven woman Marlene who, like her male predecessors, has neglected her family responsibilities. There are close thematic and emotional parallels between the aggression and confusion in the behaviour of Marlene’s abandoned daughter Angie in *Top Girls*, and the obsessive behaviour of the young boy Tim in *The Ants*, who watches the movements of ants on an ant-hill, as his parents’ troubled
marriage grinds towards marital breakdown. Tim is the victim of ambitious parents, whose conflicting egos have thrown his vulnerable emotional development into turmoil. As his parents confront him with the reality of their separation, his only response is a wish to escape. This wish is expressed to the ants in the ant-hill, as his grandfather is encouraging him to destroy them, by setting the ant-hill alight with petrol:

TIM: You ant you. Live by myself. I’ll fly a plane. There it is. One, two, three. You go away. Four, five. One, two. I’ll fly away in a plane. I’ll fly away in a plane. Don’t cry. I hate you. One two three four five.²

Comparing the disturbed reactions of the eight year old Tim to those of adolescent Angie in the garage scene, there are close parallels. We experience Angie’s resentment of her single parent upbringing, as well as her confusion as to whether her assumed aunt Marlene, or her assumed mother Joyce, is her biological mother. Here we find a fundamentally similar mixture of aggression, and the desire to break away.

Angie is responding ostensibly to her much younger playmate Kit’s reference to the fact that she herself is considered odd for not playing with kids of her own age:

{ANGIE twists KIT’s arm till she cries out.}
ANGIE: Say you’re a liar.
KIT: She said it not me.
ANGIE: Say you eat shit.
KIT: You can’t make me.
ANGIE: I don’t care anyway I’m leaving.
KIT: Go on then.
ANGIE: You’ll wake up one morning and find I’ve gone.³

At a workshop session, the students were asked, after studying both plays, to identify those central conflicts which could be identified as

what, in Stanislavsky’s terminology, is known as the ‘Super-Goal’. This refers to the central emotional thread, which subtextually links the various interrelated themes. *Top Girls*, according to the suggested similarities with *The Ants*, can be assumed to centre around a leitmotif of lost or neglected children. This emotional core informs the central dynamics of the text, and develops along a thematic axis, which links emotional deprivation to certain historical situations. This link formed the basis of a series of improvisations on the play. Thus conceptually anchored, the improvised performance *Revisiting Top Girls* followed the dictates of clearly identifiable cohesion, which is one of the central elements of the mainstreaming process.

The downgrading of maternal domesticity through the wholesale adoption of competitive male dominated hierarchical structures was also selected as an important thematic axis. This had to be emphasised throughout the main interaction of the opening scene. Thus given added emphasis, this thematic element would be clearly identifiable in the final confrontation between Marlene and Joyce.

The final scene in conventional terms is by far the most powerful, so much so in fact, that the idea of realigning the rest of the play to coherently build up to its final confrontational dialogue played a large part in shaping the improvisations. In order to bring out the sense of competitiveness as a behavioural trait, which originated in the emotional void of the main characters’ lives, the adaptation intensified the patterns of rivalry between Pope Joan and Isabella Bird. As a result they tend to dominate the scene, and at the same time mirror Marlene’s own gestures. Thus Nijo’s speeches were interrupted more often than they are in the original text. Finally, Griselda was given the appearance of a rather pathetic guest being grilled by Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, and Marlene on an aggressive radio talk show.

The biggest structural change was to shift the opening scene to the central section of the original play as a dream sequence, coming in after Angie has left Marlene’s office in Act II, Scene 1. This change was made in order to render the central interaction less separate from the rest of the play, and to make its thematic links more experiential in nature.

Re-editing those overlapping interruptions which conceal important
biographical information was a process originally undertaken in order to reduce the level of confusion for German students. However, once this was done, we discovered that the characters develop a sense of added pathos which gives a further element of emotionality to the performance.

Having thus reworked and relocated the opening scene, the production project in the subsequent realistic scenes continued to sharpen concentration on Marlene by making her the focal figure in all of the scenes except Angie and Kitt’s Act I, Scene 3 garage confrontation. The agency interviewers Win and Nell were replaced by Marlene herself, who conducts all the recruitment interviews.

Finally, in order to give added emphasis to the confusion of maternal identity inherent in the play’s structure, the ‘revisiting’ project altered the chronology of Marlene’s confrontations with Angie. The ‘revisited’ final scene takes place six months after Angie’s post garage scene visit to her supposed aunt Marlene’s Top Girls Agency in London. The adaptation ends with Angie’s suspicion that Marlene is her real mother being reinforced.

Once staged as an end of course production, the revisiting project was assessed as being thought provoking and powerful. The increased pace and deeper concentration on Marlene provoked a much more emotional audience response, without losing anything of the play’s intense and complex social criticism. The project, however, did lose something of Top Girls’ structural radicalism in terms of hybrid dramatic form. In addition, the poetic disharmonies present in the original overlapping speeches of Act I, Scene 1 were to some extent lost. Nevertheless, the general conclusion of the experiment tended to support the view that resorting to basic naturalist theatrical conventions under pressure to attract a wider public is by no means an entirely restrictive development.

Although such University course improvisations are neither scripted nor intended for distribution, one is led to reflect on the obsession with individual authorship, which has become an individualist norm embraced increasingly since the Eighteenth Century.

In the golden age of Elizabethan drama, plays evolved being altered and modified by both actors and writers, who have often remained
anonymous. We may well be permitted to ask what could have happened, within the protection of the copyright laws, if many of the plays had been open to continuous adaptation. Concluding the experiment involved critically reassessing the relationship between the restrictiveness of mainstream bums-on-seats policies (the words 'bums' is used in the British as opposed to American English sense), and the more esoteric appeal of the mind-stretching nature of experimental theatre. This whole question is by no means restricted to the stage. Most television and radio drama editors have been forced to reject much so-called avant-gardism or intellectually challenging material, in order to meet the demands of increased audience figures. Many stage, screen, radio and television writers have been commercially forced, therefore, to bow to the demands of orthodox conventions. It would appear that the broader the level of audience appeal, the more the play must bow to the conventional expectations of a wider audience. Somewhere between the most simple of popular entertainments and the avant-garde dramatic experiments lies the broad spectrum of the so-called mainstream. The fact cannot be overlooked however, that this mainstream feeds on both ends of the spectrum, often subtly integrating radical elements into an ostensibly conventional form. Thus any understandably pessimistic claims that the more conventional trends in British stage and broadcast drama have irrevocably killed off a golden age of experimentation, should not be taken as a sign that art has lost its radical bite altogether.
Omaha Magic Theatre: Not Corn, But Babes
Unchained

Omaha, Nebraska is one of the least likely cities in the United States for women’s experimental theatre. Yet there it is, the Omaha Magic Theatre (OMT), a company which has thrived since the late sixties on the Great Plains of the Midwest. Not only is it a viable company today, it has even outlived Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre (1963-1973), which provided the ordinal inspiration for OMT’s founding in 1968. Founded by Jo Ann Schmidman, OMT is one of the oldest theater companies owned and operated by women in the United States. Its resident playwright, literary manager, performer, composer, and photographer Megan Terry, sometimes called the “Mother of Feminist Theatre,” joined the OMT in 1974. Terry is in many ways the anchor of the company because of her long-standing reputation in alternative theatre. She has written more than 60 plays, has won a fellowship to Yale and has achieved an international reputation for her work. Because Terry has maintained a concern about the representation of women, her plays’ themes often examine questions of dominance and power and she broadly explores situations in which women are conditioned by social and cultural relationships. Schmidman is the group’s most important performer, director, writer, and designer. It is through her energies each day that the company functions on a practical level. Schmidman is a one-person office, writes grant proposals, and arranges road tours. Not stopping for lunch, she also disciplines the company’s workshop procedures and controls the rehearsal schedules. Sculptor Sora Kimberlain designs sets, lights, and large-scale installations. She also writes and performs with the company.

Typical of many other women’s enterprises, the Magic Theatre is run collaboratively in that the plays are scripted individually and workshopped collectively; everyone, including actors, shares the
remaining tasks of secretary, stage manager, fundraiser, set designer, house manager, and publicity agent, and much of the work is done on a volunteer basis. Like other women’s companies in the United States, they also attempt to provide work in theater for women and they challenge the hierarchical values of male-dominated theater. Chronically underfunded, they stay afloat by using in-kind communal support and mounting the highly professional works of women such as Rochelle Owens, actress June Havoc, and Susan Yankowitz.

Although identified as a women’s company, OMT does not think of itself primarily as a voice for feminist theatre. Terry has examined family violence in *Goona Goona* (originally entitled *Remote Control*), sexual roles in *Dialogue Between a Prostitute and her Client*, and sexism in the language in *American King’s English for Queens*. But when pinned down about being politically aligned with women, Terry says she does not want to “write their party line” nor does she want to be a separatist who excludes the male perspective.¹ She tells a story about a speech she gave to some Midwest feminists in which she said that it was her duty to “criticize everything, including them, and a whole bunch of people in hobnailed boots walked out”.² When asked how she portrays males in her plays, Terry refuses to describe her work in terms of essentialist gender roles:

> When I play the men in our show, I don’t think of myself as a man, I think of myself as presenting this masculine attitude. It’s this male attitude that comes through my instrument. I don’t first convince myself I’m a man to play a male — I simply assume the attitude of a male or several males I know or have observed acutely.³

Schmidman concurs:

> I think we all have masculine and feminine attitudes within us. For instance, masculine certainly feels more linear to me, more angular, not

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² Betsko and Koenig 399.

even angular but more controlled and less circular...And I can pull those parts out of myself. I don’t have to look at somebody else to get a male essence. I'd rather pull it from myself than look at some guy next door.

Schmidman credits language not gender essences with her ability to act male:

If the writing is good writing, the gender and the age is in the rhythm of the writing: a seven-year-old as opposed to a seventeen-year-old as opposed to a seventy-year-old, male or female. Males have different verbal rhythms than women...⁴

From these comments one might suppose that Schmidman and Terry naively ignore the problematics of representing women on stage and of investigating the entanglement of metaphors that constitute them. Not at all. OMT is particularly known for its extensive use of 'transformations,' the theatre technique of changing mid-scene a character’s age, gender, or relationship to others. Originally developed as one of the strategies to train actors in staying alert and responsive to one another, transformations grew out of Viola Spolin’s games for theatre, the work of method teacher Nola Chilton and Second City (Chicago) techniques, then were adopted by Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre for rehearsal warm-ups. Instead of putting on a disguise by way of a mask or changing costume off stage, the actor in a transformation exercise shifts roles in full view of the audience by adding a new piece of costume or assuming a new gesture on stage. A whore could become a madonna or the girl-next-door right before the audience’s eyes. For the OMT, transformations serve as a way of exploring the multiple variables of human experience and cultural constraints on gender. Often Terry uses stereotypes in her plays, rather than individualized characters, and with them she toys with cultural assumptions about gender using the shifting images and providing alternate situations and roles so that a central situation might suggest recollection, wishful thinking, or fantasy through comments by characters both inside and outside the scene. Although Chaikin soon

⁴ “Gender is Attitude” 302.
discarded the device because he considered it "facile" as a workshop
eexercise, Terry has found it useful largely as a way of suggesting
layers of signifiers. Author June Schlueter explains,

Transformational drama demands that the audience not only be aware of
the multiplicity of selves generated by a multiplicity of roles but that it
becomes an active participant in the process of definition and redefinition
that never ends.\(^5\)

And so what could have been a tool strictly bent for feminist
expression has been richly employed by Terry to achieve a variety of
effects and meanings.

OMT's use of transformations is only one of many retentions from
Schmidman and Terry's work with the Open Theatre. Evident in every
OMT production are Chaikin's influences. Since Megan Terry was a
founding member of the Open Theatre and Jo Ann Schmidman one of
the company's ensemble until 1970 (two years after the founding of
the Magic Theatre), this should come as no surprise. Most apparent in
the legacy are Chaikin's beliefs that theatre should first entertain, but
it should also be useful as a voice for social issues (Blumenthal's
chapter on "An Open Theory"). We see this influence in OMT's
recent offerings, which have not only explored gender, but also such
subjects as illiteracy in America, teen abuse of alcohol, and public
attitudes towards the handicapped.

OMT has also adopted Chaikin's conviction that language — both
verbal and non-verbal — is primary to living and to theatre, as well as
his contention that the discourse of theatre should remain spare, yet
precise. Chaikin said that "each play [has] its own code in the use of
words...its own special poetry".\(^6\) More than that, language is
imbedded in and implied as music. In the Joe Chaikin/Sam Shepard
collaboration for Tongues, a piece for solo voice and percussion, they

\(^5\) June Schlueter, "Megan Terry's Transformational Drama: Keep Tightly Closed in
a Cool Dry Place and the Possibilities of Self". In Modern Drama: The Female
Canon. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990) 166. Also

\(^6\) Eileen Blumenthal, Joseph Chaikin: Exploring at the Boundaries of Theater
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 44.
explored the way "language can produce different voices and modes" and "how musical elements, including structure, can be adapted to the theatre". Chaikin’s notion of “thought music” appears to be the basis for OMT actors’ ‘singing’ their lines by drawing out their vowels, by teasing out multiple repetitions of lines, and by chanting speeches in choral arrangement. Schmidman spoke of this in a March, 1996 interview: “Through the rhythms of language we dance through life. I don’t know the difference between singing and talking…”

More than any of these influences, however, Chaikin’s rejection of naturalism continues to shape Megan Terry and Jo Ann Schmidman’s work at OMT. Chaikin wanted theatre to delve into the inner world of shared human experience and to

develop a theater style which has an implication of a whole other kind of species of people, to try to see what other kinds of voices, bodies, expressions we may be... 

