1987

Revolutions Off Off Broadway, 1959-1969: A Critical Study of Changes in Structure, Character, Language, and Theme in Experimental Drama in New York City

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Order Number 8801716

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City University of New York, 1987

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REVOLUTIONS OFF OFF BROADWAY, 1959-1969
A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHANGES IN STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, LANGUAGE, AND THEME IN EXPERIMENTAL DRAMA IN NEW YORK CITY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1987

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In writing this dissertation I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my original doctoral supervisor Dr. Stanley Waren and of my doctoral committee: Dr. Margaret Knapp, Chair; Dr. Daniel Gerould; and Dr. Vera Mowry Roberts. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the Graduate Center library of the City University of New York. Particular appreciation goes to Ms. Sara Nicoll for the typing of the manuscript and to my husband Dr. Gordon Hough.

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INTRODUCTION

In comparison to the majority of new American plays written during the 1950s, the work of the avant-garde American playwrights of the 1960s employed radical approaches to structure, character, language, and theme. As part of a counter-cultural movement that was, among other things, a conflict between younger and older generations, the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s sought to be distinctive artistically from their immediate theatrical progenitors, who had raised them among the traditions of the realistic well-made play. Indeed, as the social rebellions of the 1960s were often about middle-class youth against the middle-class Establishment, so the dramaturgical rebellions of the 1960s can be viewed as instances where young middle-class dramatists were in revolt against the art of their middle-class forbears.

Some of the dramaturgical techniques of the new dramatists had been explored by European playwrights beginning with Alfred Jarry and extending through the expressionist and surrealist movements of the 1920s and 1930s. In America, during the same period, writers such as Sophie Treadwell, e. e. cummings, Ring W. Lardner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein also dispensed with

Aristotelian principles of dramatic structure, psychologically motivated characters and logical dialogue. They experimented with plays organized illogically like dreams, with characters that were more symbols than recognizable human beings and with verbal and visual imagery that was surrealist in its illogicality. In addition, they explored this new territory in the name of rebellions against what they perceived as stale, middle-class playwriting. In short, they explored many of the avenues later pursued by the new dramatists of the 1960s and for some of the same reasons. Consciously or not, the avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s were the inheritors of an avant-garde tradition that had preceded them by several decades.

Nonetheless, the new dramaturgy of the 1960s is radical when placed side by side with the realistic dramas and comedies that dominated American playwriting during the 1950s. The new avant-garde absorbed the experiments of the American absurdists during the late 1950s and early 1960s and went beyond them. Thus, while the 1960s avant-garde may not have been so innovative as they and their critical supporters often assumed, they instigated revolutionary departures from the dramaturgy of their immediate predecessors and finally created a large body of work that is cohesive and idiosyncratic enough to require critical

analysis. Finally, a number of the breakthroughs initiated at the time by the avant-garde have remained with American playwriting, both mainstream and avant-garde.

Until 1981, the extant critical analyses of the radical plays of the 1960s were either contemporaneous with the plays or from the early 1970s. In each case, the criticism was often either unstintingly supportive or unstintingly antagonistic. For comparatively objective analytic critiques, I refer the student of this period to Up Against the Fourth Wall[1] by John Lahr and Public Domain[2] by Richard Schechner. In 1981, with the publication of American Playwrights: A Critical Survey[3] and then in 1982 New American Dramatists: 1960-1980,[4] criticism appeared that attempted objective analysis of the avant-garde plays as a discrete body of work. Nonetheless, the essays by Marranca and Dasgupta and by Cohn are largely surveys of individual playwrights' styles. American Alternative

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[1]John Lahr, Up Against the Fourth Wall (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1970).

[2]Richard Schechner, Public Domain (New York: Avon Books, 1970).

[3]Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981).

[4]Ruby Cohn, New American Dramatists: 1960-1980 (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1982).

Theater,[1] another recent entry, discusses only two companies that were presenting work in New York City during this time: the Open Theatre and the Living Theatre. Similarly a recent dissertation by Judith Ellen Rieser, "The American Avant-Garde Ensemble Theaters of the Sixties in Their Historical and Cultural Context,"[2] concentrates on the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre and the Performance Group. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Volume III: Beyond Broadway[3] includes the first major analyses of the playwriting from this period in terms of influences, styles and the social context in which the plays were written. However, Bigsby's analyses of this period focus mainly on performance groups and concentrate at length on only two playwrights from the 1960s who would be under discussion here, Jean-Claude van Itallie and Sam Shepard. Indeed Shepard, of all the playwrights from the 1960s, has consistently drawn critical analysis, although feminist criticism is beginning to look more closely at

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[1]Theodore Shank, American Alternative Theater (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1982).

[2]Judith Ellen Rieser, "The American Avant-Garde Ensemble Theaters of the Sixties in Their Historical and Cultural Context" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1982).

[3]C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. III: Beyond Broadway (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

playwrights such as Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, Rosalyn Drexler, and Maria Irene Fornes, as are recent dissertations.

There is room in the field therefore for a detailed critical study that draws on the work of an extensive number of Off Off Broadway dramatists and discusses the approaches to dramaturgy that characterize these playwrights both individually and as a group. And thus the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze and categorize the approaches to structure, character, language, and theme that make the dramaturgy of certain playwrights writing for the Off Off Broadway theatre during the 1960s revolutionary in contrast to the dramaturgy of their immediate predecessors. I am using the following definition of the term "revolution": "A complete or drastic change of any kind."[1]

Chapter I of this dissertation will examine some of the roots of change. First, the chapter will discuss American playwriting on Broadway from 1950-1959, as it is difficult to comprehend the revolutionary nature of the plays under discussion without looking first at the ideas of structure, character, language, theme, and style that dominated American drama in the years immediately before Off Off

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[1]Webster's New World Dictionary, 1964 ed., s.v. "Revolution."

Broadway was born. These dramaturgical elements will also be placed in a cultural and political context.

Since hundreds of American plays were produced on Broadway during these years, I have chosen a selection of 15 plays included by critic John Gassner in Best American Plays, Fourth Series--1951-1957,[1] a representative range of American playwriting on Broadway at this time; as Gassner writes in his Preface to the volume, these plays "provide an ample experience of contemporary American theatre."[2] Thus the following plays will be discussed in the Broadway segment of Chapter I: The Rose Tattoo, by Tennessee Williams (1951);[3] I Am A Camera, by John Van Druten (1952); The Fourposter, by Jan de Hartog (1952); The Crucible, by Arthur Miller (1953); Picnic, by William Inge (1953); The Seven Year Itch, by George Axelrod (1953); Tea and Sympathy, by Robert Anderson (1953); The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial, by Herman Wouk (1954); The Solid Gold Cadillac, by George S. Kaufman and Howard Teichman (1954); Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, by Tennessee Williams (1955); Bus Stop, by

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[1]John Gassner, ed., Best American Plays, Fourth Series--1951-1957 (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1958).

[2]Ibid., p. x.

[3]Date refers to the last copyright. In other words, to the copyright of the version that presumably was used in the first New York production.

William Inge (1956); A Hatful of Rain, by Michael V. Gazzo (1956); No Time for Sergeants, by Ira Levin and Mac Hyman (1956); Inherit the Wind, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (1957); and A View From the Bridge by Arthur Miller (1957).[1] In addition, I will refer to John Patrick's The Teahouse of the August Moon (1952), which Gassner indicates he had wanted to include in this volume but was unable to because of private reasons of the author. I will also refer to three plays by Tennessee Williams from this decade that Gassner does not include in his anthology: Camino Real (1953); Orpheus Descending (1956); and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959).

Chapter I of this dissertation will next examine a selection of new American plays that were produced Off Broadway from 1952-1962, 1952 being the first year of operation of the Circle in the Square. The same critical approach will be followed as with the Broadway plays. I have selected the following plays for discussion, on the basis that they were considered by contemporary critics to be major new plays by American writers: Bullfight, by

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[1]Gassner includes 17 plays in his collection, two of which are inappropriate for discussion here: A Moon for the Misbegotten, written by Eugene O'Neill in 1943; and The Matchmaker, by Thornton Wilder, written in 1938 under the title The Merchant of Yonkers.

Leslie Stevens (1954);[1] The Girl on the Via Flaminia, by Alfred Hayes (1954); Sing Me No Lullaby, by Robert Ardrey (1955); The Immortal Husband, by James Merrill (1956); Career, by James Lee (1957); Jackknife, by Rock Anthony (1957); Me, Candido! by Walt Anderson (1958); A Palm Tree In A Rose Garden, by Meade Roberts (1958); The Connection, by Jack Gelber (1959); Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In the Closet, and I'm Feelin' So Sad, by Arthur L. Kopit (1959); The American Dream, by Edward Albee (1960); and Gallows Humour, by Jack Richardson (1961).

Chapters II through V will focus on the revolutions in structure, character, language, and theme among certain playwrights whose work was first produced Off Off Broadway and refer to influences on their work when appropriate. In using the term "Off Off Broadway," I am referring to performance spaces in a geographic area defined as "below Fourteenth Street in Manhattan,"[2] although the term eventually came to represent a state of mind and a quality of production that referred to presentations at spaces in other geographic areas of New York City.

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[1]This date only refers to the first New York production; all the other dates refer to the last copyright.

[2]Albert Poland and Bruce Mailman, eds., The Off Off Broadway Book (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), p. xi.

Numerous American playwrights had the first presentation of their plays Off Off Broadway. I have chosen as my frame of reference a number of playwrights whose work usually diverges substantially from linear plays in the style of realism; these playwrights also generally wrote five plays or more that were presented Off Off Broadway. The playwrights to whose work I refer in the body of this dissertation are: George Birimisa, Kenneth Bernard, Kenneth Brown, Rosalyn Drexler, Grant Duay, Tom Eyen, Maria Irene Fornes, Paul Foster, John Guare, A. R. Gurney, Jr., William M. Hoffman, Kenneth Koch, Charles Ludlam, Murray Mednick, Joel Oppenheimer, Rochelle Owens, Tom Sankey, Sam Shepard, David Starkweather, Ronald Tavel, Megan Terry, and Jean-Claude van Itallie. Notably absent from this list is Lanford Wilson. While Wilson does break traditional thematic barriers with The Madness of Lady Bright, a one-act drama about an aging homosexual, in general he writes out of the tradition of poetic realism that reached its apogee with Tennessee Williams. Playwrights such as Drexler, Tavel and Birimisa bring the homosexual as a character type onto the stage and in addition are more radical than Wilson in their approaches to dramaturgy.

The conclusion of this dissertation will summarize the revolutions in structure, character, language, and theme;

isolate and theorize about those I consider to be most significant in terms of the aims of the avant-garde playwrights; and place the revolutions in the context of the subsequent development of American dramatic literature.

The scope of this dissertation is of necessity limited in two particular ways. For instance, it is difficult at this distance in time to write critically about troupes such as the Open Theatre, the Living Theatre (after their brief return to America in 1968) and the Performance Group. Their presentations, particularly pieces such as Frankenstein, Paradise Now, Dionysus in 69, and Makbeth, were intensely reliant on improvisational movement and language and on performer-audience interaction that changed from performance to performance. This difficulty also applies to the work of the Play-House of the Ridiculous and to some plays directed by Tom O'Horgan, notably Paul Foster's Tom Paine. However, it is possible to analyze the work of the Play-House of the Ridiculous and the Open Theatre, for despite the improvisatory and physical aspects of their work, the literary texts are analyzable as plays. Especially in the case of the Open Theatre, where Joseph Chaikin developed performance techniques that influenced much of the dramaturgy of the period, it is essential to discuss the work that evolved from that group.

It is also beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyze in detail the particular revolutions in structure, character, language, and theme that occur in black playwriting during the 1960s. The revolutions in black playwriting were consciously different from the directions taken by the largely white avant-garde who wrote with the Off Off Broadway theatre in mind. Black plays from this time require a separate study, and indeed there is a growing number of dissertations and academic publications dealing with the subject.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the black playwriting of the 1950s and that of the 1960s should be summarized, for it is significant for this study to note where the two streams of playwriting joined and where they diverged. Two dramas by black playwrights were produced on Broadway during the 1950s: Take A Giant Step (1953) by Louis Peterson and A Raisin in the Sun (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry. One appears at the start of the decade, one at the end, yet in terms of structure, character, language, and even theme, the two plays have much in common, including their formal similarity to the realistic plays in which the majority of white playwrights were specializing. Peterson's play deals with the coming to maturity of a middle-class black boy living in a predominantly white

community in the North; Hansberry's play deals with an ostensibly lower-class black family that determinedly buys and moves into a house in a middle-class white neighborhood. Both plays employ the essential elements of the well-made play structure, portray characters motivated by psychological forces and attempt some realism in the language, although the language in Peterson's script is much more sanitized than that of Hansberry's play. Both plays deal with the problems of being black in a white society. Spence, the adolescent hero of Take A Giant Step, must decide whether to seek his white neighbors' dubious approval and friendship or be his own man, and he chooses the latter, deciding to become the best-educated black he can be. In A Raisin in the Sun, the Youngers assert by their move that a black family and by extension all black people can be just as proud and self-respecting as any group of white people.