Like the Open Theatre, Omaha Magic Theatre uses the workshop technique of developing scripts and it strives to physicalize the inner life and language by translating concepts into sound and movement. THE PHYSICALITY OF LANGUAGE reads a home-made sign in the office, more hortatory than propositional.

Although the OMT originally took much of its inspiration from Chaikin’s theory, the company has somewhat evolved in its own direction. First of all, the OMT’s methods for developing a production are different from Chaikin’s ensemble technique, a freewheeling process that ultimately created too much dissention in the Open Theatre. These days, OMT works from a drafted script. More often than not, it is Schmidman who choreographs Terry’s scripts, by interpreting individual lines and words with sound, gesture, props and music. Writing their latest play, Star Path Moon Stop, Terry set out the images of travel and mobility — “naturalist/realistic, multi-cultural chunks of America about people moving [from home] and coming

7 Blumenthal 172.
8 Jo Ann Schmidman, personal interview, 24 March 1996.
Schmidman's task was then to look at "a deeper understand of how a sense of home can be inside a person." She looked at the concrete scenes that Terry had written and thought about passages for "moving the energy." Says Schmidman,

It's [the energy] in Megan's work. It's in the clues that are there. I just have to find the energy and release it. It takes doing it [rehearsing] and doing it to get the aha. Then my job is to communicate with the musicians. Always the work is very rhythmic.

The resulting plays are most often a montage of monologue, random sound, and dadaistic imagery built around a particular theme. Their ideas seem to grow anti-rationally, almost surrealistically out of dreamlike, sometimes private associations. Unlike most traditional surrealism, however, the visual images of the OMT are often ludicrously funny and politically motivated. This is a theatre of social statement with a fantastical twist. And so the second major way in which the OMT productions have developed their own form is that, despite their surreal quality, they do not reflect Chaikin's interest in the avant garde or the idealization of the primitive and elemental in Beck's Living Theatre (where Chaikin performed) or the ritualism of Grotowski's "poor theatre". Certainly a rejection of an established artistic tradition is apparent in the OMT's work and an antagonism toward social convention, but they do not seek the spiritual transcendence of, say, Artaud's Holy Theatre or pursue other mythopoetic values in their performances. A more comprehensive way of describing the work of OMT is to point out its post-modern features.

Most of OMT's plays (particularly those written by Terry) have little or no plot, developed theme, or three-dimensional characterization. They turn instead on fragmentary images connected largely through abstract concept. The purpose of these images is to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life — e.g. to

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10 Jo Ann Schmidman interview.
urge us to listen to our environment [*Sound Fields*] or to sensitize us to the way we censor our selves [*BodyLeaks*]. Their constructs are ironic, indeterminate expressions which challenge the authority of commerce, advertising, and the information technologies. More often than not, they link lines from the consumer culture — television, popular music, news clips, common household phrase — with self-consciously contrived scenes that estrange the familiar, everyday occurrence. OMT’s apparent purpose is to “de-doxify”¹² the life we take as a given, that is to call into question cultural structures (capitalism, shopping malls, media dependency) that we unthinkingly consider ‘natural’. The scenes of these plays fold into one another without seams, building a surfeit of signifiers, often rendering internal connections between the scenes indeterminate and without transcendality. Their play *Belches on Couches*, for example, opens in a family living room. Noise from an oversized television screen drowns household activity and dominates the scene. Following in quick sequence are clips from both violent news coverage (eg. of the Gulf War) and heart-warming sitcoms such as *Ozzie and Harriet*. The “couch potatoes” (ie. the television watchers) absorb the images and sound without comment. “Drones” (workers who assist in the day-to-day tasks of the couch potatoes) move in and out, also without comment or reflection on the programs’ content. Now and again, the screen is filled with static, but little notice is paid to that as well. Characters with generic names — One, Two, Three — speak with one another, but their disjointed conversation is hardly an exchange. Here is the opening. One is commenting on the glut of information in the age of ‘communication’ which is received but never digested:

One: Rhoda drills holes. Rhoda drilled a hole in her couch to store all the information she gets from the set...She figures after she reaches a certain age she’ll just take it all out...Now she knows what saving is really about.

Two’s response is only barely relevant. Isolated by the media wall between them, One and Two only superficially understand the other. Two’s discourse is littered with her only frame of reference — bits of

television language about snack food, clothes washing, and Midwestern floods that, when strung together, hold little coherence for One or for us:

Two: Yeh! CNN, CNBC, CSPAN fires my brain stem...I surf through the broken Mississippi Levee. On my way I evacuate your bed. We hold the homeless close. We munch washed and dried Doritos, vacuum packed of uniform size. Half of Des Moines is compressed into this couch...Screwed down under glass, by the weight of all that tape, forty years of programming. Video holds — the sandbag fails.

Characteristic of the post-modern, these plays both inscribe the dominant culture and challenge it, but in terms that frustrate a totalizing statement. Not only is the language disjointed, the set — with its plastic bubbles for couches, piles of videotape, vacuum cleaners and springed coils — is a degenerate hybrid of the dross of post-industrial manufacture. This play persists in the same vein without beginning, middle or end, piling up comical references to the empty culture of late capitalism. There is no letup to these images — no dramatic tension, no climax, no mystery about what lies ahead. There is only the stream of references to the rubble of a wastefully rich country and its meaningless use of language. Rather than flow, intersect, and interpenetrate, their discourse lies unconnected and sterile. Thus the play achieves the effect of most post-modern artifacts — a

sense of exhaustion, a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony;...pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of history.13

But it also sacrifices the features of theatre which we come to expect in a good night’s entertainment — a compelling story, complex characters, witty dialog, and a fresh idea about how to make sense of things.

Given this description of the Omaha Magic Theatre — its collaborative play making and feminist leanings, its origins in the

Open Theatre, and its post-modern features — one would wonder why these plays are produced in Omaha, Nebraska. Surrounded by corn and cattle country, Omaha, Nebraska is best known for its stockyards and slaughter houses. The best, blood red, 14 oz. steaks in America are packed in Omaha, Nebraska. It is also the home of the Strategic Air Command, one of the most elite fighting branches of the United States Air Force. These are men’s men, the kind who drive hundreds of miles to cheer on the Big Reds, the University of Nebraska’s football team that wins national titles year after year.

If American football is the center of entertainment in Omaha, Nebraska, one would have to ask how OMT draws sufficient audiences and retains its fiscal and political integrity. The honest answer is their audiences are small (always fewer than a 100 people per performance) and their runs are short (only one or two weekends four times a year). And yet, these women have succeeded in garnering large grants from the Nebraska Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Lila Wallace Foundation. Coupled with the price of admission ($12 for adults) and in-kind donations from local merchants ($30,000 to $40,000 per year), the grants from various arts commissions pay the modest equity salaries of five full time staff (actors and musicians) and keep the theatre running. Terry and Schmidman pride themselves on the fact that they have never operated in the red, even though they have not always been able to rely on generous subsidies. When they began in Omaha, a local donor gave them $10,000 and then took back $5,000 of that gift at the end of the first year after discovering what sort of theatre the OMT produced. Despite the slow start financially, the OMT has managed never to borrow money by keeping its expenses low. The company persuaded the city of Omaha, for example, to provide theatre space in an abandoned, downtown Lerner’s department store for $2 a year in exchange for retrofitting the building with adequate air conditioning and heating and the maintenance of an arts enterprise in the deserted downtown city center. Recognizing that they lose money on their home box office, Schmidman cleverly books in shows, workshops, and seminars at colleges and universities across the country — Iowa, New York, Georgia, and Michigan — where they
earn between $1500 and $2000 for each workshop and $4,000 a performance. They held two month-long residencies at Dallas Children’s theatre in 1995-1996, for example. OMT also earns reasonably good sums touring Nebraska’s secondary schools statewide and holding workshops for secondary school teachers.

The OMT keeps operations going in spite of serious detractors in Nebraska. Because they would not “meet the expectations of the social life” in the Omaha arts community (Schmidman interview), the OMT is often excluded from mainstream activity such as fundraising events by local arts boards and city promotions. A slick brochure for the Greater Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau lists the Spring, 1996 productions as Charley’s Aunt, Godspell, and Last of the Red Hot Lovers (among others); there is no mention of Star Path Moon Stop at the OMT. Nor is OMT included among the events handled by the Omaha Civic Auditorium box office, which is located just across the street. The Nebraska Agribusiness Expo, greyhound and horse racing, laser light shows, the Nebraska Wind Symphony, and a motorcycle swap meet are featured in the brochures, but not the productions of the Omaha Magic Theatre. When a local Omahan (who asked to remain unnamed) was asked about why a theatre company that plays nationally and internationally was ignored at home, his answer was that “they should have their bubble burst,” meaning that they should not be allowed to continue pulling in large grants, because they undeservingly “take up too many resources for the rest of us.” He was spitting angry about their theatre based on “meaningless,” personal references that misled audiences into believing they are in the presence of important art: “Someone should say that the emperor has no clothes.” Other critics have called OMT’s subject matter “banal” and their techniques “old.” Along the same lines Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta have written a devastating commentary on Megan Terry’s latest work:

Her plays are tending more and more to be shapeless and unfocussed. Where transformations once gave a style and structure to the plays, they
now seem to have outlived their innovation. Terry hasn’t found a new form to give her current work the structural foundation it needs.\textsuperscript{14}

They further argue that Terry’s work is “marred by a certain tackiness and self-indulgence” and “the play’s excess of energy contributes to its own disintegration.”

There is some truth to these critics’ remarks about the OMT’s most recent work especially. The plays tend to be shallow and ultimately tedious, despite moments of hilarity and invention. But the banality can largely be attributed to their postmodern format. Working with serial images based on the popular culture, the plays appear to be little more than performance with free floating pieces and objects self-indulgently joined together. Because their seamless images create a ceaseless rotation of empty elements, repeatedly resisting the positioning of subject and imitating the constant flow in a video or television sequence, the vignettes suggest very little content. There are only surfaces. The images’ refusal of presence, while resisting commodification and totalization, holds audiences at a distance. Furthermore, their multiple perspective and collaborative voice render the plays authorless and directorless, frustrating audience identification with personality and voice and message. Exiting the building, theatre goers find it difficult to say something about their experience.

Secondly, the plays are oddly out of place in their Midwestern setting. The problem is that they are ensconced in the mediatized world they are trying to critique and as such, they cannot place themselves outside the object of their own critique. Moreover, their productions seem somewhat dated, despite their postmodern forms. Without the renewal of exposure to more sophisticated audiences and theater practices on either coast, the productions of OMT appear to be little more than period pieces without a center, a recycling of Chaikin’s Open Theatre without clear objects which they oppose.

On the other hand, one could defend OMT’s place in Omaha. There, the company enjoys a sense of place and space that it could not

have in New York City. Schmidman, Kimberlain, and Terry have the freedom to write their plays outside the fickle tastes of the central marketplace and so they are somewhat independent of concerns about funding. Their rent is certainly more reasonable than it would be in New York City and being isolated on the Great Plains, they can always claim a unique niche in the theatre world when they apply for grants. Although OMT’s following is small, it has found some community in Nebraska and the company provides a forum for social issues that educates school children. Even though Terry’s plays are limited by their endless flow of empty symbols and their seemingly pointless catalog of references to the vacuousness of contemporary culture, in their way they examine social relations, critique America’s empty wealth, and identify the forces that are tearing at the quality of life in a postmodern world. No other art medium in Omaha is attempting to do that on a consistent basis. Rather than decry the datedness of OMT’s retentions from the Open Theatre or write off the discontinuous structures of Terry’s plays, critics in Omaha and elsewhere might well take a look at current social trends that make the sheer materiality of the postmodern world so evident that these images are inescapable. After an evening at Omaha Magic Theatre with its random flow of references to raw commercialism and the flatness of life, audiences would do well to wonder about the fetishism of commodities in a multinational culture that saturates the lives of those even on the plains of Nebraska.
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Especially during the summer season, thousands of Americans gather in predesigned places every weekend to participate in the dramatic practice of historical period reenactments. There is hardly a historical period that does not have its crowd of devotees who will dress in period garb and play an adult and somehow surreal game of pretend. There are Ancient Britons and Romans, Knights of Arthurian round tables, Renaissance banqueteers and Elizabethan pirates, Roundheads and Tories, and of course the assorted wars from the 30 years and the French and Indian through the Wars of Independence, 1812, and Between the States to reenactments of First — and Second! — World War military engagements. The majority of participants are caucasian males, and the general focus is Eurocentric, with the numerically strongest group probably being that of American Civil War reenactors.¹

In the following, I will try to analyze this present wave of participation historiography from several different viewpoints. First, I shall investigate into the roots and backgrounds of this hobby, then, in a second step, I will try to delineate some of its contemporary theatrical aspects; and finally I shall explore the way reenactments renegotiate the past.

The reproduction of a bygone period in virtual form is not a product of the postmodern. It rather seems to be an ethnographic constant. It is visible in religious ceremonies like the verbatim repetitions of e.g. 

¹ I will in the following focus primarily on conditions in the United States. However, it should be noted that all three forms of historic representation — Living History museums, pageantry, and reenactments, had their origin in Europe, and that as a hobby reenacting seems to be most popular in Great Britain.
the Diné ‘Night Chant’ where the exact reproduction of a traditional and culturally memorized set of words and movements is believed to ensure blessing. In such ceremonies the repetition is supposed not to represent but to reduplicate the original event without ironic distance.