Aware that Broadway at this time was not welcoming new plays by black writers, some black playwrights during the 1950s initially made a concerted effort to present their work in Harlem, a plan that largely failed. Critic Harold Cruse writes convincingly that the failure was attributable to conflicts within the Harlem theatre community. Thus, some black playwrights looked elsewhere, eventually finding

a welcome at Off Broadway's Greenwich Mews Theatre, which presented, among other work, In Splendid Error (1954) by William Branch, Trouble in Mind (1955) by Alice Childress and Loften Mitchell's A Land Beyond the River (1956). These three plays are also written in the style of realism, but unlike the plays by Peterson and Hansberry, which are largely tracking problems of personal identity, these three plays have a more overtly political orientation. They revolve around a dilemma that was confronting blacks in the Civil Rights movement during the fifties, specifically, whether to opt for a slow process of change through the courts, the route taken historically by the NAACP, or to participate in peaceful but active protest such as that advocated by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. All three plays come down on the side of the latter.

For the black playwrights who came to flower during the 1960s, however, both the style and outlooks of the black plays written during the 1950s were viewed as obsolete. Defining "Black Revolutionary Theatre" in an issue of The Drama Review, critic Larry Neal wrote that

> Black Revolutionary Theatre is the name given to that special Black American strain of theatre, film, and agitprop public activity that originated in the Black Arts Movement, the Black religious and

spiritual sects, and in Third World Revolutionary Cultural and Political Societies.[1]

Neal added that the Black Arts Movement "eschews 'protest' literature. . . . Implicit in the concept of 'protest' literature . . . is an appeal to white morality. . . ."[2] Indeed, the new black playwrights of the 1960s consciously attempted to separate themselves from any literary or political tradition that in their view was associated with the dominant white culture. Amiri Baraka, then considered the leader of the Black Arts Movement in drama, verbalized the attitude in his 1965 essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," by calling for a theatre that "must be anti-Western,"[3] by which he meant anti the white European and American culture to which blacks had been subservient so long. "Black Theatre," writes critic Geneviève Fabre, "involves both a systematic subversion of Western dramatic language and form and the search for a medium capable of healing a wounded and often denied consciousness."[4] In their search for a

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[1]Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," The Drama Review 12 (Summer 1968): 28.

[2]Ibid., p. 30.

[3]LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in Documents for Drama and Revolution, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 206.

[4]Geneviève Fabre, Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 102.

form and content that would differentiate their writing from the playwriting of the white culture and at the same time speak to black audiences, the revolutionary black playwrights of the 1960s followed two principal paths, toward outrightly militant plays and toward plays reflecting black experience. Both types of plays were conscious revolts against the tradition of realism with its attendant principles of form and both also attempted to differentiate themselves from the largely white avant-garde plays of the 1960s.

The overtly militant plays, those by Amiri Baraka and others such as Ben Caldwell, Herbert Stokes, Jimmy Garrett, and Sonia Sanchez are usually brief, agitprop pieces that pit the new symbol of black nobility, the militant young street black, against either a white man or woman or a black who symbolizes appeasement (the black matriarch, for instance). The symbol of white oppression usually dies at the hands of the militant black.

The plays about black experience found their most skillful dramatist in Ed Bullins. "The theories that influenced the Black Renaissance of the sixties called for a theatre of 'black experience' as well as one of struggle, a theatre no longer dependent on white liberals or black militants but created from the most fundamental aspects of

Afro-American life."[1] Bullins' plays delve into the life and language of the urban ghetto, where blacks are often enveloped in drugs and crime (Goin' A Buffalo), love and violence (In the Wine Time), sex and protection from the white world (Clara's Old Man). The plays often do not have any easily definable structure; the first two lack any definite beginning, middle or end. They flow from scene to scene in a loose way, dependent frequently on riffs of language to move the action along. Indeed, it is the language of Bullins' plays more than any other element that differentiates them from the black plays of the fifties and from the adamantly non-realistic and non-naturalistic plays of the white avant-garde. For Bullins recreates with loving sensitivity the musicality of the varieties of street language of the black ghetto.

Ironically, in an effort to separate themselves from the Western European traditions of drama, the revolutionary black playwrights often ended where they began. While the content of their plays is significantly more radical than the "protest" plays of the 1950s, the forms these new black writers selected--agitprop theatre and naturalism--were part of earlier Western European and American theatrical traditions. Thus, while the militant black playwrights of

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[1]Fabre, Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor, p. 106.

the 1960s largely succeeded in distinguishing themselves from the white avant-garde, they did not completely succeed in obliterating any trace of Western models.

CHAPTER I

THE ROOTS OF CHANGE

American Playwriting on Broadway 1950-1959

Structure

The typical American Drama that appeared on Broadway during the 1950s owes its structure, by which I mean the way a play is put together, to the modern drama of realism as brought to fruition by Henrik Ibsen. The American dramas that appeared on Broadway usually have a plot that unfolds through logical cause and effect. The dramatic action usually begins early in Act I or at least by the end of the first act, which often finishes on a suspenseful, anticipatory note. The action continues to build through the second act, which also ends on an unresolved dilemma. The turning point in the action comes toward the end of Act III and often involves a confrontation between the single protagonist and the force opposing him, usually embodied in another character. The two characters come to verbal blows because of differences in personality or belief, and the climax follows shortly. The play's resolution often points up, or at least implies, a message.

In William Inge's Picnic, the action has already started when Act I begins with the arrival of Hal, whose sexuality will eventually disrupt everyone's lives. Throughout the first act we see signs of the physical attraction between Hal and Madge, and since we know that Madge is really Alan's girl, the end of the act leaves us in suspense about the outcome and effects of this new relationship. In Act II, the action continues to build as we see that Hal is inadvertently having a disturbing effect on his new acquaintances. The act closes with Hal and Madge going off together, and we know that their love affair is going to have an explosive impact on this group of people and possibly rebound negatively on the couple. Indeed, in Act III, Hal is asked to leave town, and there is a confrontation between him and Madge, to whom Hal declares his love. He tries to persuade her to leave with him, and she resists. Yet shortly afterward, in what is the climax of the play, she walks on stage with her suitcase and announces her intention of following Hal to Oklahoma. The action is compressed into a short span of time, and each event leads into another logically.

To be sure, there are exceptions to this structure, or at least variations in it. Among the plays from this time, John Van Druten in particular tries to write what Eric

Bentley describes as the "mood play":[1] "Mr. Van Druten says he'd like a play to be all atmosphere and no plot. He says he finds inspiration and guidance in Member of the Wedding, The Glass Menagerie, and The Cherry Orchard . . . none of them seems to me as mysteriously structureless as Mr. Van Druten implies."[2]

In I Am A Camera, Van Druten's adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Stories, Van Druten does manage to avoid certain trademarks of the conventional Broadway romance. Rather than a tight action, his play consists of a few "Sally Bowles" events that take place during the course of four months and lend his play the quality of a short story. And rather than the conventional intrigue of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, the plot is more a love story manqué, along the lines of Varya and Lopakhin in The Cherry Orchard: boy meets girl, does not try to get her, and leaves.

Indeed, Van Druten's play is not mysteriously structureless. It is framed by the trite device of having the author/observer on stage at the beginning and end of the play, typing the beginning and end of his tale. Nor does

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[1]Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), p. 258.

[2]Ibid., p. 259.

Van Druten avoid end-of-act climaxes or other traditional devices. Act I finishes with Christopher Isherwood and Sally Bowles making arrangements for her abortion. Act II ends with their first argument, and the play's turning point occurs in Act III, scene ii, when Sally defends Chris to her arch-conservative mother and Chris simultaneously rediscovers his principles and self-discipline. The climactic scene follows shortly, when Chris and Sally agree to go their separate ways.

If the dramas of the 1950s are descendants of Ibsenesque realism, the comedies borrow their tactics from centuries-old comedic situations and routines, substantiating Northrop Frye's theory that the basis of most conventional comedy is "less a form than a formula."[1] In The Seven Year Itch, for instance, the formula of the philandering husband who returns to the fold goes back to Plautine comedy. The only twist here is that the comic obstacle is neither the betrayed wife, the girl being pursued, nor some punitive father, but rather the comic protagonist himself, whose modern, guilt-ridden fantasies

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[1]Northrop Frye, "The Structure of Comedy," in Eight Great Comedies, eds. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto (New York: The New American Library, 1958), p. 461. This essay originally appears in Anatomy of Criticism under the heading "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy."

are punishment enough and eventually bring him back to the straight and narrow.

The play is full of recognizable comic devices: near misses of the physical sort (an object crashing onto a sofa the second after someone gets up); numerous reversals, as the protagonist imagines now joy, now horrible retribution; sex (he does succeed in seducing the girl); repetition; wrong people arriving at the wrong time; a scene of comic recognition when the protagonist realizes that none of his awful fantasies will materialize; and of course the requisite happy ending, as the protagonist rushes off to join his wife, in this case, in Westport.

Character

In the best dramas of this period, the characters, as Francis Fergusson writes, share in the general action by analogy and exhibit "individual variations upon it."[1] In other words, each dramaturgical element participates in the overall dramatic action. Through plot, events reveal the action; the characters are individualized embodiments of the action; language expresses the action. In Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, for example, the general action might be called "the eradication of mendacity," an action that each of the

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[1]Francis Fergusson, The Idea of A Theatre (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 148.

characters embodies: Maggie participates through her attempt to make Brick face the truth about his feelings for Skipper; Big Daddy, through the same goal; and Brick by revealing to Big Daddy that the man is really dying. Even the secondary characters--Brick's brother and sister-in-law--try desperately to expose what they perceive as the mendacity in the marital relationship between Maggie and Brick.

In lesser dramas from this time, the characters function more at the behest of theatrical mechanics. In the courtroom drama Inherit the Wind, Henry Drummond, for all his apparent roundness as a character, functions really as an apostle for the virtuous people in this play, while Matthew Harrison Brady, with his clear egotism from the beginning functions as the evildoer.

A character in the typical American drama of this period is one with "a life story behind him."[1] He has a past, which motivates or at least explains his present behavior, and one of the dramatist's tasks is to unfold this history "in bits and pieces which the reader or spectator can later fit together."[2] The character is a

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[1]Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 59.

[2]Ibid., p. 59.

psychologically understandable person, whose behavior results from a combination of past environment, past experience, and his own self-defined needs, all of which affect his reactions to present experience. Thus, in Picnic, we are asked to understand that Hal's apparent lack of self-control is in some way related to his insecure childhood and lack of parental guidance, having to make it on his own and being able to rely only on his physical strength and ability to charm women. In short, his present difficulties stem from never having been loved and never having truly loved another person. Hal, like the majority of characters in these plays, is what Eric Bentley defines as a "fully explained"[1] character. There are reasons for his behavior. He is a character whose behavior can be understood in terms of a psychology textbook; he is not one whose personality has some resonance that takes him beyond the concrete into the realm of the "enigmatic."[2]

While the characters in these American dramas are affected and formed by a past we do not see, they are usually not locked into a continuation of one kind of behavior, or experience, as they would be in a naturalistic play. To varying degrees, the characters in these plays

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[1]Ibid., p. 69.

[2]Ibid., p. 68.

want to break out of their past and present experience; they want to realize themselves, they are seeking and frequently attain some kind of change in their lives. At the point where Hal confronts Madge, he recognizes for the first time in his life that he loves and is loved in return, and he becomes what he has never been before, someone who can believe in himself. Johnny, at the end of A Hatful of Rain, faces the terrifying nature of his drug addiction and asks his wife to call the police. Brick, in the second ending that Williams wrote for his director Elia Kazan, defends Maggie's lie about her pregnancy and thus tacitly admits that he is willing to begin moving out of his isolation.

The comedies of this time are more often farces or situation comedies than comedies of character. The characters in such plays as No Time For Sergeants and The Seven Year Itch exist simply to entertain us, by creating or falling victim to ridiculous situations. In No Time For Sergeants, we are not interested in the psychology of Will Stockdale, but we are interested in watching an innocent create mayhem within the U.S. Army. Similarly, we do not need to know much about Richard Sherman in order to understand his natural urge to philander a bit; what we

look forward to knowing is whether, and how, he is going to get away with it.

Language

In the best plays from this time, dialogue furthers plot and reveals character. In Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, the most distinctive voice belongs to Big Daddy; indeed, the first word out of his mouth summarizes his character: "crap,"[1] he says, when Brick offers congratulations for the good medical news. Big Daddy's conversation is well-peppered with four-letter words, for he is a Southern red-neck who has made good and has no pretentions to being anything else. His language, like his personality, is basic. He is interested in basic, natural things: eating; his land; "rutting." He says he "laid" Big Mama "regular as a piston."[2] Essentially, he values life above all else: ". . . hold onto your life," he tells Brick. "There's nothing else to hold onto. . . ."[3] His unpretentiousness is the reason he hates the "mendacity"[4] he sees all around

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[1]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 52.

[2]Ibid., p. 64.

[3]Ibid., p. 58.

[4]Ibid., p. 63.

him--in Gooper and Mae, in Big Mama and in Brick's drinking.

Maggie's language is a reflection of how she has characterized herself, as a cat on a hot tin roof, determined to walk back and forth on that roof rather than jump off. Her conversation is compulsive; she talks in order to hold on to a failed relationship, in order to fill the void created by Brick's refusal to talk or relate to her on any level. As with Big Daddy, indeed as with all the characters in this play except Brick, her language is threaded with animal imagery. She says that Big Daddy "licks his chops"[1] when he looks at her figure; Mae and Gooper "were side by side at the table, direkly across from Big Daddy, watchin' his face like hawks while they jawed an' jabbered. . . ."[2] "Why did y' give dawgs' names to all your kiddies?"[3] she asks Mae. Mae herself wonders "if the mosquitoes are active,"[4] an appropriate question from one who is aching to suck the blood, or the money, from Big Daddy's family. It is not surprising that Big Daddy's favorite term for sexual intercourse is right off the farm, for in this play

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[1]Ibid., p. 41.

[2]Ibid., p. 42.

[3]Ibid., p. 45.

[4]Ibid., p. 55.

animality seems to be equated with life. All the characters in this drama, with the exception of Brick, are "greedily alive."[1]

Brick's language is also particular to him alone. Like his name, it is contained, unmoving. He talks in monosyllables and short sentences devoid of imagery. His first line in Act I is a question: "What'd you say, Maggie? Water was on s'loud I couldn't hear ya. . . ."[2] He has walled himself off from Maggie, from the world, and refuses to hear or feel. Later in Act II, during the long colloquy with his father, the only word that seems to arouse Brick's passion is "disgust."[3] It is a word, in this context, resonant of death. Brick's dry, sanitary words are more resonant of death than those of Big Daddy, who is psychologically alive even though dying physically.

As Ruby Cohn writes, in Williams' plays the characters are unusually verbal, given to imagery to a degree unique in American drama. "His major instrument," Cohn writes,

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[1]Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 112.

[2]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 40.

[3]Ibid., p. 62.

"is distinctive dialogue that embraces nostalgia, frustration, sadness, gaiety, cruelty and compassion."[1]

Yet Williams, and with him Arthur Miller, are the exceptions during this period. In the majority of American plays on Broadway, the language is monotonous, sanitized, and characters have barely distinguishable voices. In Robert Anderson's Tea and Sympathy, while the dialogue moves the plot along (there is little that is extraneous), everyone talks in the same colorless fashion, with the most superficial of differences. Laura's language is more grammatical than anyone else's, because she is a lady. To show that Lilly, the only other faculty wife in this play, is less ladylike, Anderson inserts the occasional "honey" or "baby" in her dialogue.[2] The conversation of the boys at the school is salted with identical examples of adolescent slang. The most distinctive voice in the play belongs to a comparatively minor character, Tom Lee's father, a hail-fellow-well-met person who addresses everyone with a "hiya," calls a man "fella," and is given to all-American cliches such as "bending the elbow"[3] and "knee-high to a

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[1]Cohn, Dialogue, p. 129.

[2]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 282.

[3]Ibid., p. 290.

grasshopper."[1] This is language that sketches general attitudes, it does not develop character. Tom Lee's father exemplifies the conventional, macho American male, Laura is generally womanly and loving, the adolescents are of the boys-will-be-boys sort.

As to verbal wit, the comedies employ straightforward one-liners, as in the following exchange from No Time For Sergeants:[2]

Psychiatrist: Now-girls. How do you like girls?
Will: What girls is that, sir?
P: Just girls. Just any girls.
W: Well, I don't like just any girls. There's one old girl back home that ain't got hair no longer than a hound-dog's and she's always-
P: No! Look, when I say girls I don't mean any one specific girl. I mean girls in general; women, sex! Didn't that father of yours ever sit down and have a talk with you?
W: Sure he did.
P: Well?
W: Well what?
P: What did he say?
W: (With a snicker). Well, there was this one about these two travelin' salesmen. . . .

Theme

The themes of the plays under discussion here tend to fall into three categories: love relationships; the

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[1]Ibid., p. 291.

[2]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 589.

problematic aspects of society; and the individual in relation to the universe. Plays about love relationships focus on the interactions of parents and children or between men and women; in this group I place I Am A Camera, The Rose Tattoo, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, Picnic, Bus Stop, and The Seven Year Itch. Plays that deal with the problematic aspects of contemporary society have a sociological or political slant, and in this group I put A Hatful of Rain, which is about the ill effects of drug addiction; Tea and Sympathy, which uses homosexuality as a vehicle for dealing with the problems of prejudice and peer pressure; Inherit the Wind which represents the liberal political viewpoint of the times by advocating freedom of speech and thought; The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial, which represents the conservative political viewpoint of the times by advocating the rule of authority; and comedies such as No Time For Sergeants and The Solid Gold Cadillac--the first is a farce that takes on the stupidities of the U.S. Army, the second is a mild attempt to satirize big business. Plays about the individual in relation to the universe focus on an individual's spiritual or moral crisis that illuminates, both for the character and for the audience, either man's relationship to the world around him, his responsibility to other human beings or his relationship to himself. In this

category I put The Crucible and A View From the Bridge, for Miller, almost alone among the playwrights writing for Broadway at this time, assumes the burden of cultural fear and resultant paranoia that he perceived in America and indeed in the post-war environment around the world.

> It is no disgrace to search one's soul, . . . It is rather the first mark of honesty and the pool from which all righteousness flows. The strength of a Lincoln . . . was not compounded of a time-bound mastery of military force alone, nor of an image monolithic and beyond the long reach of doubt. . . . he seemed to harbor in his soul an ever-renewing tear for his enemies and an indestructible desire to embrace them all.[1]

Yet a categorization of themes does not by itself give an indication of what these plays are about. To get a true picture of the ideas conveyed in the dramas and comedies of the 1950s, one must analyze the attitudes the plays convey, intentionally or unintentionally. One must analyze the attitudes toward family, love, sexuality, and marriage; the attitudes toward the roles of men and women; toward the individual in society; and toward contemporary American society generally.

The image of the family that we find in the plays of the 1950s is somewhat ambiguous. We see that in many instances the traditionally close relationship between

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[1]Arthur Miller, "The Playwright and the Atomic World," in Theatre in the Twentieth Century, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), p. 41.

parents and children is being torn. In The Rose Tattoo, Rosa is at odds with her mother, whom she perceives as too strict. In Picnic, Madge rebels against her mother's wishes and instructions by running off to join Hal; Millie dreams of leaving home when she grows up, going to New York City and becoming a writer. Rachel, in Inherit the Wind, is at odds with her narrow-minded father. In each of these cases, the younger generation views the older one as restrictive, punitive and generally behind the times.

Yet the family as an institution is not being negated in these plays. The implication is that Madge and Hal will establish their own family, as will Rachel and her revolutionary biology teacher, as will Rosa and her sailor. If there is youthful rebellion here, it is against parents who would interfere with the course of true love.

Indeed, the power of love between a man and a woman is one of the major attitudes communicated in these plays. The majority of these dramas and comedies, even the ones where family or love is not the focus, communicate that love has power to heal and cure, whether within the boundaries of marriage or not, although usually the marriage structure is portrayed as healthier. In Picnic, love gives both Hal and Madge self-respect, and the implication at the play's end is that whatever trials await

the couple, love will find a way. In the world of this play, not listening to the call of love is destructive. Helen Potts would have been happier had she not allowed her mother to annul her marriage years earlier. Without Howard, the school teacher Rosemary is a sour old maid.

Nor is love something that benefits only women in these plays. It is the healing power of Maggie's love that will bring Brick back to normalcy. In Tea and Sympathy, the message is that a man can function sexually only when he cares about the woman with whom he is making love.[1]

Laura: Tom, that didn't work because you didn't believe in it . . . in such a test.
Tom: I touched her, and there was nothing.
L: You aren't in love with Ellie.
T: That's not supposed to matter.
L: But it does.

In A Hatful of Rain, the supportive nature of Celia's love for her addicted husband will help him through the difficult time of withdrawal from his heroin habit.

If love between a man and a woman can cure all ills, sex without love is not fulfilling and can even be destructive. In I Am A Camera, Chris and Sally talk about sex in the wake of Sally's abortion:[2]

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[1]Ibid., p. 313.

[2]Ibid., p. 17.

Sally: . . . having children . . . ought to be the result of something very rare and special and sort of privileged, instead of just <u>that</u>! What are you grinning about?
Chris: Well, that's what it's supposed to be. The result of something rare and special. That's what <u>that's</u> supposed to be.
S: Oh, goodness, is it? Yes, I suppose it <u>is</u> supposed to be. Oh, is <u>that</u> why people say it's wrong to do it when you're not married, or terribly deeply in love?
Chris: Yes, of course it is.
Sally: Well, why didn't anyone ever <u>tell</u> me?
C: I expect they did, and you didn't believe them.

The penalties of sex without love are abortion, loneliness and unhappiness with oneself. In <u>The Rose Tattoo</u>, the fate of the philandering Rosario delle Rose is death, appropriately in the 10-ton truck of which he and Serafina were so proud. The Girl in <u>The Seven Year Itch</u>, in the final analysis, prefers love and marriage to an affair:[1]

Richard: Look. You're not upset about anything, are you?
The Girl: No. No, I feel fine. Are you?
R: Are you sure? I mean, well . . .
G: No, really, I feel wonderful . . . Only . . . Well, suddenly I feel like maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have to start getting in at one o'clock again . . .
R: Didn't you say--I mean--wouldn't that spoil everything?
G: You don't understand--I mean it would be pretty nice to have to start getting in at one o'clock again. As soon as I find someone

[1]Ibid., p. 532.

> who's fallen desperately in love with me--someone who's sweet and intelligent and married--to me. . . .

The women in these plays largely exist to be mothers, lovers and wives, with the emphasis on the last. If the women are unattached, that is either because they are too young (Millie in Picnic, Elma in Bus Stop), or because they are more interested in nourishing themselves for the time being (The Girl in The Seven Year Itch, Sally in I Am A Camera). Significantly, each of these last thinks of her current role as temporary. The Girl really wants to be married, and Sally has no function that she can take seriously: "I'm not even an actress, really," she tells Chris. "I'd love to see my name in lights, but even if I had a first-night tomorrow, if something exciting turned up, I'd go after it. . . ."[1] "I'm sentimental enough to hope that one day I'll meet the perfect man, and marry him and have an enormous family and be happy, but until then--well, that's how I am."[2] Indeed, if women work in these plays, it is at the conventional careers of model, actress, and teacher--functions they perform only because they are not yet married.

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[1]Ibid., p. 36.

[2]Ibid.

Men in these plays are also victims of clichés. A few, for instance, appear to be the literary descendants of Stanley Kowalski and are all muscle and little brain (Hal in Picnic, Bo in Bus Stop, Alvaro Mangiacavallo in The Rose Tattoo). Sometimes the cliché is tempered with an ingredient that threatens to become a cliché in its own right. Hal becomes more of a man when he discovers he can love, as does Bo; Alvaro stops short of being brutish because he is sensitive to Serafina; Brick has a chance to function again in his role as husband when he can admit his vulnerability to himself and to Maggie. In Tea and Sympathy, Robert Anderson completely reverses stereotypes: the jock athletic teacher has the homosexual tendencies, while the sensitive, artistic young man is the heterosexual.

Certainly, men are the doers in these plays and have the most room for self-expression. In I Am A Camera, it is Chris who writes and objectively observes the world around him. In The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial and Inherit the Wind, men are the lawyers, the journalists, the thinkers. In all these plays, if there is a man in the family, he is the bread-winner.

The playwrights are following theatrical tradition here and also mirroring the culture of the times. In

America, wrote Max Lerner, marriage is "an earnest partnership: on the part of the man, for someone with whom he can achieve self-expression and build an effective going concern; on the part of the woman, for self-expression through children, a home. . . ."[1] The American woman, according to Lerner's analysis, has an ambiguous place in society, because "psychically and socially she is caught in a society still dominated by masculine power and standards."[2]

There is something earthbound about these men, however. They do not question their identity either as coherent individuals or in relationship to the world around them. Few experience anything like alienation or anomie. If they feel at sea, this is a temporary discomfort caused by recognizable and often very specific holes in their lives, by problems that are pragmatic and correctable. Hal will be happy if he finds a job and a good wife. Bo just needs a good woman, as does Alvaro Mangiacavallo. Christopher Isherwood simply has to sow some wild oats and then he will regain the discipline that enables him to write. Even the adolescent in Tea and Sympathy knows that there is

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[1]Max Lerner, America As A Civilization (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 591.