As far as the more modern and more (or less) consciously ironic forms of reenactments are concerned, their inventor may well have been Emperor Maximilian I, who had his knights recreate medieval tournaments at a time when the social structures as well as the weaponry thus re-enacted were already entirely obsolete. Similarly, games of historical dress-up are supposed to have been popular in French (and, it may be assumed, other European) courts. These sources hint at a set of conditions that need to exist for something like ‘historical reenactments’ to blossom: a society or societal group must have a) a concept of historical periods and conditions other than the present, plus knowledge of their conditions and physical form; b) a degree of ennui with the present, c) the financial means to physically recreate conditions of the other period, and d) the pastime and leisure to indulge such practices as reenacting. It is easily visible how and why the period of modern capitalism (including post-) provides favourable conditions in these respects for a larger segment of society than the court of Maximilian.

Within the last century, attempts to recreate visitable pasts have taken on three specific forms that transform and transgress each other. One is the concept of ‘Living History’ in museology that originated from Sweden in the 1890s and became also known as the ‘Skansen’ movement from the first place where it was used. In this Skansen form, Living History is best described as an attempt to preserve traditional knowledge and customs together with the material objects and habitats that encompassed them. What is sought in a Skansen-type museum, then, is a form of scientifically controlled simulacrum, in which the borderlines between ‘past’ and ‘present’ become an object of negotiation. This negotiation occurs between the portraying person

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and the observing visitor who may or may not decide to believe in the homomorphy between original and play-acted replica. For example, characters may operate in 'First Person', i.e. pretend to really be from the time and period they portray. This — as many museum staff and reenactors attest — often leads to hilarities like the astounded observation by a visitor just told that the American Civil War took place 130 years ago: “Why, you must be really old then.”

The staff in Living History museums are usually paid workers, but increasingly they are supported or even replaced by enthusiastic volunteers. Authenticity is a priority, but Living History museums must needs keep an eye on their attractiveness for tourist trade. Employees/volunteers may well enact the past they represent for themselves and/or for each other, but this aspect takes back stage in museal Living History in comparison to the importance of performing for the tourist audience. On occasions, individual tourists may be asked to participate in activities like to try a hand with an artisan’s tools, or try on a piece of period costume.

The attraction of the Skansen-form of Living History seems to originally have been born out of a nostalgic and primitivist longing for bygone times. The Historical Pageantry movement (my second point) was, according to the seminal book by David Glassberg, a celebration of progress with a system of vaguely progressive social and educatory tendencies and motivations inspiring the relatively small number of professional and semi-professional pageantry masters, scriptwriters, and organizers.

Pageants usually consist of a sequence of floats in a parade, or in a choreographed sequence of acted scenes. The content is historical, but the performance and attire of the actors generally lean more towards the symbolic and referential than the authentic replica, except in such cases were, as documented in some of the photographs in Glassberg’s volume, the original was used as its own symbolic representation for

3 Thanks to Tom Fasulo, University of Florida, for sharing this anecdote.
4 David Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, Chapel Hill / London: UNC Press 1990
example were Civil War veterans played themselves as they had been forty years earlier.\textsuperscript{5}

Organized and collectively performed by individual communities, pageants were largely autocelebratory affairs, highlighting events in the communities’ histories and combining them by means of allegorical interplays, thus creating local versions of a sort of collective topical ‘rags to riches’-myth. As a community-oriented venture, the participants in a pageant play as much out of and for themselves as they play for their respective audiences. Historical pageants as a concept of popular entertainment were originally brought over from England, flourished in the USA during the period between the turn of the century and the first World War, but took a downward turn after that. Due to the general repetitiousness of their formal structure and the unequivocally affirmative nature of their message, pageants lost their attraction in the public image and became instead identified with small town moralistic entertainment, as references to pageantry in, for example, Sinclair Lewis’ \textit{Arrowsmith} indicate.\textsuperscript{6} Also, the lack of physical authenticity and the use of allegorical figures quickly became a subject of ridicule in the post-war world, as a story from the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} illustrates, in which the protagonist berates her husband, who is going to play the allegorical ‘Spirit of History’ in a local pageant that “spirits never wear pants.” Instead, she insists, he must don a cheesecloth toga.\textsuperscript{7}

Despite their decrease in popularity, pageants never disappeared entirely from the American scene. There was, for example, an annually performed pageant called \textit{Journey’s End}\textsuperscript{8} in the 1970s in Atoka, OK, which shows that the structure of community pageants had by then become more strictly narrative in a dramatic sense. Allegories had given way to episodic scenes combined and related through a

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 87f. The photograph on p. 89 seems to show some younger men alongside the veterans.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 238.

\textsuperscript{7} Richard Connell, “Mrs. Pottle and Pageantry,” \textit{Saturday Evening Post} Jan. 14, 1922, pp. 10f., 34, 36; quoted after Glassberg, p. 238

\textsuperscript{8} Thanks to Ms. Margaret Hames of Atoka, who introduced the play to me and provided a copy of the typescript.
stage manager. What remained intact was the autocelebratory moment and the somewhat diffuse idea that all of what was past had contributed to a present that was beneficial to all, so that there was still a message that the community had experienced some progress. The text was added on several times, and the production and performances were very much a community effort.

The third form of historical representation, period reenactments, entered the dramatic scene as a collective form of sociodrama and public pastime only after WW II. In the United States, Second World War had been the dividing line between the last larger reunions of original veterans of the Civil War, and the first costumed meetings of blackpowder shootists with original rifles who later formed the North-South Skirmish Association. The American Civil War Centennial and also the Bicentennial of the US provided a major boost to reenactments; and ever since the 125th anniversary celebrations of most larger Civil War engagements were attended and reenacted by up to 12.000 participants and an estimated 100.000 spectators (Gettysburg 1988), few people doubt that reenactments, notably of the Civil and Revolutionary Wars, are here to stay. At first sight, their relation to both Living History and Historical Pageantry seems obvious: borrowing from the Skansen museums the urge for authenticity, and the choreographed recreation of past events for present audiences from Historical Pageantry, reenactments apparently combine the best of the two forms. But there are more theatrical roots and connections, notably to ceremonial warrior-like games, and to religious rites de passage or initiation rituals.

The first of these connections, to games, is easily visible. Sham battles were fought in tribal warrior societies as well as for the

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9 One might say that reenactments re-entered the scene since it could be argued that the annual encampments of the organizations of Civil War veterans, during which some veterans wore and were photographed in their original as well as replicaed uniforms, were in fact a sort of historical reenactment; cf. Richard Murphy a.o., eds, The Nation Reunited. War's Aftermath, Alexandria VA: Time-Life Books, 1987, p. 161; 164f. Notice that both the Grand Army of the Republic and the UCV had a sort of uniform designed for themselves. Cf. also the use of inauthentic replicas by veterans discussed in John Braden, "The First Farbs", Camp Chase Gazette 17:8, 1990, p. 32.
amusement of courts and public assemblies. They have always been part of military maneuvers, and in the late 19th century they became a form of popular entertainment in the version of Cowboys vs. Indians in e.g. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows. Interestingly enough, the defeat of Custer’s cavalry on the Little Big Horn in 1876 seems to have been a tourists’ favourite already in the 19th century, and on Coney Island, spectators could see 600 veterans of the Boer War reenact their battles shortly after the turn of the century. Historical reenactments of battles continue this vein of entertainment warfare in a more or less harmless way, much the way even more refined and civilized forms of battle-games like (ice) hockey, football or rugby do the same thing.

Secondly, and this sets reenacting apart from the other forms, the spirit of the past is not usually invoked in allegorical form for all to see, but is sought for as a form of individual salvation from the present.

...this hobby had transformed my car into a time machine, each mile taking me further into my vacation from the twentieth century. For one or two weekends a month, I left the complexity and problems of my real life for a simpler, cruder time where the big issues of the day have already been settled. Within my knowledge of the era’s attitudes and its reassuringly reliable technology, there was room to be creative, to project an idealized past of simple virtues.

Coming from a veteran reenactor, this statement points to a strongly escapist urge behind this hobby. Qualities not found in a confusing (and in some cases also unsuccessfully mastered) present are assigned to a past that is neither reliably known nor socially understood. Within this assigned space and time, a refuge is sought and found, a safe haven that protects the individual from the evils of modern civilization. This function of a historical reenactment as a huge outdoors church is reinforced by the occurrence of quasi-religious experiences. Many reenactors confess an addiction to what is known

as ‘period rush’ or ‘history flash’. Judging from some anecdotal reports, this experience can culminate in a subjective step through a parafictional wormhole into the other age, time and period. Not only does this moment of imagined recognition apparently hold some addictive powers, it also ties period reenacting back with another one of its roots in religious services, aimed at reduplicating a sacred experience.

The pseudo-religious exaggeration occasionally encountered in this context evokes the religious terminology also usual in preservation efforts aimed at preventing battlefields and the habitats of historical figures from being torn down, tarred over or otherwise mutilated. It also evokes the subcaption of a French article calling reenactments “Regressions temporelles sous controle.” Regrettably, the identification of some reconstitutionists with the past, and their ennui with the present, has reached a degree that they have lost this “controle” and wandered off into realms where they prefer to be called by their assumed hobbyist names and titles. Other individuals are fiercely convinced that they are reincarnations, and especially in Civil War reenacting one can meet the occasional Confederate refighting the lost cause of his ancestors. That, say many serious Union reenactors, is about the worst nightmare they have in the hobby: a wild-eyed, ancestor-worshipping unreconstructed self-styled ‘rebels’ charging at them with rifle levelled and a fixed bayonet.12

Obviously, however, the above are not the regular cases, they are extremes. For many other reenactors — my guess would estimate their number at about 50% of the grand total — reenactments are just another way of dressing up some, being with the boys and getting drunk: from beer to fraternity, so to speak.13

The participation in certain events, however, or in a certain number of events, may take on the qualities of what Arnold van Gennep has called *rites de passage*. Sometimes this seems to be reinforced by self-

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12 According to discussions of this topic on alt.war.civil.usa and the CW-reenactors internet list.

13 If I may borrow this title of a Landeskunde class Charles Reagan Wilson used to conduct in Würzburg many years ago.
made ceremonials, if one is to believe Jack Barth’s “The Red Badge of Make-Believe Courage”:

Soon enough, it’s time for my first drill with the 15th — and my hazing. Eyeing me narrowly as I stand at attention, First Sergeant Manning Williams manically tears open a cartridge roll with his teeth, battlefield style. Then he pours the black powder into his mouth, getting it nice and moist ... After which he gives a rebel yell, spits the powder into his hand, and starts spreading the halitosisy goo on my face...

Fortunately, few reenactors seem to indulge these kind of practices, but even the good-natured banter of ‘recruits’ about “seeing the elephant” points out the distance between the novice and the initiated and the parareligious implications of ceremonial participation in camplife, drill, and mock battle. With these practices and implied rituals, it does not come as a surprise that the vast majority of reenactors are white males.

I come to my second point, the theatrical aspects of reenactments. The recreation of battles in a dramatic form and in a theatrical environment has been a part of historiodrama ever since Shakespeare’s Henry V. There, the prologue begs the audience to

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts
Into a thousand parts divide one man
And make imaginary puissance.

Likewise, even the impressive figure of 12,000 hobbyists assembled at Gettysburg in 1988 does not measure up to the 150,000 that were there for the original battle. In this as in many other ways, like regarding the general health, age, and — most noticeably — weight, the relation between the original battle and its aestheticized recreation as cultural performance can at best be described as ironic. The fact

15 In fact, reenacting has been called one of the last refugia of this most hunted species of the postmodern PC era. However, an increasing participation of African American and female reenactors is observable, and with wholly beneficial results.
that some uniforms are created with a painstaking effort to get the right amount of threads per inch of the exactly same sort of material, with hand-sewn buttonholes etc., does not save the reenactors from this ironic position. Nor is there usually much of an attempt to reenact the aftermath of battles or to point out to audiences that the Civil War was not all fun and gambol.\textsuperscript{17} In fact if this is done at all, it is usually done by or in interaction with the circle of civilian and paramilitary impressions that surround the central battle events of each reenacting weekend fair.

The choreography of a reenactment thus seems to work in circles. The battle forms the largest of these event circles, within which there may be special effects and previously arranged extra thrills like pyrotechnics, a cavalry charge, whole groups having trained to fall down in a bloodlessly ironic ‘as if’ replica of a cannister hit, and the like. Around this central event are grouped the civilian and paramilitary impressions of e.g. a doctor plus male and female nurses and a hospital, a war journalist drawing sketches, a mortician offering his services etc.

The members of this choreographic fringe, which Dennis Hall has actually called “secondary participants”\textsuperscript{18} tend to be on the average more serious and living history oriented than the make-believe ‘soldiers,’ for whom the public event climax is in the pageantric battle performance. But while the individual impressions are generally more well researched and more educational in the sense that, like in the Skansen museum, their activity is more directed towards an attentive audience, it is the sham battle that draws the crowd, and that the majority of the ‘soldiers’ in the ranks long for. Its function within the ordered structure of the reenacting week-end is to celebrate a sense of communality in a ritualized collective effort in which the participants play for themselves, for each other, and for the audience (in that order).

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} In the more recent past, attempts to go beyond the ‘farbfest-cum-boozep’-type of event are noticeable: for example, the 1995 Secessionville event in SC was not only the first one fully covered on the internet; it also used more space and time for the activities surrounding the sham battle than for the battle itself.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Dennis Hall, “Civil War Reenactors and the Postmodern Sense of History”, \textit{Journal of American Culture} 17:3, 1994, 7-11, p. 8.
\end{itemize}
I come to my third and last point. Reenactments mix aspects of living history, historic pageantry, and parareligious practices to form an amalgam that reconstitutes historical events into performance events. However, whereas Rory Turner has called reenacting a “mimetic form” that is “remarkably objective”, I contest his idea that there is anything beyond an “iconic identity” of original or reproduced objects. Rather, I see reenacting as a typical expression of popular entertainment culture, complete with a cottage industry to support it. This does not necessarily mean that reenactments are a sort of temporary Disneyland, even though the differences are gradual and not absolute. One could call historical reenactments action entertainment historiography. As such, it attempts to construct meanings through the use of the rhetoric of the dramatic forms listed above. The mix of dramatic forms ensures that participants and audiences can respond to their favourite aspect of the collective practice individually, depending on whether they are in it for the educational purpose, for the male bonding, for the surrogate warriorhood, or for the ‘period rush’ experience.

As a collective practice, reenacting belongs with other forms of experience-entertainment culture. This is where the period reenactment as an emotionally loaded public pageantric event differs from the relative sublimity of the Living History museum situation, even if, as said before, parts of this museum situation may in fact be reproduced in the pageantric performance. ‘Authenticating’ elements like fake-blood capsules, ‘dying’ in fake agony, or sawing off limbs (a reenactor who lost a leg in a motorcycle accident years ago is said to be much in demand for these presentations) are added to improve the filmic impression for the audience.

To find such a form of action historiography during a time that I would like to call the virtual modern here (for want of a better word), should not come as a big surprise. The virtual modern so far presents

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19 Ibid., p. 55.
20 The use of original objects in reenactments is actually one of the most thrilling moments for many reenactors when at the same time it constitutes one of the most serious lapses from the assumed isomorphism of iconic identities, since those objects were obviously new when they were originally used, and not 140 years old.
itself as a politically non-progressive or even regressive amalgam of fragmented processes, marked by transitions and interfaces with non-real levels of experience and information transmission, whether this be the virtuality of computer cyberspace or the simple and already natural-looking world of television. Historical reenactments are part of a continuum of make-believe, a series of culturally stimulated and produced simulacra that started with three-dimensional painting in the late middle ages. From the beginning, the creation of simulacra has been connected with attempts to control and subsume history. 21

One moment that divides the virtual modern from its postmodern predecessor is the fact that the dividing line between what used to be called ‘nostalgia’ in the modern period and what Fred Davis — though with noticeable caution — called the “antiquarian mood,” has evaporated.

For now, however, I believe it is still the case that most speakers would assign a story-derived enchantment with Revolutionary America to a different category of experience from the one they reserve for fondly remembered material from their own lives. Paradoxically, this is perhaps because the active antiquarian mood grants greater existential license to the imagination and permits more pure self-fantasy ... 23

Reenactors telescope their own and another era’s past into a present experience that does not distinguish any longer between nostalgia and antiquarian mood but remodulates both. Punning expressions like “In the future I will be present in the past” 24 or “Voorward met het...”
verleden”\textsuperscript{25} are indicative of this. Ironically, the virtual modern thus becomes a potential haven for all sorts of private and public nostalgia, including the revels of political reactionaries captured best by the German term ‘Ewig-Gestriges’ (those who will forever adhere to the ideologies of past political periods).

Reenactments, even though they attempt to reconstitute a past, renegotiate it. The result, as befits the democratic capitalist virtual modern period, is a multitude of pasts, depending on individual knowledge as well as collective purpose. The organisation of the reenactment scene resembles that of the internet, with clusters and subgroups. Theoretically, everybody is his or her own historiographer. This has advantages as well as drawbacks: Depending on who one talks to, one may get away from a reenactment with an impression that these events support historical knowledge as well as transcultural understanding. On the other hand, one may just as well hit upon a ‘Farbfest’ dominated by redneck types, or in fact meet both variations at the same event.\textsuperscript{26}

With this in mind, and with the individually varying degrees to which participants intermix aspects of living history and historic pageantry in their participation in events, reenactments oscillate between extreme possibilities. They can be at worst an irresponsible celebration of wholesale slaughter, much like a bad war movie, and a blatantly reactionary statement of white male purposes. At best, they can be an ironic but formally nearly homomorphous recreation of multifaceted and multicultural historic conditions and practices. Ironically, both extremes may be the feelings two different participants leave the same event with.

Sensibly done, reenacting — like Living History museums — can be

\textsuperscript{25} “Onward with the past”, on a living history group’s website (http://www.novar ltd. demon.co.uk/DeKlauwaerts).

\textsuperscript{26} Jack Barth has given a graphic example for this kind of ‘living historian’: “Just then, a resurrected Reb swaggers past, ... taking a swig from a can of Miller Genuine Draft, and letting go with a loud burp: ‘Don’t forget Brrrrrrobert E. Lee.’ No, indeed. With men like this honoring his memory, his name will resonate forever.” Barth, “The Red Badge of Make-Believe Courage,” p. 92.
educational, both to whatever audience there is, and to the participants themselves, provided the metalevel experience is not the basis for a past-inspired emotional high, but a search for historical insight to a point where Bertolt Brecht’s theory of the Lehrstück attains a new graspable level of possibilities.


Two cases in point: Even though the majority of e.g. Civil War reenactors are white Southern males, the number of those among them who will portray Union soldiers for authenticating purposes is increasing, and I have talked to some who freely admitted that wearing the ‘other’ uniform gave them completely new historical insights. — Experiments with Civil War living history programs have been made in African Americans youthful delinquent rehabilitation programs, apparently with success (newspaper clipping, Civil War News, n.d., n.p.)
Other Voices: Latino and Asian American Theatre in New York

When in a recent interview in the *New York Times Magazine* the ever satirical writer and playwright Gore Vidal was asked for a definition of gay fiction he answered tartly: “What on earth is that? Does that mean the book only hangs out with other books?”¹ In the same fashion one might wonder about the nature of a category like ‘Latino and Asian American theatre and drama’. Is it a drama written only by Latino and Asian American playwrights and performed exclusively by Latino and Asian American actors? A theatre solely enjoyed, or not as the case might be, by a Latino and Asian American audience and thus ‘beyond the mainstream’?

As with gay, African American and women’s drama etc. trying to define any specific characteristics of any given group can be misleading and dangerous and any critic of multiethnic literature and drama knows only too well that, as Paul Lauter puts it, “neither separation nor integration provide wholly satisfactory methods for representing or studying marginalized cultures.”² Thus, the Asian American literary critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim aptly describes her own experience as follows: on the one hand she doesn’t want to be seen as “different, as exotic and frozen in a geographical mythology.” On the other, she writes,

should you proceed to treat me as if I were not different, as if my historical origin has not given to me a unique destiny and character, I

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would also accuse you of provincialism, of inability to distinguish between cultures.\(^3\)

Despite this classic catch-22 situation, however, one thing is clear: whatever the aesthetic starting point, before there can be an attempt at assessing contemporary American theatre all voices will have to be heard or at least represented. In this paper I am aiming to do just that: presenting some of the voices still mostly unheard of, in this case those of Latino and Asian American playwrights.

But what kind of a group are Latino and Asian Americans anyway? Before looking at their theatre and drama, I would like to give some brief notes on their demography and their history. The labels of 'Hispanic' and 'Asian/Pacific Islander' were originally introduced by the U.S. Bureau for the Census for demographic purposes. As with all categories in our time of political correctness these labels have been hot issues of debate inside and outside of the respective communities. Some, for example, consider 'Hispanic' as a mere bureaucratic government census term. For others, like the Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros, however, it smacks of colonization. She goes as far as refusing to let her work appear in anthologies that use the word 'Hispanic', and in one of her short stories she writes,

> Dear San Antonio de Padua (...). I would appreciate it very much if you sent me a man who never calls himself 'Hispanic' unless he's applying for a grant from Washington, D.C.\(^4\)

And although most Latino American artists and intellectuals prefer the term 'Latino', there is no total agreement here either, as exemplified in the statement of the Cuban American playwright Maria Irene Fornes,

> Latino is so ridiculous (...). I mean we are Latin because we speak a Latin language, but so are the French, the Italians, the Romanians. I mean Latino has a nicer sound to it, that's the only thing.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Interview with Maria Irene Fornes, June 16, 1993, New York City.
Whatever they prefer to call themselves, both the Latino and the Asian American community share at least two characteristics: their growth and their diversity. Demographically Latino and Asian Americans are the two fastest-growing segments of the American population. Today Americans of Spanish or Latin American origin are the second largest ethnic group after African Americans and according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census by the year 2000 will comprise the largest single minority in the U.S.. Although at the moment Americans of Asian descent are just three percent of the U.S. population, they are the third largest ethnic group. Both are comprised of diverse nationalities: Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban being the dominant groups within the Latino American community, and Chinese, Filipino and Japanese being the largest groups within the Asian American community.

The history of Hispanic and Asian migrants and immigrants differs greatly from that of former groups (like, for example, that of the early 20th century European immigrants). Hence, Luis Valdez, founder of the Mexican American theatre company, El Teatro Campesino, remarks about the history of Mexican Americans, "We did not, in fact, come to the United States at all. The United States came to us." A common phenomena uniting all Asian immigrants is that before the Immigration Act of 1965 each Asian immigrant group was denied entrance into the U.S. and/or future citizenship at one point, thus becoming the most significant 'other' in terms of citizenship eligibility.

Luckily, times have changed, however, and quite a few Latino and Asian American artists have become household names within the American mainstream pop and entertainment culture — an achievement that has been hard-won and long overdue. By now there are sold out concerts by Gloria Estefan and Yo-Yo Ma. Andy Garcia and Rosie Perez are hot Hollywood items and so are news and talk show celebrities like Connie Chung and Geraldo Rivera or filmmakers like

Wayne Wang and Richard Rodríguez. Looking at Latino and Asian American playwrights, however, only a few names— if any at all —come to mind, such as Luis Valdez, Maria Irene Fornes and recently David Henry Hwang.

Of course, there are many more out there worth noticing. One reason for the high unfamiliarity with Latino and Asian American playwrights lies in the fact that their main outlet, the Latino and Asian American theatre itself, is a comparatively recent development. Most Latino and Asian American theatres and theatre companies only stepped into the limelight of the American public in the course of the Black Arts and Student Movements during the late 1960s. Since then, however, a rising generation of talented Latino and Asian American playwrights have contributed considerably to the development of American theatre. In fact, by taking into account the cultural and demographic changes within the U.S. and worldwide during the last 20 years and exploring other cultural traditions, their plays may well point out the way American theatre must pursue if it is going to prosper and thrive in the '90s and beyond.

Although, fortunately, some Latino and Asian American plays are available in print either in separate volumes or in anthologies, except for some publications on Chicano theatre and a few articles there is hardly any secondary literature on Latino or Asian American theatre and drama. Thus, my research on the subject actually began by digging into the more or less well organized archives of the Latino and Asian American theatre companies themselves and furthermore by conducting 30 interviews with them as well as with Latino and Asian American playwrights in New York City in the spring and summer of 1993, which I transcribed later on. New York City represents the ideal place of research on Latino and Asian American theatre for many reasons. Apart from the fact that, as the late Joseph Papp once pointed out, “creative people get inspiration from their immediate environment, and New York has the most immediate environment in the world,” it is also more ethnically diverse than other U.S. immigrant

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cities and it has sizeable numbers of nearly all European as well as most Asian, West Indian, and Latin American nationalities. Most of all, it has a large number of active Latino and Asian American theatre companies and playwrights.

Both theatre companies and playwrights were asked about certain aspects of their professional and personal life, such as their role as 'ethnic' representatives, their bicultural identity, their involvement in their communities, etc. Without going into any details about the results of my survey, I would like to point out that the theatre companies and playwrights are just as diverse as the communities themselves ranging from the storytelling Mexican American sisters Coatlicue to the well established Pan Asian Repertory Theatre on Theatre Row.\(^9\)

It has also to be said that all theatre companies see themselves as cultural institutions and all playwrights perceive themselves as artists first before they even consider talking about themselves as being representative of any community. This attitude does not imply, however, that there is no sense of ethnic pride anymore. But instead of it being used in the demagogic fashion of the 1960s and the 1970s it has become a natural part of their identity and their main emphasis is on artistic integrity and not on ethnicity. As the Amerasian playwright, Velina Hasu Houston, puts it,

\[\text{The goal is not to be invited to the party because of our race or culture or gender but because of our artistic merit (\ldots). Playwrights of color must begin to be perceived as playwrights rather than as people of color who happen to have written plays.}^{10}\]

But what are the plays written by Latino and Asian American playwrights like? Looking at these plays one thing becomes clear right away: in a time when the quintessential American metaphor of the 'melting pot' has been replaced by that of the 'salad bowl', the playwrights' interests lie not so much in the conflicts between

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\(^{10}\) Telephone interview with Velina Hasu Houston (Santa Monica, CA), July 30, 1993.
European and non-European groups or in a nostalgic search for a pure identity as in a constant questioning of conventional perceptions of identity, ethnicity and community and thus also of the dubious concept of ‘the mainstream’. Looking at the portrayals of inter- and intra-group relations, gender roles and community life in these plays, it becomes obvious that there has been a significant shift concerning content as well as style. Although contemporary Latino and Asian American playwrights are still dealing with so-called traditional ethnic subject matter, such as migration and immigration, assimilation and discrimination etc., their focus is rather on specific problems and matters within a community as well as on the conflicts between all kinds of communities in general (for example, as generated by class and gender differences) than on the old dichotomy between European and non-European groups.