[2]Ibid., p. 604.

a concrete solution to his loneliness and sense of inadequacy. These characters want to fulfill themselves, but that fulfillment does not involve a questioning of their reason for existence or their place in the universe. On the contrary, they operate within the system; they accept the norm, even if, temporarily, they have not attained it. The only protagonists who question their identities in any moral or ontological sense are John Proctor in The Crucible and Eddie Carbone in A View From the Bridge.

John Proctor is the existential hero who thinks for himself and in the end succeeds in being true to himself, thus acting in good faith.

> Man is not to be defined as a "reasoning animal" or a "social one," but as a free human being, entirely indeterminate, who must choose his own being when confronted with certain necessities, such as being already committed in a world full of both threatening and favorable factors among other men who made their choices before him, who have decided in advance the meaning of these factors.[1]

"What is John Proctor? What is John Proctor?"[2] Miller's hero asks. Although the question comes on the last morning of his life, for Proctor the entire play is about his search to define himself by taking responsibility for his

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[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Forgers of Myths," in European Theories of the Drama, ed. Barrett H. Clark (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 400.

[2]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 400.

actions. The search begins when he ends the affair with Abigail and is over when he is unwilling to be guided by forces he cannot see and which seem to have abandoned him and his fellow townfolk. "God is dead!"[1] he asserts to Danforth. Proctor will not be defined by a temporal judge such as Danforth, whose decisions contradict what is patently true. And although Proctor asks his wife to judge him, in the end he makes his own moral decisions and in so doing creates himself. "How may I live without my name?"[2] he cries to Danforth. How can I live, if I do not own myself? In death, at least, Proctor keeps faith with himself.

Eddie Carbone, the tragic protagonist of A View From the Bridge, is also trying to define himself, although unlike Proctor, Eddie is experiencing passions he is afraid to acknowledge. Thus, his choices are made in bad faith. He betrays his community because he cannot face the truth about his love for his niece; to paraphrase Gerald Weales, "Eddie accepts the bad label because he cannot face the true label. Thus he betrays the rules of a society he

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[1]Ibid., p. 393.

[2]Ibid., p. 402.

basically accepts."[1] Eddie's panic, which increases as the play goes along, derives from shifts in himself that he projects onto the world around him. His challenge to Marco is a misplacement of responsibility. "I want my name," he says in an echo of Proctor, "Marco's got my name."[2] In his moment of anagnorisis, Beatrice does give Eddie his name by telling him the truth. Eddie still cannot accept that image of himself, but unconsciously, perhaps, he senses the deeper guilt and sacrifices himself.

"The heroes of [Arthur Miller's] plays, still seeking meaning for their lives, break out and destroy themselves, and in so doing make a comment on the American way of life they leave behind."[3] Certainly this is true of The Crucible, which Miller made clear at the time was a criticism of Joseph McCarthy and the kind of thinking that allows one group of men to ride roughshod over another simply because of differences in belief.

For at least one drama critic, Miller's social criticism was not forceful enough. Writing about The Crucible, Eric Bentley finds fault with Miller.

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[1]Gerald Weales, American Drama Since World War II, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 13.

[2]Gassner, Best American Plays, p. 345.

[3]Raymond Williams, Drama From Ibsen to Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 275.

> . . . what is he attacking? And is he really attacking it? "He's attacking the American way of life," says someone. "Why nothing of the sort," says someone else, "he shows great sympathy for it." The punch is threatened; and then pulled. We are made to feel the boldness of the threat; then we are spared the violence of the blow. Now isn't this particular ambiguity strikingly characteristic of that large wing of the liberal movement which has been overawed by communism? . . . The Crucible is a play for people who think that pleading the Fifth Amendment is not only a white badge of purity but also a red badge of courage.[1]

Yet Bentley was aware that Miller's attitude and subject were rarities on Broadway.

> In The Crucible, Mr. Miller says something that has to be discussed. Nor am I limiting my interest to the intellectual sphere. One sits before this play with anything but intellectual detachment. At a moment when we are all being "investigated," or imagining that we shall be, it is vastly disturbing to see indignant images of investigation on the other side of the footlights. Why, one wonders, aren't there dozens of plays each season offering such a critical account of the state of the nation--critical and engage?[2]

But with the exception of Miller and Williams, few playwrights writing for Broadway heeded Bentley's call. Some of Williams' work from the 1950s is experimental in form and increasingly harsh in tone and attitude. Camino Real (1953) is an imaginative expressionist work that had an earlier incarnation in 1946 as Ten Blocks on the Camino

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[1]Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), p. 257.

[2]Ibid., p. 90.

Real, but the majority of the daily New York theatre critics did not respond positively to the play's allegorical style, and bad reviews closed the play after 60 performances. Two subsequent plays from the 1950s, Orpheus Descending (1956), a rewrite of the earlier Battle of Angels (1940) and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959) echo several of the themes that Williams had incorporated in A Streetcar Named Desire (1947). Both of the later plays depict worlds in which the artist, the dreamer and the innocent are essentially victims of stronger yet morally corrupt individuals. Of the many differences between A Streetcar Named Desire and Sweet Bird of Youth, however, one of the most significant in terms of Williams' outlook on the world is that the territorial prerogative exercised by Stanley Kowalski has widened to include the community of an entire town, whose denizens are at the beck and call of a cruel and morally corrupt yet apparently all-powerful politician. It is one of Williams' unusually overt comments on a contemporary society that he sees as allowing almost no control to those who would give of themselves creatively or emotionally.

In the realm of comedy, the critical spirit is found in John Patrick's The Teahouse of the August Moon (1952), which is based on a novel of the same name by Vern Sneider.

This comedy is strongly satirical of the behavior of the American military in a foreign country, in this case the island of Okinawa. The portrait of the pompous and ignorant Colonel Wainwright Purdy III has much in common with Frank O'Hara's General in The General Returns From One Place to Another (1964). And even though Purdy is eventually foiled in his plan to tear down the teahouse, the happy ending occurs so glibly and so in-the-nick-of-time, that we cannot help but realize the fairy tale nature of the resolution and know that in reality, Purdy's planned finale would have succeeded. The play received both the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for 1954.

But the aim in most of the comedies from this time was surely to entertain, and Williams and Miller notwithstanding, even the dramas that seem to be about problematic social issues often "pull the punch" in the final analysis. A Hatful of Rain is not about a society in which drug addiction flourishes or is a symptom of some deeper social ailment; it is about triumph over adversity. On the surface, Tea and Sympathy depicts a world much like American society at the time, when peer pressure was inordinately powerful and to be different was regarded with suspicion. But in the end, Anderson steps back from the

edge. Rather than depict the reality of what happens to the lone dissenter--rather than portray his destruction and throw down the gauntlet to American society--Anderson allows the dissenter to be understood by someone. The world, Anderson implies, is really not so terrible after all.

If Broadway's American playwrights are not usually critical of American life, this is not because there was nothing to be critical about. As the 1960s would later reveal, there was plenty to be critical of, and much of it not far below the surface. Yet, as the British historian Godfrey Hodgson writes, the 1950s in America was not a critical age. It was, instead, an age of consensus.

> The period from the middle of the 1950s, in the United States, up to the impact of the crisis of the 1960s was . . . an age of consensus. Whether you look at the writings of intellectuals or at the position taken by practicing politicians or at the data on public opinion, it is impossible not to be struck by the degree to which the majority of Americans in those years accepted the same system of assumptions.[1]

Some of the consensus, according to Hodgson's interpretation, was a kind of after-shock following the political demise of McCarthy. Although the Senator himself had been excised from the political scene, the aura of what he

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[1]Godfrey Hodgson, America In Our Time (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 68.

had been able to accomplish permeated attitudes and behavior. "Intolerance and anti-communist hysteria were not dead, but at least exploiting them was no longer fashionable.[1]

> For some seven years after 1955, few fundamental disagreements, foreign or domestic, were aired in either presidential or Congressional politics. . . . The Eisenhower administration accepted that the federal government must continue social security and such other New Deal programs as had stood the test of public popularity. It was ready to enforce due compliance with the law in civil rights, though reluctantly and with caution. And it was prepared to use fiscal and monetary measures to maintain full employment and economic growth. Not much more, and no less could be said of the Kennedy administration in the first two years. . . .
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> Not only in Washington but in the press, on television, and--with few exceptions--in the academic community, to dissent from the broad axiom of consensus was to proclaim oneself irresponsible or ignorant. That would risk disqualifying the dissenter from being taken seriously, and indeed often from being heard at all.
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> A strange hybrid, liberal conservatism, blanketed the scene and muffled debate.[2]

In addition, according to Hodgson, reasons for dissent seemed non-existent, especially among middle-class Americans. With the McCarthy hysteria gone, with the Korean War over, the middle class could return to the feeling of exuberant self-confidence that it had begun to savor at the end of World War II. This confidence was based on the

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[1]Ibid., p. 72.

[2]Ibid., pp. 72-73.

prosperity of the United States and on the concomitant belief that prosperity by itself could cure whatever social ills might exist. Herbert S. Parmet, writing about the 1950s in his unusually objective biography of Eisenhower, notes that

> [Americans] despite the two relatively minor recessions, were enjoying the highest standard of living by any society in history. The children and survivors of the Great Depression had finally come of age; the great new middle class treasured its material well-being and was in no mood to share hard-won gains. Imbued with the American dream and the Protestant ethic, fearing international--and even internal--communism more than the decay of their own society, they were ready to agree that public assistance would kill private initiative.[1]

The conservative historian Allen J. Matusow writes with some acerbity that even liberal intellectuals, who 20 years earlier "flirted with Marxism, dreamed of utopias, idealized the common folk,"[2] now, whether from anxiety or financial well-being, joined in one of the underlying tenets of consensus, anti-communism.

> Prominent intellectuals not only declared for the West in the Cold War; they volunteered to be foot soldiers in the ideological battle. . . . As the intellectuals rallied to the defense of America in the early fifties, they retreated from their role as critics of society. For one thing, there no longer seemed much to criticize. After the war the

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[1]Herbert S. Parmet, Eisenhower and the American Crusades (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), p. 576.

[2]Allen J. Matusow, The Unraveling of America (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 4.

> crisis of capitalism had failed to make its expected reappearance, and unprecedented prosperity began eroding the old antagonism toward big business.[1]

The segments of the American population most unwilling to participate in the liberal conservative consensus were blacks who, despite their own internal conflicts, were actively if non-violently waging battles against Southern segregation, and isolationists, who believed that Eisenhower was soft on communism and had crawled into bed with the Eastern Establishment. Eventually, as the decade progressed and turned the corner into the 1960s, there were also more evident critical stirrings among artists and intellectuals.

> It was not, as some have maintained, a 'placid' decade. No years that contained McCarthy and McCarthyism, a war in Korea, constant fear of other conflicts and atomic annihilation, and spreading racial violence, could be so described. Perhaps the placidity of the President promoted that impression.[2]

Whether the middle-class complacency was real or a reaction against an undercurrent of anxiety, the majority of American playwrights who wrote for Broadway projected the liberal conservative consensus that America was wonderful and that all things were possible in this best of

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[1]Ibid., p. 5.

[2]Parmet, Eisenhower, p. 577.

all possible places. Thus the excess of sentimentality and "happy endings" in so many dramas of this time. Thus, too, Elia Kazan's request that Williams write a resolution for Brick's problem. Johnny in A Hatful of Rain turns himself over to the police (no question that the drug addiction treatment will work), and Robert Anderson shies away from a truly honest depiction of life. For this reason also, with the exception of isolated examples like The Teahouse of the August Moon, there is an absence of stringent satire among the comedies written during this period.

Again, whether as a reflection of how middle-class America truly viewed itself, or as a defense against underlying uncertainty, the worlds of the majority of these plays are ordered. In most of these plays, right and wrong are clear, and rewards go to those who follow the right path, unhappiness to those who do not. In the world of any Inge play, the characters know which values are good, which are bad and they do not quarrel with the arrangement. A family is good; to be a loner leads to unhappiness. Marriage is good; the single life is not. Love is always positive; hate is destructive. The world may be changing, as in Inherit the Wind, where an outmoded set of rules is being replaced by a new system, but the world of this play is certainly not a moral vacuum. Indeed, in a general way,

all the plays under discussion here are about rules; the plays are about obeying rules or transgressing them, and the consequences of each. In the worlds of these plays, actions have predictable consequences, because the characters acknowledge codes of behavior, codes for right and wrong, from the very beginning. Thus, by extension, actions also have meaning, for the characters are operating within worlds where there is a "because"--where B happens because a character does, or does not do, A.

Even in the plays of Williams and Miller from this time there are clearly articulated codes of behavior. The difference is that their heroes and heroines usually rebel against the established order and one way or another they go down to defeat. In The Crucible, Proctor revolts against a code that Miller has depicted as hypocritical and detrimental to individual freedom. In A View From the Bridge, however, Eddie transgresses a code that he should have upheld and must die for it. The worlds in such Williams plays as Orpheus Descending and Sweet Bird of Youth do not allow the individual who is at odds with the community's norm to exist. And thus in Orpheus Descending, Val and Lady, the artist and the foreigner, are murdered by the townspeople, as in effect is the corrupted but vital dreamer Chance Wayne in Sweet Bird of Youth. With the

exception of A View From the Bridge, Miller and Williams are questioning the established order through these plays, and even in A View From the Bridge Miller is indirectly questioning the kind of environment that would encourage one man to inform on another.