Two of the plays dealing with the trauma of migration and displacement actually made worse by the community itself are Yolanda Rodríguez’s *Emigracion*, confidently subtitled ‘An American Play’ and first produced in March 1994 by the off-off-Broadway theatre Theater for the New City and Velina Hasu Houston’s much acclaimed *Tea*, which premiered in 1986 at Manhattan Theatre Club and has been produced many times since all over the U.S. Although of totally different backgrounds (Rodríguez was born in New York City of Puerto Rican parents; Houston’s mother was a Japanese war bride who married an American soldier — part African, part Native American — and followed him to an army base in Kansas where Houston grew up) there are striking similarities between the plays. Both show the playwrights’ desire to save the stories of their family and their people. Or as one character in *Tea* remarks, “When we’re dead, no one will remember there were Japanese in Kansas.” Rodríguez describes her play as “in a way the story of my parents.”

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11 Yolanda Rodríguez’s play *Emigracion* has not been published yet, thus references to the play are to the manuscript of the author. Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea* is published in: Roberta Uno (ed.), *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

12 Interview with Yolanda Rodríguez, June 28, 1993, New York City.
Other Voices

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poem to her mother.” Proceeding from the belief that the personal is the political, both plays show the fate of the characters as it is being influenced by the political and economic situation of their time as well as by their own actions.

On the one side, there is the bitter-sweet love story of Ramona and Salvador, two young Puerto Ricans migrating from the island to New York City at the height of the Puerto Rican migration wave in the 1950s in Emigracion. On the other, there is the story of four Japanese war brides in Fort Riley, Kansas, all married to American soldiers and coming together to bid a traditional Japanese farewell to a fifth one, Himiko, who has just committed suicide and now finds herself being forced, “to wander between two worlds forever.” Although there is a history lesson included in both of the plays — one about the push- and pull-factors of Puerto Rican migration during the 1950s, the other about the situation of the Japanese American couples who got married during the American occupation of Japan and who were then resettled in American outposts such as Fort Riley — they are far from being docudramas. On the contrary: using a lyrical language of their own and a seemingly realistic style, a number of different perspectives and flashbacks, the two playwrights offer the audience a variety of viewpoints of the same story, thereby deconstructing any illusion of objectivity. Thus, in Tea, for example, the five Japanese American women also act out the perspectives of their American husbands and their Amerasian children.

The attempt to break away from realism becomes apparent already in the stage directions given by the playwrights in that Rodríguez asks for two transparent flats behind which — parallel to the main plot — the flashbacks take place and in that Houston advises to divide the stage into two levels, “a representation of the netherworld (in which time is elastic and the spirit can journey) and a representation of the home of Himiko.” In the end all these are means to conjure up the dead and thereby save their stories and their memories. The motif of making peace with one’s past, one’s origins and the recognition that every individual is but a link in a long line of ancestors comes up

13 Cf. footnote 10.
again and again in the form of ghosts and apparitions in Latino as well as in Asian American plays, reminding one of the *Mexican Day of the Dead* which symbolizes a community between people beyond death.

The emphasis on a community between people regardless of their ethnic origin, their class or their gender is a common theme in most of the Latino and Asian American plays. Most of the characters suffer more from a lack of mutual understanding and misconceptions within their own circle of friends and family than they do from outside causes. The American cult of individualism with its myth of the self-made man carries no value for these characters. As one of the protagonists in Milcha Sanchez-Scott’s play *Roosters* remarks, “Me, me, me. You gonna choke on this me, me.”

The following plays, José Rivera’s “futuristic poetic fantasy” *Marisol*, first produced in March 1992, Juan Shamsul Alam’s slice-of-Bronx-life, *Hakim*, Elizabeth Wong’s media drama *Kimchee and Chitlins* as well as Ping Chong’s multimedia performance piece *Deshima* specifically deal with the problems and the possibilities of living together in a multiethnic society in a non-violent way.

In the first play, there is the modern day heroine, Marisol, “Miss Puerto Rican Yuppie Princess of the Universe” who, on her odyssey between the Bronx and Brooklyn, encounters a world that has fallen apart: the angels have taken up guns to overthrow God, the moon’s gone, time’s crippled, rainwater turns your skin bright red and cows give salty milk. In the second play we find Hakim, a moslem, in the middle of the hellhole called South Bronx, preaching to his neighbors about the possibilities of change. In the third one there is Suzie Seeto, an ambitious young Asian American TV-reporter who has to cover the

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riots between African and Korean Americans in Brooklyn in 1991 and who gets involved with both parties. And in the fourth play we find ourselves in Deshima, now a neighborhood in Nagasaki, but 300 years ago an artificial island which at that time was the only Japanese place open for trade relations between Japan and the West. Though there is no one protagonist in Chong's piece, once again it deals with the clash of cultures, the abilities of people to understand one another, and the constant changing of identities.

All four plays try to convey a vision of democracy contentwise as well as aesthetically. There is always a portrayal of several positions on one subject (Wong, for instance, uses a Black and a Korean chorus), the prejudices on all sides are exposed, traditional concepts are put into new contexts and categories such as 'true' or 'false' are constantly being deconstructed. The language includes bilingual as well as multilingual elements and the playwrights put their verbal gems even into the mouths of fiends. Despite all the misunderstandings between characters, however, the key words are solidarity and community. As one character from Marisol puts it, "We'll survive the millennium as a team (...) [t]his town knows when you're alone. That's when it sends out the ghouls and the death squads."\(^{16}\) The communal ethos of the plays is also shown in their elements of storytelling and mythmaking.

Still, there are no absolutes, no utopia, nor sense of perfection, or completion, or as Elizabeth Wong describes it,

Well, people often, when they see the play [Kimchee and Chitlins], ask me or kind of hope for an answer, a solution to the problem. And I don't think that there is ever one solution to the problem. And definitely my plays just call the questions. They sort of hold the mirror up, so that we can take a kind of more objective look at the problem. But if there is an answer, I think it's always in hard work. I think it takes extra work to be more patient, to be more understanding, takes hard work. So I think the end of the play tries to illustrate like that incredible leap that you have to take beyond self-interest and beyond the self to try to reach out to the other. And maybe that's not possible, I don't know. But I hope so.\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\) Cf. footnote 15.

\(^{17}\) Telephone interview with Elizabeth Wong (Los Angeles, CA), July 8, 1993.
And that is what these playwrights are trying to do — reaching out to the other. If pressed for a name for the direction these playwrights are heading, I would say that it lies in the area of interculturalism where, as Richard Schechner puts it, "cultures collide, overlap or pull away from each other," and which is marked by confrontations, ambivalences and difficulties. In the playwrights' own words that means being interested in "the human being’s irrationality" (Cándido Tirado), "those areas where people rub up against each other (...) that area of tension" (Philip Kan Gotanda), "people’s differences" (Elizabeth Wong), and "the idiosyncratic" (Kitty Chen), in intersections such as "Chinese rap and Samoan rap" (Milcha Sanchez-Scott), "Chinese Cuban restaurants" (José Rivera), "the juxtaposition of a Spanish word coming out of a Chinese mouth" (Eugenie Chan), "the Spanish influence on Filipino Americans" (Luis Francia) and "the point of mainstream society and Asian American culture (...) where the Latino American and African American, all these cultures, come to an intersection" (R. A. Shiomi). In short, to quote the African American playwright Anna Deavere Smith, "they are on their way to develop a kind of theater that could be more sensitive to the events of our own time than traditional theater could."
Dealing with contemporary Black Australian drama one must ask who is meant by Black Australians. Today the term ‘Black Australian’ is often used to replace ‘Aborigine’ in the national sense. It does not replace the tribal names that people use for themselves. One of the first elements in the process of the British colonisation of Australia was the de-identification of the target population and replacement of the names of the people and their groups with general descriptive nouns such as ‘aborigines’. The various tribal groups with their different names, traditions and languages, as well as the people of the Torres Strait who are linguistically and culturally different from the other indigenous people of Australia, were all subsumed under the label Aborigine. In 1988, the year of the bicentenary of the British invasion, many Black Australians decided it was high time to reassert their own identities. From then on a gradual replacement of the term ‘Aborigine’ by the term ‘Black Australian’ took place. Talking about Black Australians rather than Aborigines shows the fact that there is not a homogeneous group but rather a complex heterogeneous body, the members of which undergo changes and develop, influence or separate themselves from each other.

Today indigenous art such as paintings or music has become very popular and achieved a world-wide reputation. However, very little is known about indigenous literature, although there are some signs that Black Australian literature, and in particular drama, is gradually leaving its position in the shadows to conquer centre-stage: in January this year there was a detailed article in the German journal Die Zeit¹

¹ *Die Zeit*, Nr. 4, 19, Jan. 1996. This paper shows that the ‘Geburtsstunde’ of Black Australian drama did not start with Mudrooroo’s play, as the *Zeit* article claims, but already began as far back as 1968 when Gilbert’s *The Cherry Pickers* was first performed.
on the Mudrooroo/Müller project, a play which features Heiner Müller’s *Der Auftrag*, framed with a play by one of the best known Black Australian authors, Mudrooroo,² with its rather long title: *The Aboriginal Protesters Confront the Declaration of the Australian Republic on 26 January 2001 with the Production of THE COMMISSION by Heiner Müller.*³ On stage these two plays melt together and the dual, collaborative perspective - White European and Black Australian - becomes obvious.⁴

Literature, and in particular drama, has not just recently taken up a significant position in Black Australian culture with the writing of Mudrooroo, but has always played a major role. The dramatic tradition of Black Australians extends back through their corroborees - ceremonial gatherings with dramatic performances - for approximately 60,000 years. Up to 30 years ago Black Australian literature was mainly oral, though today there is a wide variety of written works as well. Contemporary Black Australian drama represents a powerful way of cross-cultural communication and has reached a new dimension. The plays offer their audiences an insight into Black Australian thoughts and values from a Black perspective and not from the view of White Australians as was usual 30 years ago. In the words of the well known Black Australian political activist and dramatist Kevin Gilbert:

In my view, Black theatre should be aiming, for the time being, at social comment. Give on-stage Blacks’ views of the white society - the hard truth about its history, values. But we also have to attack apathy and laziness in our Black society as well. Hopefully it will be a two edged attack.⁵

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² After the symposium Mudrooroo’s sister brought up the discussion that his blackness is not because he is a descendant of the indigenous people of Australia but that one of his forefathers was a Black American. Before the publication date Mudrooroo had not commented on the matter. Cf. also Roger Martin & Shaun Anthony. “Author urged to prove Aboriginal heritage” The West Australian 24 July 1996.


⁴ The Performing Space company also performed the play in Germany: 23-25 July 1996, Muffathalle München and in Weimar.

As these words show, Black Australian drama is a means of political communication. Therefore a brief overview of the sociopolitical developments and changes, especially those of the last 30 years, will be necessary in order to understand the meaningfulness and implications of contemporary Black Australian Drama.

The years from 1788, when the first fleet arrived, till the 1960s were characterised by thorough racism. Black Australians were shot just like kangaroos; those who survived were mostly rounded up in so-called missions or Aboriginal reserves where they were not allowed to talk in their vernacular, but forced to speak English.

It was not until the 1960s that one can talk of the ‘awakening’ of the Black Australians and the first signs of protest. In 1967 the national referendum gave the Black Australians the right to vote. 190 years after the British invasion the indigenous people of Australia became legally acknowledged as citizens of their own country.

After the political awakening of the Black Australians there followed a period in the 1970s characterised by the search for an identity of their own. This search was answered by the Australian government with a policy of assimilation which aimed to make the Black Australians white.

In the 1980s the Australian government moved towards a policy of integration. The anti-bicentennial protests in Sydney, Canberra and Brisbane reached a wide public. Due to the heavy protests the Australian government more readily gave support to the indigenous people of Australia.

The fighting of the Black Australians for their rights still goes on, and in the 1990s the Australian government, under its former Prime Minister Paul Keating, supported the return, from exile and alienation, to a Black Australian identity with a policy of reconciliation. The most significant sign of reconciliation and success in the struggle for land-rights is the Mabo case, which has had far-reaching consequences.

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6 In 1992 Eddy Mabo and his clan were given back their tribal land by the High Court of Australia. With this fundamental judgement the proclamation of 1788 that Australia was terra nullius was no longer valid. The Mabo decision caused a flood of landright claims. However, the requested proof of ownership is very complex and not many Black Australians have been given back their tribal land.
With this very brief historical overview it becomes understandable why the first Black Australian drama, *The Cherry Pickers* by Kevin Gilbert, was not written until 1968. The political and social changes I have just indicated were essential to create the foundations for Black Australian theatre. Before that time there was neither a strong Black Australian voice, nor an audience ready to listen and understand that voice, with which they now successfully fight oppression. Looking at the short history of contemporary Black Australian Drama one could describe it as a drama in three acts: the first act representing the appearance of agitprop, the second act emphasizing the socio-analytical aspects and the third act dealing with the analysis of the individual's consciousness.

Representative of act one is Kevin Gilbert's agitprop play *The Cherry Pickers*. It is not only noteworthy because it is the first Black Australian dramatic piece ever written; with his drama Gilbert opens up the way for a new form of theatre and raises a strong political voice which cannot be ignored any longer. This voice is embedded in the story of the cherry pickers who come back every spring to the cherry orchards. Whenever these people gather there is a spirit of revival, of intense relief, for the cherry season means a temporary release from starvation, some freedom and independence from the crushing heels of the White station managers and local police.