The majority of playwrights writing for Broadway held to realism as their preferred style, perhaps because realism as they used it allowed a protagonist a choice, allowed him to overcome the difficulties of his situation rather than be overwhelmed by them. In addition, the dramatic structure that had evolved with the true realism of Ibsen--that of the tightly constructed prose play with its principles for exposition, act endings, climaxes, and denouements--was apparently an appropriate form for plays that intended to project ordered environments. A harmonious, predictable literary form, whatever imaginative or critical uses it might be put to by a Miller or a Williams, was generally a good vehicle for conveying an attitude that all was right with America, all problems could be solved.

There is something artificial about America's view of itself during the 1950s. There is something artificial about most of these plays. The majority lack violence, anger, ugliness; they have a decorousness about them. "Theatre is an escape," Eric Bentley writes as early as

1954, "and 'realist' theatre is no longer an exception to the rules: it differs from non-realistic theatre only in pretending to be so."[1]

American Playwriting Off Broadway 1952-1962

Did American playwriting Off Broadway also subscribe to the liberal conservative consensus? The answer, in large part, is yes. New work by American playwrights Off Broadway did not depart substantially from the form and outlook of new American plays on Broadway, although there were pockets of experimentation throughout the decade, culminating in the avant-garde dramaturgy of Jack Gelber, Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit from 1959 to around 1962 and thus overlapping with the start of what came to be considered Off Off Broadway.

But plays like Bullfight, Sing Me No Lullaby, The Girl on the Via Flaminia, Teach Me How To Cry, Career, Me, Candido!, A Palm Tree In A Rose Garden, and Jackknife owe their structures, ideas of character and language to the same mechanically constructed realism embraced by Broadway, although the outlooks on the world occasionally differ. Sing Me No Lullaby and The Girl on the Via Flaminia present strongly critical attitudes of America. The first play, a

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[1]Bentley, The Dramatic Event, p. 150.

drama about a man suspected by the F.B.I. of pro-Communist sympathies, implies that a country which condones and even encourages persecution is destroying human beings. The Girl on the Via Flaminia, a drama about the relationship between an American soldier and an Italian girl shortly after the defeat of Italy, condemns the allied liberators of World War II, particularly the Americans, for being almost as destructive in their way as the Axis powers. It is, in effect, an anti-war play, in which the principal targets are Americans.

But the majority of the plays Off Broadway espouse the same kind of value system as the majority of their Broadway cousins. In Teach Me How To Cry; Me, Candido!; A Palm Tree In A Rose Garden; and Jackknife, even the most serious difficulties dissolve to make way for an implied or actual happy ending. In Teach Me How To Cry, Patricia Joudry's sentimental drama about two lonely adolescents, Melissa and Will separate at the end but vow to love each other forever and see each other again one day. Even if they should not meet again, the ending implies that the fact of their having loved each other will enable them to conquer all the ills of life. In Me, Candido! the good-hearted judge awards the young Candido to the adoptive father Jesus, over the objections of the social worker, because the Judge is

swayed by the outpouring of love for the boy. Career, which was originally produced at the Alley Theatre in Texas before being moved to New York, does not have a happy ending but nonetheless upholds middle-class values. In this relatively unromantic look at the hardships of the acting profession, the ending implies that the protagonist would have been happier had he been able to accustom himself to a middle-class life, with wife, children and a steady job.

New playwrights who depart from realism as a style tend to look to the French dramas of Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Anouilh and Jean Giraudoux as models. In particular, these writers frequently adopt Anouilh's and Giraudoux's device of using classical myths to point out the inadequacies of contemporary civilization.

One of the more imaginative plays of this sort is The Immortal Husband by the poet James Merrill, which was produced by the Artists Theatre at the Theatre de Lys in 1955. Here, Merrill borrows from the myth of the Greek goddess Aurora, who fell in love with the mortal Tithonus. Aurora gave Tithonus the gift of eternal life, but neglected to include eternal youth, and eventually Aurora changed the continually aging Tithonus into a grasshopper.

In Merrill's play, the myth is used as a parable to point up the duality of contemporary existence. Aurora (who symbolizes eternal youth) and Mark (who symbolizes youth's bedfellow carelessness) go off to seek adventure, leaving behind Tithonus, who represents the dark side of civilization that never dies. Structurally the play operates on two levels. Each of the three acts is a mirror image of the other, showing the relationship between Aurora and her husband across different centuries, and at the same time each act traces the development of the marriage episodically from start to finish.

That Merrill and other contemporary playwrights such as Lionel Abel and Robert Hivnor should look to France for dramaturgical inspiration put them in line with many American literary intellectuals during the 1950s. Indeed, the small group of liberal-intellectual drama critics that wrote during this time urged American playwrights to look to Europe as an example of how to write plays that can rise above the unadventurous realism Broadway was purveying. John Gassner, writing in Theatre Arts, the mouthpiece for the Broadway theatre, labeled this group the "new 'New Critics,'"[1] among whom he numbers Eleanor Clark, William

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[1]John Gassner, "There Is No American Drama," Theatre Arts, September 1952, p. 24.

Becker and Eric Bentley. Gassner chastised them in 1952 for preferring European playwrights to American. "The 'new New Critics' have a more or less European orientation," Gassner wrote. "An American writer is usually favored or disfavored to the degree to which he has approximated some European playwright's talent or fallen short of it."[1]

This is Gassner being sweeping and not a little self-protective. In 1952, it was risky for someone who could be labeled an intellectual, especially someone connected with theatre, to avow in print that he favored Europeans over Americans. Gassner, in fact, wrote in Theatre Arts in 1955, at a safer distance from McCarthyism, that "At the present time there are only two major playwrights alive in the world--O'Casey and Brecht."[2]

But those drama critics who were dissatisfied with American playwriting and were less concerned about speaking their minds were looking to Europe for what was lacking in America. Bentley wrote in 1953-54 that France "is in the

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[1]Ibid., p. 24.

[2]John Gassner, "The Winter of Our Discontent," Theatre Arts, August 1955, p. 23.

lead in playwriting."[1] Theodore Hoffman wrote in Theatre Arts:[2]

> What if the American playwright wants more than surface signals? What if he studies O'Neill, Miller and Williams and finds that they teach him only what to avoid? What if he wants to present social life without corny overtones, to learn how to put political ideas dramatically, how to conceive tragedy in modern terms? The obvious answer is Go to Europe.[3]

In Europe, Hoffman pointed out, the aspiring American playwright could learn by seeing and reading the plays of Cocteau, Lorca, Claudel, Montherlant, Brecht, Giraudoux, and Sartre.

The interest in European dramatists was also plain in the newly-founded Tulane Drama Review (TDR).[4] Side by side with the many essays on tragedy in modern times and the articles about Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and

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[1]Eric Bentley, The Theatre of Commitment (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. viii.

[2]Theodore Hoffman, "The American Theatre is Un-American," Theatre Arts, March 1953, p. 73.

[3]Theodore Hoffman, "The American Theatre Is Un-American," Theatre Arts, March 1953, p. 73.

[4]The journal was published for two issues as The Carleton Review, since the periodical was first published by Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. The third issue, Vol. 1, No. 3, was published by Tulane University in Louisiana, where Robert Corrigan had gone to teach. The board of advisory editors at this time were: Eric Bentley, Columbia University; Hubert C. Heffner, Indiana University; Eugene H. Falk, University of Minnesota; Monroe Lippman, Tulane University.

Arthur Miller, were essays about Lorca, Sartre, Pirandello and Duerrenmatt--"The liberal wing of 20th-century playwriting."[1] In the late 1950s, TDR "began to take up the cause of Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov and the other so-called Absurdist writers."[2] In the May 1958 issue, editor Robert Corrigan printed Antonin Artaud's essay "The Theatre of Cruelty" (the first English translation of The Theatre and Its Double was published in America in 1958 by Grove Press): "We are very pleased to bring you this short piece," Corrigan wrote in the issue's Introduction. "Artaud has made a significant contribution to the modern theatre and since the war his influence in Europe has been strongly felt. This brief article is an introduction of Artaud to the readers of TDR. . . ."[3] Commenting on Arthur Adamov's play Ping Pong, Corrigan wrote that Adamov was

> . . . opening up new territories which other playwrights (and audiences) must explore if the theatre is ever to go beyond the narrow and mechanical limits of naturalism.[4]

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[1]Brooks McNamara, "TDR: Memoirs of the Mouthpiece, 1955-1983," The Drama Review 27 (Winter 1983): 5.

[2]Ibid., p. 6.

[3]Robert Corrigan, TDR 2 (May 1958): 4.

[4]McNamara, "TDR: Memoirs of the Mouthpiece, 1955-1983," p. 6.

During the late 1950s, Off Broadway cautiously began to offer some of the foreign Absurdist plays. Julie Bovasso presented Jean Genet's The Maids at the Tempo Playhouse in 1955. In 1958, the Phoenix gave the first New York performances of Ionesco's The Chairs and The Lesson. Also in 1958, there was a production of Beckett's Endgame at the Cherry Lane, the first professional New York production of a Beckett play since the short-lived Waiting for Godot on Broadway in 1956. Two years later, Genet's Deathwatch was presented at Theatre East, and in 1960 The Balcony at the Circle in the Square. In 1961, Genet's The Blacks was produced at St. Marks Playhouse.

With the liberal intellectuals' steady insistence on the originality of European playwrights, it is not surprising that soon some new American playwriting that appeared Off Broadway reflected this trend. The Connection owes its jazz motifs to the beat writers of the 1950s, notably Jack Kerouac, but it borrows its purposeful blurring of the boundaries of truth and fiction from Pirandello, and in its concrete stage image of the addicts waiting for their fix, the play aligns itself with absurdist drama. Edward Albee's The American Dream is one of the clearest instances from this time where the techniques of European absurdism have been brought to bear in an American context. And

Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet, and I'm Feelin' So Sad is a take-off on absurdist-style irrationality that nevertheless functions in its own right as an absurdist portrait of a mother-dominated America. These playwrights experimented with elements of non-realistic style that the more radical playwrights creating for Off Off Broadway would later ingest and pursue even further.

What is perhaps even more significant in terms of the development of American playwriting during this time is that Gelber, Albee, Kopit and others then considered avant-garde such as Jack Richardson and Arnold Weinstein bring a fresh sense of criticality to their plays. The Connection points an accusing finger at the society on the supposedly safe side of the fourth wall. Not only does Gelber paint an unvarnished portrait of a drug culture--a portrait much more incisive than either the romanticized picture in Kerouac's novels or the sugar-coated view of A Hatful of Rain--but Gelber makes of the image a metaphor that he extends to all of American society. Similarly, The American Dream is an acute satire for this period, saying as it essentially does that the middle-class American family is materialistic and sterile, and that the American dream leads to death. Richardson, in Gallows Humour,

presents a comic but grotesque view of a conformist society in his portraits of the murderer and the executioner. "The tight, white collar of the suburban commuter carried to its logical, metaphorical conclusion is the noose. . . ."[1]

Gelber, Albee, Kopit, Richardson and their avant-garde contemporaries were participating in a transition from the complacent fifties to the radical sixties, what Morris Dickstein calls the "rise of a new sensibility,"[2] "a seedbed of ideas that would burgeon and live in the more activist, less reflective climate that followed."[3] At the same time that European and American absurdist plays were being produced Off Broadway, there were discontented stirrings among students, visual artists, blacks, intellectuals--all of whom were aware and increasingly willing to voice their knowledge of the hypocrisy beneath the system of abundance.

> The tremors of the sixties, which shook institutions in so many remote corners of society, were generated from society's own deep core, from all

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[1]Charles Marowitz, Introduction to Four American Plays (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p. 12.

[2]Morris Dickstein, Gates of Eden (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 51.

[3]Ibid., p. 88.

> those problems in the fifties that could no longer be wished away. . . .[1]

The American absurdists, like the critics writing for TDR, were seeking ways to express their dissatisfaction with both the conventional culture that surrounded them and the largely conventional dramaturgy that dominated American playwriting. Thus they turned to a style of writing that within their frame of reference not only seemed innovative but also enabled them to voice the sense of existential alienation they were experiencing, along with so many novelists, poets and critics writing during the 1950s. Certainly these American playwrights who flourished Off Broadway from 1959 to 1962 paved the way for the more radical styles and outlooks of the new dramatists who would create for Off Off Broadway. Indeed, several of the new dramatists initially wrote plays in the absurdist vein, most notably Jean-Claude van Itallie and Paul Foster, and absurdism as a technique and view of the world is never really absent from the playwriting of the new dramatists. But as the 1960s progress, the work of the radical playwrights becomes increasingly fragmented and alogical, leaving behind even the illogicality of absurdism for a

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[1]Ibid., p. 69.

form that perhaps better mirrored the social and cultural convulsions of the decade.

> The social upheaval in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s not only gave rise to a new cultural movement outside the dominant culture; it also spawned an alternative theatre. Initially, the new theatre was expressive of those who aligned themselves with the various social movements of the time--civil rights, free speech, hippie, anti-nuclear, anti-Vietnam War, ecology, feminist, and gay. It was an alternative to theater of the dominant complacent middle-class society which tended to perpetuate the status quo in its aesthetics, politics, working methods, and techniques.[1]

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[1]Shank, American Alternative Theater, p. 1.

CHAPTER II

REVOLUTIONS IN STRUCTURE

In this chapter I will examine the revolutions in dramatic structure among avant-garde plays written during the 1960s, with particular focus on what I call the collage structure in which these plays were written. I will first discuss these revolutions in terms of some of the specific influences on structure; I will then describe the changes in approach to structure in general terms and subsequently in more detail, citing specific examples.

Influences

I believe that the major influences on the development of structure among the avant-garde plays from this time were absurdism, the theories of Antonin Artaud, Brechtian theatre, and Happenings. As noted in the previous chapter, European absurdism came to the attention of American dramatists and critics during the 1950s and spawned a small number of American absurdist plays. The influence of absurdism is apparent in the avant-garde plays of the 1960s, notably in the use of images as the dominant means of dramaturgic communication. Theatre of the Absurd,

writes Martin Esslin, "is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and therefore it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech. . . . The action in a play of the Theatre of the Absurd is not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images."[1] In the European absurdist plays especially, images are the building blocks of the action as well as the spiritual core of a play. The nearly unchanging landscape in Beckett's Waiting for Godot (a new leaf in the second half of the play is the only addition) mirrors the static condition of the world which Vladimir and Estragon inhabit. The growing corpse in Ionesco's Amédée, Or How To Get Rid Of It pushes the play along to its final image of liberation, at the same time that it communicates the condition of a world overburdened by things and by the past. While the playwrights of the sixties avant-garde would eventually move away from the single concrete image, or the single image spiraling and expanding, to a conglomeration of images, this structural element of absurdist plays was one influence on the sixties avant-garde.

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[1]Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 354.

A weightier influence on the avant-garde playwrights were the theories and vision of Antonin Artaud as expressed in The Theatre and Its Double.

> It had an immediate impact, more especially since many of its ideas seemed to chime so completely with the avant-garde's interest in mysticism, with its suspicion of language, and with its desire to create works in which causality, narrative and character gave way to the power of the image and the liberation of the sensibility.[1]

Artaud called for a theatre that departed from what he considered to be overly-literary tendencies, a reliance on words rather than on the directly theatrical elements of theatre. He called for a theatre that used the elements of the mise en scène as the dominant language.

> Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models; resplendent lighting, incantational beauty of voices, the charms of harmony, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements whose crescendo and decrescendo will accord exactly with the pulsation of movements familiar to everyone, concrete appearances of new and surprising objects, masks, effigies yards high, sudden changes of light, . . .[2]

The sensuous and theatrical aspects of theatre were to be all-important. Words would not be dispensed with entirely,

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[1]Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. III, p. 54.

[2]Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 93.

but would have the logic they possess in dreams. The spectacle might as a whole have a meaning, yet in addition each theatrical element was to be separate and distinct, creating visual and physical images.

> The new stage language of concrete signs will have the power of immediately communicating the exact meaning of each hieroglyphic sign or symbol to the audience. This communicative power, which springs from the direct physical effect achieved by what happens on the stage, constitutes the true magic of the theater.[1]

Even more than absurdism, for which Artaud's theories were also a precursor, Artaud seemed to call for a multiplicity of theatrical elements existing side by side and preserving their heterogeneity, and for a multiplicity of images.

If Artaud's influence is palpable in the work of the 1960s avant-garde, specifically in the collage structure of their work, the shadow of Brecht also stands behind much of the radical playwriting of the 1960s.

> His [Brecht's] intentions . . . were different from those of other leading theaters of his time: (1) he wanted to attack the bourgeois audience, which others made an all-out effort to please; (2) his theme was the cruelties and contradictions of man as a social creature, while other theaters were concerned with psychological problems; and (3) Brecht wanted a deliberate, conscious effect, while

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[1]Martin Esslin, Antonin Artaud (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), p. 92.

> other theaters were interested in illusion or spontaneity.[1]

Brecht appealed to a number of playwrights, directors and artistic directors at this time for the clear political intentions in his plays and for his overt calls for change. None of the radical playwrights under discussion here were as Marxist in political orientation as Brecht, and few so directly challenged the audience to political or social action. The radical plays of the sixties were more critical of society than political. The plays were political only in the sense that thematically they were aligned with the counter-culture movement, which had a range of political opinions and alliances, most conspicuously an anti-war stance. What these playwrights did cull from Brecht in particular was a focus on man as a social creature rather than a psychologically self-involved creature. More significantly for the purposes of this chapter, a number of playwrights also culled Brecht's technique of injecting song, dance, poetry, slogans, and direct address to the audience in the midst of the stage activity. Rarely, however, is there the sense that these playwrights are interrupting stage activity to keep the audience from being so lulled by the theatrical experience

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[1]Joseph Chaikin, The Presence of the Actor (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 35.

that they miss the political perspective. The playwrights are indeed emphasizing the theatricality of their work, but more for its own sake, or to establish an actor-audience connection that also underlines the absence of the fourth wall. Inevitably, the interjection of song, dance and other contrasting theatrical elements contributed to the form of collage.

A further influence on the structure of the radical plays of the sixties were the Assemblages, Environments and Happenings that evolved from both the visual arts and the performing arts in the 1950s and early 1960s. The introduction of Assemblages and Environments into the visual arts during the 1950s broke a number of traditional barriers. Allan Kaprow, the artist who is credited with giving the Happening its name, traced its immediate origin to Assemblages that allowed "the addition of foreign matter to the surface [of a canvas]. . . ."[1] Bedsprings, wire, parts of cars, pots and pans would be hung or otherwise assembled on panels or some other surfaces. Soon, as Kaprow writes, the more radical Assemblages were "large enough to dwarf a man. . . . A broken surface becomes a sort of topography relief in which one could travel, as

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[1]Allan Kaprow, Assemblage, Environments & Happenings (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1965), p. 163.

though up and down the face of a cliff. . . ."[1] This larger construction might become a space into which a person could walk: an Environment.

Where traditional art had enjoined the use of one material to create an aesthetic object--paint, wood or stone, for instance--Assemblages and Environments demanded by definition a collage of a variety of materials. The makers of Assemblages and Environments believed they were the artistic descendants of the Cubists, who had introduced "foreign matter"[2] in the form of paper to their canvases. "It was only a matter of time," writes Kaprow

> . . . before everything else foreign to paint and canvas could be allowed to get into the creative act, including real space. Simplifying the history of the ensuing revolution into a flashback, this is what happened: the pieces of paper curled up off the canvas, were removed from the surface to exist on their own, became more solid as they grew into other materials and, reaching out further into the room, finally filled it entirely. Suddenly, there were jungles, crowded streets, littered alleys, dream spaces of science fiction, rooms of madness, and junk-filled attics of the mind. . . .[3]

Soon, the spectator walking into an Environment became an object of the Environment, a part of the collage, and at this point the Environment became a Happening.

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[1]Ibid., p. 163.

[2]Ibid., p. 165.

[3]Ibid., p. 165.

> To describe a Happening for those who have not seen one means dwelling on what Happenings are not. They don't take place on a stage conventionally understood, but in a dense object-clogged setting which may be made, assembled, or found, or all three. In this setting, a number of participants, not actors, perform movements and handle objects antiphonally and in concert to the accompaniment (sometimes) of words, wordless sounds, music, flashing lights, and odors. The Happening has no plot, though it is an action, or rather a series of actions and events. It also shuns continual rational discourse. . . .[1]

In addition to its variety of juxtaposed elements, the Happening, according to Kaprow, "should take place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing locales,"[2] and "time, which follows closely on space considerations, should be variable and discontinuous."[3]

If one side of the avant-garde arts movement identified the Happening as largely an outgrowth of developments in the visual arts, specifically painting, another viewed the Happening as an outgrowth of the performing arts. There is some validity to this if, with C.W.E. Bigsby, we identify the first Happening as that event staged by John Cage in 1952 at Black Mountain College, where Cage amassed in one room readers of poetry, painters, a pianist, and a dancer, all of whom were told to do whatever they

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[1]Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 265.

[2]Kaprow, Assemblage, p. 190.

[3]Ibid., p. 191.

wanted. As the Happening became more elaborate, often requiring rehearsals, Michael Kirby claimed it for theatre, defining the Happening as "a purposefully composed form of theatre in which diverse alogical elements . . . are organized in a compartmented structure."[1] Indeed, if we look at Kirby's description of the structure of the Happening we can see a link between the Happening and the collage structure that the avant-garde playwrights eventually reached.

> Happenings have abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theatre. . . . In their place, Happenings employ a structure that could be called . . . compartmented. . . .
>
> Compartmented structure is based on the arrangement and contiguity of theatrical units that are completely self-contained and hermetic. No information is passed from one discrete theatrical unit--or 'compartment'--to another. The compartments may be arranged sequentially . . . or simultaneously. . . .[2]

Sometimes different compartments contain the same images, thus evoking connections but not asserting them logically or even, Kirby emphasizes, illogically.

> Functioning in terms of an information structure, the elements in traditional theatre are used in either logical or, as in the Theatre of the Absurd, illogical ways. It can be seen that the elements of a Happening have an alogical function. This

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[1]Michael Kirby, Happenings (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1965), p. 21.

[2]Ibid., p. 13.

> does not mean that either structure or detail does not have an intellectual clarity to the artist, but rather that any private idea structure used in creation is not transformed into a public information structure.[1]

What the visual artists appreciated in the development from Assemblages to Happenings--the contiguity of elements that previously artists would not have dared utilize let alone put into contact with each other, the principle of collage in effect--Kirby describes as compartmenting in the-Happening-as-theatre. Not surprisingly, Kirby sees Artaud as the spiritual ancestor of the Happening, with his emphasis on "the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs."[2]

The Happening thus introduced to the worlds of visual art and performance the idea of many disparate elements coming together to create dissonance; what Sontag calls "disrelation," rather than harmony. Discontinuity, the juxtaposition of thematically unrelated and textually dissimilar objects, the instability of time and place--these were the fundamental tenets of the Happening, and

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[1]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[2]Ibid., p. 34.

they could serve as examples of how traditional structure might be fractured:

> When we think of "composition," it is important not to think of it as self-sufficient "form," as an arrangement as such, as an organizing activity in which the materials are taken for granted as a means toward an end that is greater than they are. This is much too Christian in the sense of the body being inferior to the soul. Rather, composition is understood as an operation dependent upon the materials (including people and nature) and phenomenally indistinct from them. Such materials and associations and meanings . . . generate the relationships and the movements of the Happening, instead of the reverse. The adage that "form follows function" is still useful advice.[1]

Fragmentation

The attitudes towards structure that characterize the avant-garde plays of the 1960s are rebuttals to the principles of dramatic organization that were the trademarks of the realistic dramas and comedies of the previous decade. The avant-garde plays of the 1960s replace logic with contradiction, integration with fragmentation, and neatness with anarchy. Writing about Megan Terry's Keep Tightly Closed in A Cool Dry Place (1965), Peter Feldman, who directed the Open Theatre production, described the play as "a kind of theatrical cubism":

> The author breaks up and reconstructs various facets of the same experience, thereby exposing all the

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[1]Kaprow, Assemblage, p. 198.

> possible aspects of it. There is movement, disorientation, superimposition, new relations between events, a splintering of time and form.[1]

The way that a play is organized has been rethought, and attempts are being made to throw over the rules that generally held sway in the 1950s. Instead of a plot that has a beginning, middle and end, there is frequently a series of images or events that do not present a logical narrative. Indeed, the logical cause and effect process that provides coherence in the plays of the 1950s has no place in this avant-garde dramaturgy, where parts do not necessarily have any sequential relationship to each other. If parts are connected at all, they are more likely, as Michael Kirby writes, to depend "upon sensory rather than intellectual relationships."[2]

In the absence of a logical narrative, the single action propelled by one individual has also been discarded. While a play may still retain a focal figure who appears in many images, generally the idea of a protagonist has been rejected in favor of a group of characters who perform or participate in activities and tasks.

In the same way that this drama rejects unity of action, it also rejects the single spatial point of view.

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[1]Peter Feldman, "Notes for the Open Theatre Production," in Four Plays by Megan Terry (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 204.

[2]Michael Kirby, "The New Theatre," TDR 10 (Winter 1963): 28.