Kevin Gilbert uses *The Cherry Pickers* as a means of political communication in the Black Australian fight for freedom. Its openly political message - equal rights and independence for the Black Australians - as well as the political agitation for improvements and changes stands to the fore. Polemically and bitterly Gilbert confronts the audience, which is mainly white, with the harsh truth of the Black Australian past:

Look back and look beyond to history
to know your country's birth, to know the truth.
(....) 200 years, five hundred thousand burning native souls
aglow aglow demanding justice done.
(....) These ghastly crimes, these murders called for worse
or rather, accurate, euphemisms than
‘punitive party’ and ‘dispersals’ - still more furtive words cloaked war and genocide.\(^7\)

Through the reflection of the past from a Black Australian perspective Gilbert explains the situation Black Australians find themselves in today, their suppressed position in a dominantly White society. But Gilbert does not stop here, he goes one step further and demands political improvements. For too long Black Australians have endured discrimination and suppression, now the time has come to stand up and fight back against oppression. This political message is told in a propagandist and progressive way with which Gilbert aims to awaken a political awareness. However, if this was all it would run the risk of being a one-dimensional agitprop vehicle. But *The Cherry Pickers* is more than this. Besides its bitter and polemical voice it is also a passionate and vibrant play infused with ribald humour and affection.

The first few years after its publication Gilbert was criticized for his harsh words with which he risks alienating the very audience he is trying to reach. Surely, the accusing voice is also a risky voice. However, Gilbert had to take the risk. Injustice needs to be brought up in order to be overcome. The last 30 years have proved that although Gilbert’s voice is very critical it is justified and communicates with the audience. Otherwise it would not have conquered centre-stage and opened up the way to a new form of drama. Obviously a dramatic thorn in the conscience of White Australia was, and still is, necessary to shake up the audience who have never had the opportunity to see the Black Australian experience from the viewpoint of the oppressed and victimized in order to achieve improvements and changes.

Only four years after *The Cherry Pickers* was written another major play by a Black Australian was staged. Act Two: *The Dreamers* by Jack Davis. In his play Davis shows the every-day life of the Wallitch family, Black Australians living on the fringes of society, where most Black Australians are today. In the play one sees the many sides of Black Australian every-day life: their quarrels and togetherness, their sorrows and happiness, their drunkenness and sobriety. However,

under the layer of the socio-analytical drama, the protagonist Worru develops his individual drama, which manifests itself in a mixture of western reality combined with Black Australian spirituality. At this point, Black Australian theatrical conventions like traditional dance, music and reminiscences, which are mainly spoken in Nyoongah - the vernacular of Jack Davis - melt together with realistic western theatrical conventions. The consistent usage of Nyoongah emphasizes the strong awareness of Black Australian history and traditional oral literature in which it is steeped. At the same time it challenges the White Australian audience or reader and makes her or him feel a stranger in the continent which, after all, has only been occupied by Europeans for two hundred years. The strong Black Australian awareness represented in *The Dreamers* makes the play one of the most culturally independent Black Australian theatrical statements to date. It is a significant enrichment to cross-cultural communication.

Although the political message of the play cannot be overlooked, its tremendously entertaining and humorous aspect is particularly noteworthy, and becomes especially important when Black Australians create works conforming to the format of western theatre. As humour in Black Australian drama plays such an important role one must examine and ask what exactly this humorous technique is which makes up Black Australian drama to such a great extent. First of all, none of the plays written by Black Australians over the past three decades could be termed a comedy. Adam Shoemaker, an outstanding expert in Canadian and Australian indigenous literature, defines the specific Black Australian humourous technique as following:

Humour acts as a respite from, or breathing space within, the seriousness of that which surrounds it. The wit employed has definite characteristics: it is almost entirely verbal rather than situational, it frequently has sexual overtones, often deals with such themes as religion, alcohol and gambling, and for the most part it deflates pretensions, especially those of White Australians and of 'White-thinking' Aboriginals. 

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This kind of humour can also be found in Act Three of the Black Australian theatrical history; in plays which analyse the individual’s consciousness. *Murras*, written in 1986 by Eva Johnson, is set back 20 years ago in the politically significant years of 1967 to 1972. The play shows how the Francis’, the family which comprises the main characters in the play, are forced to leave their home and move to the city. With the example of three generations of women it demonstrates the changing consciousness and different awareness of the roles of Black Australians due to their dramatically altered living conditions.

In this play the dancer is of particular importance. The Mimi dancer, a very powerful spirit who can generate magic to bring about sickness and death, represents the Black Australian spiritual identity with its strong links to the land, the tribal past and the Dreamtime. He begins the play by performing the birth dance of the Black Australian Dreaming and ends it with a slow circular movement, which symbolises the strong connection of the indigenous people to the country and their spirituality. The Mimi spirit also performs Granny’s dying scene, by dancing her back to the world of her ancestors, her Dreaming. As Helen Gilbert has observed:

> These dances not only reconstitute Black Australian identity through a discourse of the body and its performance; they also re-contextualize the rest of the dramatic action (structured largely within European genres) within a Black Australian metaphysic that subverts white cultural aggression and its teleological assumption by situating the Dreamtime as coexistent with the present. ⁹

This connection to past and present, of Black Australian spirituality as part of their reality, is created by the dancer, who gives the play a particularly Black Australian awareness and strengthens the Black Australian consciousness. In the play Eva Johnson shows that despite oppression, Black Australians have managed to not only maintain their own values and find a new Black Australian consciousness, but to combine two utterly different cultures in their dramatic work.

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Black Australian drama truly breaks new ground in the field of cross-cultural communication. It opens up the possibility of experiencing Black Australian theatre from an utterly new perspective and gives its audience an insight into Black Australian thoughts and values. It is furthermore the expression of resistance, the remythologizing of the people's past and present experience. The plays are part of the 'new Dreaming' - and even the celebration of the fact that 'We have survived' the Europeans' pogroms, which was the physical and cultural genocide that came near to meaning the total destruction of the Black Australians and their culture. The first significant acts in Black Australian drama have now been written; the play will continue to grow in meaningfulness and impressiveness and I am sure it will be exciting to watch the coming acts.
African Theatre Today: Perception and Reception at *africa 95*

*Africa 95* as a season of African arts presented a multitude of cultural events, predominantly in the metropolitan London area but also as far North as Edinburgh and in the urban centres of the West, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool. One of the major aims of *africa 95* was to present African art in all its aspects on an equal footing with art in general, i.e. it should not be presented as ethnographic or ethno art, and it also meant to prevent the spectators from putting on the anthropological mode of perception in listening and viewing. As a consequence of these double aims and to enhance the visibility and the presence of African art, the organisers aimed to present the various events in the so-called ‘major venues’. This was successfully done in the field of visual art and music with the epoch-making exhibition *Africa — Art of a Continent* in the premises of the Royal Academy, the exhibition on modern African art at the Hayward Gallery, with the presentation of modern African art music by composers as Akin Euba and Lawrence Tamsusa in Liverpool and Birmingham and a concert by Hugh Masekela at the Royal Festival Hall as the closing event. With African theatre, this aim to demonstrate presence in major venues did not succeed entirely. The famous East and West End theatres and the prestigious venues like the Royal Court or the Royal Shakespeare Company did not respond to the organisers’ plea to open their houses to the African artists and performers. With theatre, it was again more the fringe venues, and particularly the venues in those neighbourhoods with a high concentration of African and West Indian residents. This was most obvious with the Albany Theatre in Deptford, where Amakhosi from Zimbabwe performed, or the Royal Court for Young People at the end of Portobello Road, both of them areas that might even have a majority of Black residents.

The organising committee of *africa 95* for the performing arts,
under the directorship of Helen Denniston, selected the plays that were eventually to represent Africa and African Theatre at the festival on a basis of mixed motives and criteria. The overruling principle was certainly to present plays and performances that do not lure the audience into the anthropological trap of perception. This means that shows with a predominantly folkloristic repertoire or style of presentation would be excluded. The organisers screened the potential participants on various trips to Africa and professionalism in the overall presentation was certainly one of the criteria ranking high on the list. This means that groups with experience in international tours and experience in how to present themselves with promotional material were definitely at an advantage. Purely pragmatic considerations of accessibility, availability of sufficiently impressive promotional material and cost also played an important role. It is clear that with London as the venue, francophone theatre would not be represented adequately. There was only one show by a francophone author: Yewi by Sonouvou Zinsou from Togo. The final programme with two shows by Nigerian writers, two from South Africa, one from Zimbabwe and one by a Black British/Nigerian author, was certainly not a misrepresentation of the different regions of Africa, as far as their dramatical and theatrical productivity is concerned. Nigeria and South Africa have certainly been the two countries with the highest visibility on the international scene of theatre festivals, and also the two countries with the largest quantity of produced plays internally, and probably also the ones with the highest production standards. It appears also to be significant that the change of roles of Nigeria and South Africa in the overall political landscape were reflected in the shows, both thematically and stylistically. Nigeria, that once spearheaded the fight against apartheid, and had been the focus of attention of all the African aspirations, has now assumed South Africa’s former role as the pariah among the African nations. South Africa on the other hand is now in the eye of all the other African nations and the world, as the one nation on which the hopes of Africa are concentrated. After the political failures in the past and the slow motion of democratisation processes, they all look to South Africa to prove to the world that Africans are capable to successfully run a
multi-party, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural democratic state.

South Africa, that in the past produced huge quantities of highly politicised agit-prop plays — due to the policy of the ANC that culture has to be part of the struggle against apartheid — was represented at *africa 95* with the Handspring Puppet Company’s production of William Kentridge’s play *Faustus in Africa*, a mixed media experimental performance. Kentridge picked scenes from Goethe’s *Faust I* and *II*, presented them with actors, puppets and animated screen pieces, replenished by new scenes written by South African Rap poet Leseho Rampolokeng. Malcolm Purkey’s Junction Avenue Company production of the historical play *Marabi* is based on Mdokwe Dikobe’s novel *The Marabi Dance*, and deals with the social and cultural changes in the urban townships before and during World War II, focusing on the social commitment of the artists/musicians who convert Marabi music into a distinctly political musical idiom. Both plays are definitely not a-political, but they are also deliberately non-topical. Their relevance is in accordance with Albie Sachs’ provoking essay *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom* (1991). They very distinctly attempt to assert their relevance in their style of presentation, in aesthetic experimentation and in ascertaining cultural, aesthetic, historical continuation of the old days of the Sophiatown cultural experiment.

Biyi Bandele Thomas’ *Death Catches the Hunter* was performed at the Battersea Cultural Centre (where also *Faustus in Africa* was performed). It tells the story of the leader of one of the new charismatic churches in Nigeria who falls victim to his own claim to absolute integrity and invulnerability. The Zimbabwean group Amakhosi presented *Stitsha*, as most of their plays written and directed by the group leader Cont Mhlanga. *Stitsha* is not necessarily Amakhosi’s strongest play, but it seemed to suit the occasion of *africa 95* and its particular venue in Deptford/Southeast London. *Stitsha* deals with an issue that is highly relevant in Zimbabwe: A young girl who rebels against her father by refusing arranged marriage in favour of an independent career as an artist — as dancer, director, choreographer of her own modern dance company. *Stitsha* tackles two issues: filial obedience and social acceptance of female performing
artists. *Stitsha* is packed with dynamic dance scenes, where traditional elements figure prominently, but where the dominant feature is that of a modern dance idiom. Amakhosi started out as a Karate club. Thus Eastern fighting techniques influences their dancing style, taking recourse to folklore without being folkloristic.

Soyinka’s great plays clad their political and social messages in the seemingly ethnographic costume of myth, ritual, customs, thus offering the connoisseurs of Nigerian politics and Yoruba culture the opportunity to enjoy the multitude of instances for double entendre. With his long expected new play *The Beatification of Area Boy* he presents an open, and utterly undisguised commentary on the total degradation of the Nigerian military dictatorship and its corrupting effects on the Nigerian society as a whole. *Area Boy* is not an agit-prop play in the sense that it would call for immediate and direct political action, but it is a drastic denouncement of the Nigerian military regime. *Area Boy* is certainly a highly topical play, inspired by and targeted at the actual political situation in the country. But it is also obvious that much of the political punch, which *Area Boy* has assumed, was attributed to it from the outside. The Abacha Regime has considerably contributed to the success of *Area Boy* as a political statement, when it started to run amok against Ken Saro-Wiwa and many intellectuals and journalists during the time that *Area Boy* was on show at the West Yorkshire Play House in Leeds.

Nigeria’s second contribution to *africa 95*, Bode Sowande’s dramatisation of Amos Tutuola’s tale *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, at first sight, looks utterly unpolitical and untropical, being a traditional, magico-fantastic tale converted into a dramatised storytelling session for children, presented at the Royal Court Theatre for Young People. But Nigerian politics also contributed to the politicisation of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. According to Sowande, the selection of the play as the Nigerian contribution to *africa 95* was highly objected to in official circles. The National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioner NATAP released a press statement on May 12, 1995 entitled *Nigerian Theatre in Britain’s Bush of Ghosts*, in which Sowande’s play is described as “spurious tarzanist and an imposition, underlining the colonialist agenda of the festival
organisers.” NATAP relates *africa 95* to the sacking of Benin City in 1897 and “the carting away of treasures whose meaning will be turned upside down for the exotic consumption in Britain.” (*The NEWS*, 19 June, 1995, p.27)

The argument against the play was essentially the old type of objections that had been put forward against Tutuola’s work as being unworthy of modern African culture and literature, as being backward, retrogressive, primitive, and certainly not in line with the image any culturally progressive nation would like to project of itself to the outside world. So, under the Abacha regime, the old objections about Tutuola’s and other Yoruba ‘traditionalists’ works, has been revived again, namely that this ‘traditionalist primitivism’ is detrimental to the image of Nigeria in the world. Tutuola/Sowande’s play had a successful run in London and certainly helped to alleviate the disastrous effect for Nigeria’s image in the world, that has been caused by Abacha’s political primitivism, particularly by the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni compatriots on November 10, 1995.