These plays rarely take place in one particular living room or kitchen, unless there is a satiric intention at work. Nor, on the other hand, do these plays usually occur in some nameless void as in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. These plays usually take place quite overtly in the theatre or performance space in which the performers and spectators come together. This overt acceptance of the stage as a stage allows for a flexibility of spatial perspective, so that frequently the realm in which a play happens is some combination of a locale of the imagination and the particular theatre space. Because events, fantasies and images in these plays tend to change from moment to moment, they need no locus except the transmutable one of a theatre, which can then become any place the playwright wishes it to be.

Following close on the absence of unity of place is the absence of a single temporal point of view. Time in these plays is not a stable element; it is a flexible, malleable entity, to be manipulated at will. Past and present frequently exist side by side in the same scene. Lapses of time are often telescoped, so that the idea of the passing of time does not seem to operate in these plays. On the other hand, time is not inexorable. This drama is not interested in the concept of a past unfolding through the course of a play, like locked doors opening to reveal a final, inevitable secret. The past is largely irrelevant to

this drama, except as a source of camp nostalgia or as a repository of myths that can be used to understand the present.

By the same token, time is not conceived of as the empty eternity of Beckett or the endless circularity of Ionesco, although some of the earliest plays of the 1960s, such as Paul Foster's Balls or Jean-Claude van Itallie's Motel are indeed absurdist in their perceptions of time. In the avant-garde plays of the 1960s, the present moment is usually all-important. Activity happens in the here and now, and these plays occur as much as possible in real time. Creation is all-important, not the presentation of an already-created, pre-packaged object. This drama is unwilling to be neurotically influenced by the past and is not interested in being metaphysically concerned with the future.

With changes in the concept of how a play is structured goes a shift in the idea of what constitutes unity. In most of the dramas and comedies of the 1950s, unity depends on a wholeness that is derived from an identifiable beginning, middle and end, and from an action carried through from start to finish by the protagonist and analogously by a play's subsidiary characters. In the avant-garde plays of the 1960s, unity depends on disparate elements creating a collage, a form in which numerous elements are "in

incongruous relationship"[1] to each other, as if some giant hand were shaking a cannister and sending the contents sprawling on stage. Yet overall the seeming disorder is conscious, and even the plays that are most anarchic structurally have a style or theme that unifies their amorphousness.

Images

The avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s use disparate images as the building blocks of a play. The images or stage pictures can be either visual or literary and usually do not have any logical relationship to each other.

At the beginning of the decade, the influence of the European absurdists is clear, notably in the use of concrete poetic images to communicate meaning. Plays such as Motel (1962) by Jean-Claude van Itallie; The Magic Realist (1962) by Megan Terry; A Beautiful Day (1963) by Ruth Krauss; Kenneth Brown's The Brig (1963); and Balls (1964) by Paul Foster present one or more concrete images that act as metaphor.

Balls is particularly evocative of Beckett in its use of a single poetic image to create a metaphor for eternal solitude and loneliness. The single poetic image on stage is that of two white ping pong balls on invisible wires,

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[1]Webster's New World Dictionary, 1964 ed., s.v. "collage."

swinging back and forth, in and out of white light that is focused on their arcs. There is no plot, there is only the situation of two men long-buried in seaside graves, now about to be washed into the ocean. As the two men converse (we hear their voices on tape), other images are created both verbally and aurally: a busload of schoolchildren stop at the gravesite to urinate; a man and a woman stop to make love; the two men recapture events from their past lives. Eventually the coffins float out to sea, the balls swing off stage, and the stage is left in darkness. But it is the image of the balls swinging to and fro in the blackness that provides the central metaphor for the play, an image of endless time much like the bare tree in the barren landscape of Waiting for Godot.

Motel also is reminiscent of the absurdists in that there is no plot, there is instead a pattern of images that culminates in an image that is a concrete metaphor for the destruction of the modern world. The first visual image is a motel room, an artifact of contemporary American/Western civilization. Soon we hear a recorded voice describe past rooms that have contained the seeds or the aftermath of violence:

> I am an old idea. Gaia I have been, and Lilith,
> I am an old idea. Lilly, Molly, Gaia; the walls
> of the stream that from which it springs forth.
> The nothing they enclose with walls, making then
> a place from which it springs forth, in which it

> happens, in which they happen too. I am that idea: roofless stone place where the heat of the sun and the cheers of the people break loose the fangs of the lion. There was that room too, a railroad carriage in the Forest of Compiègne, in 1918 and again in 1941. There have been rooms of marble and rooms of cork, all letting forth an avalanche.[1]

Gaia was born from Chaos; Lilith, in early Semitic folklore, was a female demon believed to inhabit ruins; Compiègne is the site of the Armistice between the Allies and Germany following World War I and the site of France's surrender to Germany early in World War II. And now "There is another room here. And it too will be slashed as if by a scimitar."[2]

The image of the empty room gives way to the next image, as the Motel Keeper Doll, a modern Lilith, enters, followed soon by the Woman Doll and the Man Doll, all moving jerkily like machines. These products of American civilization eventually destroy the other products of American civilization: they jump on the mattress; tear the bedspread; smash pictures; write obscenities on the wall; and decapitate the Motel Keeper Doll, while the Motel Keeper's recorded voice reels off the names of products sold in a

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[1]Van Itallie, Motel, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 83.

[2]Ibid., p. 84.

catalogue, while a civil defense siren blares deafeningly, and the back wall of the stage opens to reveal an automobile, whose headlights shine white light into the eyes of the audience. The Woman Doll and the Man Doll exit through the audience, leaving behind an image of chaos and destruction. We, products of Western civilization, will destroy civilization with our products, among which van Itallie includes the nuclear bomb. "Next year there's a shelter motel to be built by me," the voice of the Motel Keeper boasts. "Shelter motel. Everything to be placed under the ground."[1] The ultimate room will be the one we inhabit during nuclear holocaust. Van Itallie's poetic images build to create a metaphor for apocalypse.

Although both Balls and Motel rely on images rather than plot to convey meaning, neither uses images in the disjunctive fashion that leads to collage. Indeed, while the avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s return at times to the absurdist use of one or several concrete poetic images as metaphor, notably in plays such as Murray Mednick's San (1967) and Willie the Germ (1968), the increasing tendency is toward a surreal amalgam of images or toward contrasting images that are not necessarily surreal in quality yet operate from the assumption that reality is continually

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[1]Ibid., p. 84.

shifting. Sometimes the images convey meaning: both the visual pictures and verbally-created images describe feelings, actions or are symbolic. At other times, the images are simply theatrical facts in themselves; they seem to exist solely as theatrical or sensual objects.

Tom Eyen's surrealistic The White Whore and the Bit Player (1964) uses cinematic techniques to present images from the memories and fantasies of a movie star at the instant of her suicide. The play takes place in the ten seconds before the movie star dies and cuts back and forth between events in the lives and imaginations of the two sides of the star's personality, the whore and the bit player. "The play is a surreal nightmare," writes critic Bonnie Marranca, "its images and dialogue pouring fourth in no coherent order, as if the actress were seeing her life go by in a movie, with all its frames distorted and out of sequence."[1] The play has the quality of a film gone berserk. Rather than proffering one metaphoric image as in Balls, or a few images that build to create a cumulative metaphor as in Motel, The White Whore and the Bit Player operates like a dream, in which image succeeds image with no apparent logic. Sometimes an image reappears with slight nuances, and at other times visions overlap or are present simultaneously

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[1]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 229.

It is as if the structure of the play as a whole were a metaphor for the problem the play addresses, the question of the reality or illusion of images. Are we whatever persona is foisted on us by the outside world? How do we see ourselves, and how do others see us? Which is the true self, the whore or the bit player? So many images are refracted through the kaleidoscope of Eyen's play that finally it is impossible to decide which of the star's facets is the real one and which the false.

Another approach to the development of collage as dramatic structure is seen in the early work of Sam Shepard, notably in The Rock Garden (1964), Shepard's earliest extant play. "Lacking any narrative at all," writes critic Michael Bloom, "the play describes in a kind of triptych portrait a single condition of sensation--the utter tedium and boredom of a typical American family situation."[1]

Each of the three dominant visual images in The Rock Garden seems to represent (for only the most minimal furniture and properties are called for) a different room in an American household: dining room: bedroom; living room. In the first image, a boy and girl silently sip milk at a

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[1]Michael Bloom, "Visions of the End: The Early Plays," in American Dreams, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981), p. 73.

table, while a man, possibly their father, sits at the head of the table reading a newspaper. The girl drops her glass of milk, and there is a black out. In the second image, the boy sits in a chair and answers questions in words of few syllables while a woman, presumably his mother, lies ill in bed and talks about the past; her monologue is subtly seductive. The boy begins the scene wearing undershorts, then periodically exits and reenters having donned additional pieces of clothing. At the end of the scene, the man enters, and the boy leaves. The third image presents the man sitting on a sofa downstage left, delivering a tedious monologue about building a rock garden; the boy sits in a chair facing upstage right and periodically falls off the chair from boredom. Then the boy, in a coup de théâtre, suddenly delivers a monologue in which he describes and achieves orgasm; the man falls off his chair in response.

Through visual and verbal images, Shepard telescopes what could be the action of a traditional family drama, namely a son's coming of age. (Indeed, Shepard in an interview with Kenneth Chubb and the editors of Theatre Quarterly, says that "Rock Garden is about leaving my Mom and Dad").[1] Michael Bloom is not quite accurate when he writes

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[1]Kenneth Chubb, "Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys: Interview with Sam Shepard," in American Dreams, p. 193.

that The Rock Garden has no narrative. In fact, the narrative is condensed into blocks of visual and verbal images. There is no logical connection between scenes in the sense of traceable cause and effect; instead, the images appear like slides, as if the playwright were selectively presenting shots of family life at different stages of the boy's development. Change is the important dynamic here, not continuity.

From disjunctive images as scenes, Shepard moves in Red Cross (1966) to disjunctive images as blocks within the play itself. In Red Cross the opening visual image of the white room with its white beds is interrupted by the block of verbal imagery relating to Carol's dream of skiing down a mountain until her head explodes:

> . . . the top will come right off. My hair will blow down the hill full of guts and blood. Some bluejay will try to eat it probably. My nose will come off and my whole face will peel away.[1]

This monologue gives way to another block of imagery, as Carol leaves, and a Maid appears to make the beds. In the course of making the beds, the Maid receives a swimming lesson from Jim and soon she is astride a bed and then in the middle of a lake, swimming. The Maid leaves, and Carol reenters, immediately launching into a monologue about finding bugs on her body while she was out shopping:

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[1] Sam Shepard, Red Cross, Chicago and Other Plays (New York: Urizen Books, 1981), p. 102.

> Bugs! Bugs all over me. Buried in my skin. Little tiny itty bitty bugs, clawing and biting at me. They're all in my hair and everything. Sucking my blood, Jim![1]

When Jim turns to her, "there is a stream of blood running down his forehead."[2] The blocks of visual and verbal images seem tacked on to each other, an approach that Shepard would develop even further as the decade progressed and as he assimilated the transformation technique of the Open Theatre.

Indeed, one of the most significant contributors to the development of images as the basic ingredient of the collage structure were the transformation exercises of the Open Theatre, which began holding workshops under its director Joseph Chaikin during the 1963-64 season. The major recipients of this technique were Jean-Claude van Itallie and Megan Terry, although Maria Irene Fornes had some involvement with the group, and Sam Shepard "was around the edges of the company"[3] until its dissolution in 1973.

As described by Eileen Blumenthal in Joseph Chaikin, transformation work evolved out of one of Viola Spolin's

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[1]Ibid., p. 124.

[2]Ibid., p. 124.

[3]Eileen Blumenthal, Joseph Chaikin (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 171.

improvisational games,

> . . . along with early expressionistic dream-play technique. Mid-scene, actors might change their characters' age, sex, species, or relationships to others; the time of day, year, or history; the location; the physical scale; and so forth.[1]

Director Peter Feldman writes in his "Notes" for the Open Theatre production of Keep Tightly Closed in A Cool Dry Place:

> The transformation is adapted from a Second City Workshop device but is not merely an acting stunt. It is an improvisation in which the established realities . . . of the scene change several times during the course of the action. What may change are character and/or situation and/or time and/or objectives, etc. Whatever realities are established at the beginning are destroyed after a few minutes and replaced by others. Then these are in turn destroyed and replaced. These changes occur swiftly and almost without transition, until the audience's dependence upon any fixed reality is called into question.[2]

One of the earliest plays to utilize the transformation device is Jean-Claude van Itallie's Interview, in its 1966 Open Theatre production. The play, which is a picture of American society as mechanistic, is built through blocks of images that are created when characters and situations undergo transformations. There is no protagonist; there is instead a community of people who change identities

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[1]Ibid., p. 90.

[2]Feldman, "Notes for the Open Theatre Production," Four Plays by Megan Terry, pp. 200-201.

throughout the course of the play and in so doing shift locale, situation and inevitably the visual image on stage.