The politicisation of that unpolitical play has been enhanced through a number of minor incidents that affected mainly the casting and the rehearsal process of both the Tutuola/Sowande and the Soyinka play. Sowande’s cast was a racially and culturally mixed group of African, British and American based actors and singers; professionals and semi-professionals, of Asian, African, European descent. The racial mix of the cast definitely adds a new dimension to the story that can be seen as a deviation from the alleged folkloric and ‘backward oriented’ Yoruba folktale. The representation of figures from the Yoruba mythology or religious belief system by Asian or Caucasian faces deemphasises the Yorubaness of the presentation and favours intercultural perceptions. The racial mix adds an element of universalism to the performance. It definitely blocks the ethnographic and anthropological gaze of the spectator, that is only out to detect and confirm his own racial stereotypes. Another element of innovation which Sowande added to the story is that he multiplied the role of the narrator. Again, Sowande rebukes the ethnographic gazing spectator by sharing out the narrator’s role on a non-racial and non-sexual basis.
It is White male and female, Asian female and African males that share in the role of the narrator(s). Sowande even visualises this universal component in casting the multiplied character of the narrator. The passages in which he reenacts the story-telling performance and the oral atmosphere of the tale — as opposed to the dramatised and acted scenes of individual episodes — reproduce the village story-telling set-up — with one exception. The actors/listeners are gathered in a circle. The children who came as audience to the performance at The Tabernacle (a former Baptist church) gathered round the inner circle in concentric circles. The main difference, however, is that the narrator — traditionally a male narrator — is not seated in the centre of the inner circle, but just like the other actors/listeners on the periphery of the inner circle. Multiplying the narrator role reduced the importance and the exposed nature of the one and only narrator, and therefore did no longer demand the spatially central position of the narrator in the middle of the circle. But still, the narrators are placed in distinguished position on the periphery of the circle, namely on the four cardinal points — North, East, West and South. Another device to reduce the ethnographic gaze and emphasise the universality of the story.

If universal aspects of Sowande’s production style are emphasised here, this must not be misunderstood that Sowande was striving to convert a distinctly Yoruba based tale into another nondescript ‘universal’ Coca Cola or Donald Duck version. In my view, it is obvious that Sowande was attempting to show in his production the interplay between cultural difference and intercultural proximity. He does not negate the specific Yoruba origin of his play, but he refutes the distancing ethnographic gaze which would allow a spectator to put it at the non-committal and non-involving distance of otherness.

Recent political events and ogre-like misbehaviour of the Nigerian head of state together with that monstrous gathering of stooges in the National Relief Council, could have well furnished several of the episodes in My Life in the Bush of Ghosts with a new allegorical viz. political meaning. The bloodthirsty Television Handed Lady, the brutality of the Smelling Ghost, the tribal warfares and mass slaughters, the betrayal of Super Lady and many other incidents lend
Amos Tutuola/Bode Sowande: My Life in the Bush of Ghosts
Royal Court Theatre for Young People
Layout of acting area (stage)
and sitting of audience at The Tabernacle
themselves to an interpretation in terms of political topicality, referring to present-day conditions in Nigeria or even to individual characters in the present regime. These are, however, interpretations which are injected from the outside into the story. Political allegorisation in the case of Sowande's play is distinctly a process, originating in the minds of the audience/recipients, who relate the fantastic happenings and the weird images, which they see on the stage, to the hard political facts.

These were the facts which figured so prominently at that time (September to October 95) in the newspapers which the spectator brought from the news-stand outside in the street to the inside of the performance venue of The Tabernacle. Politisation, however, can operate also on a very personal level, as the case of Tunji Oyelana reveals. He was the musical director of both the Sowande and the Soyinka show and was warned not to return to Nigeria at the end of the *africa 95* season. Tunji Oyelana's case of politicisation of the arts in the present situation appears to be incidental or accidental or even arbitrary, as far as the *africa 95* spatial context is concerned. But it obviously has its structural and systematic components as well, as far as the home base in Nigeria is concerned as a determinant factor of the projection and reception of Nigerian and African art in Europe.

In the case of Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy*, the structural system of Nigerian politics also had its impact on the production of the play in a series of apparently accidental incidents. With *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Soyinka continues his various styles of dramatic composition by merging two strands of his earlier work: the comedy style of the *Brother Jero* plays of the Sixties up to *The Requiem of a Futurologist / Die still, Dr. Godspeak* of the middle Eighties on the one hand, and the political satires like *Kongi's Harvest, A Play of Giants, Opera Wonyosi*. In *From Zia, with Love* (1993) Soyinka had added the element of political topicality and direct commentary on Nigerian politics. As far as dramatic style is concerned, *The Beatification of Area Boy* does not really represent a radical new departure in Soyinka's work. Individual dramatic and thematic elements are familiar from his earlier work. Area boy Sanda has all the qualities of the amiable liar, imposter, cheater of *Brother Jero*, but also the characteristics of the commander of the Palace
guards, Peachum, in *Opera Wonyosi*. The overall atmosphere of political and social degradation, the corruption of the rulers and the corruptedness of the common man is an echo from the earlier plays. Political topicality and the topical songs in the Brechtian epic theatre style, all these elements are present. It is the combination of these elements and the emphasis that create an impression of freshness.

As early as 1992 Soyinka had started experimenting with individual scenes for a new play in a workshopping style in Lagos. One of the early strategy papers of the planning committee of the arts festival *africa 95* listed as one of the key events “a joint production with the ensemble of the Nigerian National Theatre” — a troupe that does not exist in that format. The play should open in the National Theatre in Lagos and then, the production was to be brought to London into one of the “major venues”, preferably the Royal Court Theatre, where Soyinka had been working in the late 50s. Although no names were mentioned, it was clear that this play was “the new Soyinka”.

After the military had first withdrawn Soyinka’s Nigerian passport, then his United Nations Pass, to prevent him from participating at the International Writers Parliament, convened by Salman Rushdie, Soyinka sneaked out of the country. Soyinka immediately held the Military Regime to ridicule, when he said in a BBC interview that “he had been with friends on a hunting excursion, when he suddenly and quite unexpectedly found himself on the territory of the Benin Republic and could, of course not legally reenter Nigeria without his passport.” These events mark the change in the relationship between the Laureate and the man in power — between Soyinka and Babangida or Abacha. When Soyinka continued to attack the Abacha regime in a number of articles in international newspapers, it became clear that the original idea of a Nigerian-English coproduction was no longer feasible. Whether it was the fear of diplomatic complications with Nigeria that closed the doors of the “major venues” of the London theatres is open to speculation.

In this situation, Soyinka’s old alma mater, Leeds University, stepped in, together with the West Yorkshire Playhouse and the Swiss agency Nawao. The necessary funds and resources for the production were thus put together. The casting for the play reflects this particular
history of gestation of the play. The West Yorkshire Playhouse director Jude Kelly went to Nigeria in 1994 to audit a number of actors. Prominent among the Nigerian members of the cast were the old hands Olawale Ogunyemi and Tunji Ojelana, the musical director, who had been working with Soyinka since the early days of independent Nigeria, when Soyinka had just returned to the country. Other roles were cast with British based Nigerian and West Indian actors. They were joined by four Swiss actors who played the tourists, businessman, ambassador, among them the Afro-Swiss multi-talented Miriam Keller, who played the Shop Assistant, Mama Put’s daughter, but also performed with the Sax at the final wedding party. This Swiss-Nigerian connection had been established a few years ago, when the Zürich based Zirkus Federlos toured Nigeria. This very mixed crew of actors with different backgrounds in different theatre styles were then put to the rigid British rehearsal regime under the purely British staff of the West-Yorkshire Playhouse under its director Jude Kelly. Soyinka was present during the rehearsals, officially functioning as “assistant director”, but found “confidently having very little to contribute to Jude Kelly’s handling of my play” (The Observer, 29 Oct. 1995, p.S.2.10.)

Wole Soyinka is fairly well known in British theatre circles. After first appearances with the Leeds University Theatre, cabaret performances, BBC programmes, he had worked as directorial assistant at the Royal Court with Pinter and Wesker. His plays have been performed on the English stage, particularly his two classics, The Road and Death and the King’s Horseman, that was performed in a highly disputed production at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester in 1990. It was therefore no surprise that the new Soyinka play was eagerly expected. With the continuous and increasingly bitter attacks against the Abacha regime which Soyinka had launched in the international press, it was to be expected that the new play would be a continuation of that campaign on the stage. It was clear that the play was going to be a topical piece, the question was however, whether it was going to be a savage indictment with tragical qualities or another political satire.

Already his latest two 1993 plays, From Zia, with Love and A
Scourge of Hyacinths, reveal a change in tone. From Zia, with Love deals with the Nigerian and Pakistani government involvement in international drug trafficking and is marked by a distinctive touch of investigative journalism. A Scourge of Hyacinths retained Soyinka's allegorical style, when he likens the uncontrollable spreading of the water hyacinths to the no less controllable spreading of political corruption.

In an interview, Soyinka played down the political content of Beatification of Area Boy by saying:

it is, if you like théâtre vérité, to play on the expression cinéma vérité. It is not a contestation of ideas, it is a bit of a raw sociology of an environment. It is up to the people to find a message in it, if they want to. (Yorkshire Post, 31.Oct. 95, p. 11)

The commitment to vérité, truthfulness, makes it plausible that the Soyinka of the 90s doesn't find the time any more to wrap up his perceptions in the form of allegory and metaphor. In his earlier political satires, as in A Play of Giants, dealing with the African dictators of the 70s, Amin, Bokassa, Mobutu, Ngiema, or in Kongi's Harvest and Opera Wonyosi, dealing with the Nigerian Mafia at the court of the central African emperor Bokassa, Soyinka had blamed the disastrous record of African politics on the leading personalities. And he continued to insist over the years until his last interview with The Independent (16.9.95) on his point: the root cause for the political failure of African independent states is due to the failure of its political leadership.

One of the most revealing symptoms of political charlatanism in Soyinka's plays is the abuse and the misappropriation of African traditions for crude political populism, self-aggrandisement and fake folk nativist ideologies. In this respect his views correspond exactly with his Laureate colleague Derek Walcott from the West Indies, who complained about the fascist tendencies of politicians

to assimilate folk culture to the state and the manifestations of the state's image through folk-costumes, folk-parade, and folk-circuses. The people, and not the state, will need to choose their image (quoted after Bruce King, Derek Walcott And West Indian Drama, Oxford, 1995, p. 154.)
Indicative of this view is the finale of Kongi’s Harvest, where the political usurpator Kongi hijacks the role of the high priest from Danlola, the traditional ruler and spiritual leader of the community, and performs the ritual sacrifice of the New Yam. Kongi thus attempts to present himself as the guardian of tradition, but he at the same time usurps the power of traditional religion and neutralises the influence viz. the culturo-political power of the traditional priesthood. Similar to Kongi’s corruption of tradition, the politically powerful in The Beatification of Area Boy abuse traditional rituals for sheer self-aggrandisement. In the final scene of the wedding of the children of two oil tycoons, the bridegroom perverts the traditional ritual of libation to the Earth goddess to an obscenely ostentatious display of his riches. He litters the scene with a huge suitcase-ful of Naira notes. And so does the bride pervert the traditional wedding ritual: She has to hand her calabash to her chosen one — the sexual symbolism is obvious. She plays lightly with this symbol of her consent to the marriage and finally hands the calabash to her old flame Area Boy instead of her bridegroom, thus blowing up the whole wedding ceremony.

In his lighter farcical aspects, The Beatification of Area Boy reminds us of Soyinkas earlier trickster comedies, the Brother Jero Plays and Requiem for a Futurologist. With this latter play about the popular television futurologist Dr. Godspeak, who prophesied, to the dismay of the whole nation, the end of the oil boom, Soyinka had made an appeal to the Nigerian intelligentsia, not to accommodate to the Pied-Piper policies of the then civilian regime of President Shagari. Ten years later, Nigeria is intellectually dehydrated. Nigerian intellectuals abroad who want to visit home and intellectuals in Nigeria, who want to go abroad, deem it advisable not to be seen in any sort of connection or association with the country’s Nobel Laureate. They seem to fear that they too, might lose their passports, and thereby lose another bit of their minimal intellectual freedom. When Jude Kelly visited Nigeria to do the casting for the play, she similarly avoided to make any statements that might relate her mission in Nigeria with Soyinka.

Fifteen years ago, Soyinka and his Guerilla Theatre could still
employ a hit-and-run dramaturgy by performing impromptu agit-prop plays like *Abudja* or *Rice Unlimited* in front of the Parliament. Today, Soyinka is limited to a much more indirect way of infiltrating the political scene in Nigeria from abroad. That *The Beatification of Area Boy* could not premiere in Lagos or that the text is not officially on sale in Nigeria, however, does not mean that Soyinka is completely cut off from his constituency back home. BBC World Service broadcast a live-recording of the play — a unique type of broadcast in the history of BBC radio drama, an initiative started by Albie James. BBC also broadcast an interview with Soyinka on the play and Tunji Oyelana’s songs from the play were aired several times on Africa Service. Nigerians in London clip reviews, dub radio and TV broadcasts, and within a week this information is available in Lagos. This was the case with the Channel 4 films on Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Issue, and this was also true for Soyinka’s *Beatification of Area Boy*.

As far as the artistic concept is concerned, *Beatification of Area Boy* does not represent a sensational novelty. On the contrary, Soyinka seems deliberately to fall back on some of his old theatrical forms that proved successful with his audience: the trickster comedy and the political satire. Since *Opera Wonyosi*, Soyinka’s re-writing of Brecht’s *Three-Penny Opera*, Soyinka had not made much use of song and music. His affiliation to the popular form of the Yoruba Folk Opera, his beginnings as a performer writing and singing his own songs in the students’ cabaret in Leeds, his liking for the BrechtlWeill song style, all this seemed to be forgotten. Now with *Area Boy* he revived the theatrical use of song again. In its individual elements, *The Beatification of Area Boy* might appear rather conventionally Soyinkaesque, but the new mix of trickster comedy, political satire and musical brings newness and freshness into the play.

Soyinka called *The Beatification of Area Boy* in the subtitle *A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*. He thus states two principles for his dramatic concept: a loose string of scenes that are predominantly illustrative and do not necessarily add up to a well made, structured plot; and he strongly suggests that the scenes presented here deal with the everyday life of the underprivileged Lagosians, and as such claim truthfulness
and authenticity. This is Soyinka’s new concept of Theatre vérité that is well researched and truthful in atmosphere, though not necessarily documentary in detail. Truthfulness and authenticity on the stage depend to a large extent on the acceptance by and the rapport with the audience. It depends on the audience’s willingness to identify with what they see on the stage. In this context, the songs which Tunji Oyelana set to music appeal directly to the audience. The songs set the emotional tune for individual scenes, they characterise individual figures, they revive memories of established popular successes.

The actual theme song, *I love my Lagos, I no go lie*, is a repeat of Soyinka’s 1983 hit *I love Nigeria* that was part of his *Etiki Revolution Wetin* LP (a song in the Njemnze mode). Tunji Oyelana very carefully chose the musical idiom to match the situation and the profile of the singers. In the street scenes, the Highlife style à la Bobby Benson dominates, the evacuation of the slum Maroko also comes as a Highlife tune; the sensational appearance of a bicycle in car-crazy oil-boom Lagos is presented in the popular ballad style, the prisoners, who are detached to clean up the shopping mall for the wedding celebration, sing *The Military Conga*, in which they rap about their frustrations; the arrogant military officer sings *My Uniform is sacrosanct from cap pom pom to underpant* in the pompous style of the melodramatic Gilbert & Sullivan arias. When he puts on shades that make him look like Nigeria’s dictator Sani Abacha, the operatic is transposed into the farcical. The songs in true Brechtian manner freeze the action, generalise the situation. They have an ambiguously distancing and at the same time emotionalising effect. They have the function of retardandum in plot development, but Tunji Oyelana’s musical and performative style also give additional tempo and speed.

The scenes that constitute the *Lagosian Kaleidoscope* have the quality of cabaret numbers. They revolve around a number of current social issues: the over-night millionaires and the persistence of poverty and deprivation; the indestructible hope of the down-trodden for a new start and better life, and the frustrations about the political and social realities, the hope for the prevalence of legal order and respect for the law and the daily practice of a lawless system, or a disregard for the law by both the area boys at the bottom of the social ladder and the
politically powerful in the top ranks. The scene about “missing organs” reveals the credulity and fickleness of the masses, but it also insinuates the existence of an organised organ trade, be it internally for purposes of witchcraft or internationally as a pure commercial racket. Mama Put with her food stall slaves to pay for the education of her daughter, hoping for a better life. She cannot forget the atrocities, under which she had to suffer during the civil war, and likens them to the atrocities of the ecological war, which the government wages in conjunction with the oil companies against the people in her home area, the Niger delta.

...the pilots didn’t care where they dropped their bombs. But that proved only the beginning of the seven plagues. After the massacre of our youth came the plague of oil rigs and the new death of farmlands, shrines and fish sanctuaries, and the eternal flares that turn night into day and blanket the land with globules of soot...I suppose those oilmen will also earn medals? (Area Boy, p. 21)

Public transport has degenerated to that extent that the weak are literally trampled to death or run over. Foreign businessmen, as well as the local ones, practice Rambo manners. And in the middle of all this chaos, the military appears regularly on the stage, not as a force that restitutes order, but as a force that spreads terror and fear and also generates and enhances hatred and disgust among the civilian population.

Another continuing theme of the play is who is actually in control of Nigerian society, who is running the country, who can provide some sort of stability and order, how it is done and what kind of social order prevails. One of the premises for the play and the country itself is that the legitimate forces of order have vanished and decayed a long time ago, and it is now two contending factions who compete for control. The military have hijacked the state and are running the government according to their own rules and mannerisms, and for their own profit. But control of society has been taken over by the area boys, who control the lives of the ordinary people. Soyinka gives a definition of Area Boys as

local slang for what you might call a street gang member, but a street gang
with a sense of community and control. They are petty criminals, but some useful community service is often performed by the better ones.

(Yorkshire Post, 31. 10.95, p.11)

The leader of the area boys is Sanda, an ex-student and ex-radical, who has dropped out of university and returned to that quarter of Lagos where he originally came from. He holds an official job as security guard of the swank Plaza shopping centre. In his impressive uniform he sits as "Oga Security" in his chair outside the automatic sliding doors of the shopping mall, reading his magazines, apparently uninterested in what is happening around him, but fully aware of all the movements in both worlds, the world of the rich who come and shop in the Plaza, and the liminal society that has gathered around that temple of Nigerian consumerisms to make a living on the crumbs of the rich. Mama Put with her food stall, the barber with his improvised open-air barber shop, the trader, the news vendors, the bus boys and in particular, the area boys. Sanda has organised the vagrants, the hang-abouts, the unemployed, the thieves and pushers of Lagos and managed to inject a sense of community spirit. Before Sanda came, "they were all running around like frightened chicken", as the trader says. Sanda is in control of the extortionist protection money racket. He decides how much “insurance” the customers of the shopping centre have to pay when they leave their car; he decides whose car is to be broken into, whose pocket or wallet is to be picked, who of the customers will be assisted with carrying his shopping bag and at what price. Like so many area boys, Sanda has demarcated his dominion, his area, which he runs like an administrative district, levying taxes, collecting fees, providing services, guaranteeing a certain amount of stability. The order which the area boys have established is a crude type of gangster order, governed by arbitrary decisions and rude gangsterist manners, but it provides some basic sense of order, some elementary form of social stability. Sanda in Soyinka’s words is

the kind of confused youth, who refuses to be sucked into a corrupt system and so establishes a counter society. But these counter societies sometimes develop sinister tendencies that mirror the society that they are supposed to be countering.

(The Independent, 16.9.95, p. 3)
But Sanda represents quite a bit of Soyinka’s own oppositional spirit. This becomes clear, if one looks at the scene in which Sanda meets again with his old flame from his student’s days, Miyesi, who comes from one of the richest families in the country. Miyesi comes to the shopping centre to check on the preparations for her wedding ceremony that is going to be held in the yard of the shopping centre this very evening. Comparing their shared ideals in their student days and their present status in society, they have come to two completely contradictory political attitudes. Both claim to be realistic and pragmatic, but the respective realisms and pragmatisms of the rich and the poor are two entirely different kettle of fish.

In Soyinka’s autobiography, *Ibadan, the Penkelemes Years*, professedly written as a statement about the political turmoil in Nigeria before the first military coup in 1966, but in reality very much a book about Nigeria in the 90s, there is an almost identical scene. In *Ibadan*, we see Soyinka debating with the daughter of Akintola, one of the new self-styled political leaders of the Western region. The Soyinka-Akintola debate in *Ibadan* and the Sanda-Miyesi debate in *Area Boy* are practically identical in spirit, in argumentative positions held, and even in many formulations. *Ibadan* and *The Beatification of Area Boy* were written practically at the same time.

“*The raw sociology of an environment*” (*Yorkshire Post*, 31.10.96 p.11) reveals a completely split society, two social worlds apart, a new style of social apartheid. The military, who claim to be the one and only force to establish and maintain order, have long withdrawn from the grass roots, and are only concerned about themselves and about their own self-enrichment. And in their attempt to cream off, they teem up with the business elite. But government has completely lost contact with the governed, with the Nigerian society. The counter society of the area boys at the grass roots level appears to be slightly more attractive, but mostly so, because Soyinka depicted the area boys, the vagrants, cheaters, and pushers, with the sympathy and humour which he has always shown in his plays for trickster heroes.

The only representative of civil society is the Judge, an ex-lawyer, who was kicked out of the Nigerian Bar Association and is now living as a seriously demented vagrant on the premises of the Plaza shopping
centre. It is exactly his uncompromising belief in the sanctity of the law, in the absolute rule of legality, which has driven him mad.

The arbitrariness of the scenes of social documentation that constitute the Lagosian Kaleidoscope have been integrated into a frame of factual events on a higher, political plane, that lend an additional punch to Soyinka's concept of Theatre vérité. In good Soyinkean style, he draped this factualness first in the costume of the miraculous, the seemingly supernatural, which he gradually unmasked to reveal the hard facts of political expediency or even atrocity. The play opens with a miraculously bright dawn, about which all the characters marvel and speculate as to its causes. The mad Judge boasts that this miraculous dawn is his creation, the dawn of a new day for a future Nigeria, the result of his magico-hypnotical forces which he cultivated over the years. The trader looks at the dawn purely pragmatically: The brightness of the light only reveals the dilapidated state of the houses and the potholes in the streets more glaringly. Mama Put, who is still traumatised by her war experiences, senses the terror in that bright dawn: To her it appears like a leopard that jumped onto his prey. With the repeated appearance of the military officer, it is gradually revealed, that this mysteriously bright dawn is neither natural nor supernatural, but purely man-made, and as such neither beautiful nor mysterious, but simply another of the political and social atrocities of the military regime.

The army had bulldozed the slum Maroko, expelled about a million residents and set fire to the rubble. What appeared as a bright dawn was not the sunrise at all, but the gleam of the fire in Maroko. The same fate could be meted out any day to the area in which Sanda and his friends live.

The stage set emphasises the segregative aspect of Nigerian society. At the back of the stage loom the uninviting concrete walls of the Plaza shopping centre with its automatic sliding doors. The walls and the doors separate the traders, area boys, the liminal characters from the privileged class that can get access to the shopping mall. The red light over the door gleams obscenely like the light of a brothel.

The set evokes reminiscences of expressionistic stage sets. The inhospitable concrete walls, the fly-over, the liminality of the scene
recalls Maxwell Anderson's American crime tragedy *Winterset* from the Thirties. Although set and costumes do not follow the expressionist black-and-white trend, there is a distinct restraint in the use of colour, favouring shades of brown and grey.

Elisabeth Ingrams, a member of the *africa 95* performing arts team, writes in her assessment of the West Yorkshire Playhouse production: The threshold of a glittery shopping plaza which is the entire setting for the play, acts as a literal junction of worlds — a crossroads where rich and poor, the area boys and police chiefs, foreigners and locals, countrymen and townsmen meet. This literal *liminality* of the setting provides a powerful concrete metaphor for the play — it allows the play to reflect the transitoriness and fragility of life within the capital as people and events pass rapidly through the territory of the traders who occupy that particular corner. (*Final report: The africa 95 theatre programme*, 1996)
Notes

I am indebted to Elisabeth Ingrams, member of the organising team of *africa 95*, for her assistance. She made scripts and press clippings available. She kindly shared her inside knowledge about the festival as a whole as well as about individual productions and was ever willing to discuss the achievements and shortcomings of individual shows and the performing arts programme. I wish to express my thanks for her assistance.

Since there is no academic criticism available yet, I only want to list the major reviews and interviews in the press and mention a few publications that deal with theatre in Nigeria up to the late 1980s.

Tutuola/Sowande: *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*


Amakhosi/Cont Mhlanga: *Stitsha*

*International Arts Manager*: High Kicking: The Amakhosi theatre company... February 1996, pp. 31/32
Wole Soyinka: *The Beatification of Area Boy*
Carles Spencer; Great Heart that refuses to despair, *Daily Telegraph*, 3.Nov.95.
Robin Thornber; Crash of haves and nave-nots, *The Guardian*, 1. Nov.95, p.45
Michael Coveney; Splinters of Sanity, *The Observer*, 5.Nov.95

Interviews with Soyinka while preparing Area Boy:


Kathrin Tiedemann, Unbehaglicher Optimismus, *Berliner Tages­spiegel*, 11.10. 96, on the visit to Berlin, Oct. 96)


These three publication contain articles or chapters on Bode Sowande and Wole Soyinka up to the late 80s. Obafemi has a short passage on Soyinka's plays of the 90s. Derek Wright, *Soyinka Revisited* (Boston, New York, 1993) is the most up-to-date Soyinka biography. An article on William Kentridge's *Faustus in Africa* and the South African adaptation of Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan*, by Eckhard Breitinger is to appear in Marcia Blumberg, Dennis Walder: *South African Theatre Today*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, Fall 1997.
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