The play begins as four Interviewers talk with four Applicants; then the Applicants leave the place of the Interview and become people on Fourteenth Street. Next, the Second Interviewer becomes the Gym Instructor, and we see him trying to mold his Students into "the kind of people seen in advertisements and movies."[1] Soon, "the rapid movements of the gym class become the vibrations of passengers on a moving subway train."[2] Transformations continue until the end of the play, with each image conveying a different situation but essentially demonstrating the lack of communication and automatization within American culture. There is no plot; there are instead swiftly changing images that occur without logical cause and effect.

An even broader panorama of images occurs in Megan Terry's Viet Rock (1966), which Terry indicates evolved out of her Saturday Workshop at the Open Theatre and which uses the transformation technique to explore numerous images of the Vietnam experience. The play encompasses the experience of war from birth to death, starting with performers on

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[1]Jean-Claude van Itallie, Interview, American Hurrah (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1976), p. 41.

[2]Ibid., p. 42.

stage who transform from being actors to being mothers with babies. The babies then become grown sons who are inspected by doctors for induction into the army, and by the end of the play, the sons have died in battle. Images shift rapidly as Terry uses transformations to present facets and attitudes of a social/historical situation. As the core group of performers changes identities, we see war through the attitudes of soldiers, mothers, doctors, the military, politicians, left-wing protesters, and right-wing hawks. Locales and situations shift as identities shift: in one image, we see a Sergeant drilling his men, then we see the same men encountering War Protesters, next the GIs are bailing out of an airplane, then the men and women become members of a Senate Investigating Committee in Washington, interviewing characters reminiscent of Eleanor Roosevelt and Mohammad Ali on possible solutions to the Vietnam situation. In this fashion, Viet Rock presents more contrast among its images than a play like van Itallie's Interview. Viet Rock offers a wider range of attitudes and therefore variations in imagery, whereas Interview essentially proffers the same attitude--that of people responding to mechanistic American life--in each image. In addition, in Terry's play there is more contrast within the images themselves. While the images in

Interview contain various movement patterns, the patterns are all machine-like. In Viet Rock, the nature of the movement differs widely from image to image. The image of Shangri-La contains a slow-motion orgy, while in another image soldiers march single file then suddenly go into a "wild frug." At the opening of the play, the actors lie on stage and form a circle, "a giant flower or a small target."[1] Then the actors rise in a circle and move so that "the circle begins to bounce,"[2] then suddenly transform into doctors, nurses and would-be GIs in an induction center, and the movements become linear and mechanical.

The technique of radical juxtaposition of images reaches an apogee with Paul Foster's Tom Paine (1967). Overall, the play has a two-part structure that is epic in scope: the piece begins with Paine's voyage to the American colonies shortly before the American Revolution and ends with Paine's death in a New York City bear pit years later. The first part of the piece focuses on Paine's involvement with American politics; the second part

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[1]Megan Terry, Viet Rock, Four Plays by Megan Terry (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 28.

[2]Ibid., p. 30.

is largely a portrait of Paine's experiences in Europe, on the fringes of the French Revolution.

This two-part structure is filled with fluidly-moving images, many of which occur simultaneously before they dissolve or transform into the next image. For instance, at one point during the first part of the play, the main area of the stage contains the Captain and his Mate arguing on deck about the stormy crossing, while in another area three low-lifes dicker in a London pub about politics, and Tom Paine gets tossed between the two groups. Unlike Interview or Viet Rock, where the shifts in images occur suddenly and sharply, in Tom Paine, images melt or bleed into one another as a constant stream of characters and performers moves on, off and around the stage. No image remains before us for long; shifts seem to occur every three minutes or oftener, and there is not a still moment in the play.

The play is framed by improvisations, during which the twelve actors in the piece comment upon the set or the play itself and eventually transform, at different instants, into the first characters they depict. Again unlike Viet Rock, where the actors present themselves as performers only at the start and finish of the play, Foster and his director Tom O'Horgan scattered improvisations throughout

the work, thus providing an additionally contrasting texture and image. This kind of contrast is further bolstered by the actors continually moving in a variety of acrobatic patterns, sometimes crawling ensemble like a centipede, or singly shimmying up a rope to the rafters, or standing "knife-wedge" tight like passengers in a ship's hold. Although the majority of plays written by the avant-garde in the second half of the decade continue to be formed by streams of changing imagery--He Wants Shih! (1968) by Rochelle Owens; The Serpent (1968) by Jean-Claude van Itallie and Turds in Hell (1968) by Charles Ludlam are some notable examples--Tom Paine is still a culminating work in regard to the use of images in the creation of structure.

Indeed, the only other step possible in the evolution of images as the building blocks of structure is perhaps the dissolution of images, which was apparent in a work such as the Living Theatre's Paradise Now, developed while the company was in exile in Europe between 1963 and 1968 and performed in the United States in 1968. In a piece such as Paradise Now, the idea of images controlled or calculated to any degree has almost totally given way to the idea of the performance as one fluid experience. Here, not only are sounds, words and movements improvised from

presentation to presentation, but since "one-third . . . the 'Action' sections--was not planned but left to the spectators and performers to develop through their own spontaneous actions,"[1] since, in other words, there is hardly anyone to observe anything as objective as an image because the audience is participating in the creative experience instead of watching it, the whole concept of image in the theatre is being questioned.

The Group As Contributors to Image

One of the additional features that separates the avant-garde plays of the 1960s from the majority of plays of the previous decade is the absence of either a single or a group protagonist. As in the Theatre of the Absurd, where there is not a dramatic action in the traditional sense, there is instead a situation or there are images to which one or more characters contribute through specific tasks and activities or are, to borrow from Michael Kirby's analysis of the Happening, one more image in a compartment of images. The anonymous family members of Sam Shepard's The Rock Garden function as participants in the imagery of that play by being elements in each visual picture, and even though the son appears in each of the three dominant

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[1]Shank, American Alternative Theater, p. 35.

images, his role is more descriptive than active; he and the other figures are the subjects of the images, even at their most aggressive.

When we look at works such as Interview, Viet Rock and Tom Paine, we see that the playwright creates pictures of a world or of a society through the use of an ensemble. In a conventionally-plotted script about Tom Paine, for instance, Paine would be the maker of his fate, driving the action of the play. In Foster's Tom Paine, he is only a connecting thread in a variegated tapestry. We see images of Paine's life put before us by a group of characters who are essentially narrating Paine's tale for him. We do not follow behind the character of Paine as he leads us to the discovery of his destiny.

In plays such as Interview and Viet Rock, there is not even a single connecting figure. In these plays, the many characters are equal and their function in the script is again partially to create the imagery of the piece. They do not function as a group protagonist, for there is no action to move forward; they sing, dance, speak, and transform from one character to another all in the service of images which when juxtaposed and run end to end, form a whole and convey meaning.

Place

Place, in the avant-garde plays of the 1960s, is rarely the specific element that we find in the majority of dramas and comedies of the 1950s. A locale is rarely a particular character's living room or specific family's kitchen. Brick and Maggie's bedroom in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof gives way to generalized locales such as Terry creates in Viet Rock: an induction center; a coffee shop; a war zone. Even in plays where there seems to be some specificity of detail, such as Motel, we soon realize that the locale is an anonymous and universalized space. This could be any American motel room on any American highway:

> . . . no motel on this route is more up to date. Or cleaner. Go look then talk me a thing or two. All modern here, but, as I say, with the tang of home. . . . There's a button-push here for the TV. The toilet flushes of its own accord.[1]

The same universalized approach operates in Sam Shepard's The Rock Garden, where the dining room, bedroom and living room are directed by Shepard to be so minimally designed that clearly the rooms are to be more symbolic than realistic, more universal than specific. Described in this fashion, the treatment of place differs little from any number of symbolic uses from the Greeks through Williams in Camino Real. Yet we must keep in mind that in the theatre

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[1]Van Itallie, Motel, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 83.

of images that Shepard and his colleagues were pursuing, place--to borrow from Artaud's vocabulary--becomes one more sign or hieroglyph in a series of signs that includes objects, characters, and movement patterns as well.

If place is generalized in these plays, it is also flexible. In The White Whore and the Bit Player the star is in the sanitarium one instant, in a movie studio or at Catholic school the next. In the plays that utilize the transformation device, a change of character almost always instigates a shift of locale. In the majority of Sam Shepard's plays from this time, for instance, place shifts to become wherever the character's imagination takes him. The Maid in Red Cross, learning to swim atop a bed, suddenly finds herself in the middle of a lake. Kent, in La Turista (1967), imagines himself into a variety of characters in an attempt to transcend physical space, and in so doing he inhabits a number of places depending on the self he adopts at a particular moment. Thus Kent transforms from an American in a motel room to a tough gunman on the American frontier to a lawyer in a Perry Mason-style courtroom to a monster escaping from a laboratory and jumping between the roofs of a city, until finally he literally disappears, by jumping through the upstage wall.

For Shepard even more than the other dramatists of the 1960s, the personal experience of space is valued over any conventional concept of dramatic space. As Richard Gilman writes, Shepard has "impatience with space for having limits . . . and finality."[1] Shepard is interested in the places the imagination creates or fantasizes about and thus, in their minds, Shepard's characters inhabit numerous places, which momentarily become reality on stage.

That any shift in locale can indeed become momentarily a reality on stage is testimony to the perception among these dramatists that the place where all activities are happening is the theatre itself. Events are not transpiring in some fictional site behind a fourth wall, they are taking place in a performance space. This recognition is most clear in plays like Viet Rock, The Serpent (1967) or Tom Paine, where performers go on stage at the start acknowledging that they are actors first. Similarly, in plays like Rosalyn Drexler's Home Movies and Ronald Tavel's Gorilla Queen, the script includes songs and banter geared directly to the audience. But even in plays where the acknowledgment of the performance space is not so overt, there seems to be acceptance of the theatre as a theatre--the dramatists are not

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[1]Richard Gilman, "Introduction," Seven Plays by Sam Shepard (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), p. xv.

trying to create the illusion of another world--and this gives them leave to be flexible.

Time

There are no limitations to the conception of time in these avant-garde plays. In Balls, for instance, time seems endless; it appears to stretch into eternity. In Tom Eyen's plays, "time is fluid."[1] In The White Whore and the Bit Player and Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down (1965), Eyen uses time as in a dream, where there are no boundaries between yesterday and today, where past and present exist on the same plane or knock against each other in no chronological sequence. In The White Whore and the Bit Player, for instance, it is not even clear at some points whether the star is speaking through a fantasy in the present or has stepped back in time to relive an experience in her past. In Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down, Hanna and the various men in her life move back and forth in time as though through invisible walls; occasionally, the shift into the present is only a matter of one line injected suddenly in the middle of a scene; then time reverts to the past. In Tom Paine, images occurring simultaneously may take place in both the past and present at once.

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[1]Michael Feingold, "Introduction," Tom Eyen: Ten Plays (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1971), p. 3.

If some of these playwrights want either to expand time or fragment it, others seem to want to telescope time. Richard Gilman notes Sam Shepard's "Impatience with time for proceeding instead of existing all at once, like space."[1] In The Rock Garden, by deleting transitional time, Shepard comes as close as he can to presenting three images simultaneously. He nearly eliminates the concept of passage of time both within and between the three scenes, and thus the images are concentrated and become a shorthand for action that would cover a period of many years in a realistic play. In La Turista (1967), he appears to try to solve his frustration with time by having Act I contain events that actually follow the events in Act II, and by having characters from the 19th century (The Doctor and his Son) co-exist with Kent and Salem in the 20th century.

Ronald Tavel, in Gorilla Queen, also telescopes time, but for a different reason. He totally eliminates any sense of time passing, with the result that entrances, exits and other events occur with ridiculously comic speed and juxtaposition. Thus does Tavel use time as part of his parody of the popular media; in the case of Gorilla Queen, the parody is of Hollywood-style movies.

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[1]Gilman, Seven Plays by Sam Shepard, p. xiv.

Generally, the playwrights from this period are interested in the flexibility of time because they are also focusing on the present rather than the past or the future. The past is static and is only significant as a repository of cultural myths. The Doctor and his Son in La Turista can exist in the same time frame with Kent and Salem, because, in Shepard's view, we carry all our cultural history around in our heads anyway and it all exists within us at once. Thus, the three Morphan brothers in The Unseen Hand are alive in the 20th century, although they are 19th-century gunslingers, and Willie, a futuristic sci-fi character, can exist in the present too. What Bonnie Marranca describes as Shepard's "geography of the spirit"[1] includes past and future times that we carry around with us in the here and now.

Similarly, the 1960s playwrights are not concerned with the future in the sense of characters opining about their fate or knowing what they will encounter when they make their last exits. These writers are not concerned with fictional time happening behind a fourth wall. As much as possible, these plays are taking place in real time. In Motel, the destruction of the motel room takes place during

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[1]Marranca, American Dreams, p. 16.

actual time rather than in some illusionary time from which we are removed. In plays such as Viet Rock or The Serpent, where performers first appear as actors, there is recognition that the play is being created before our eyes in real time. In Gorilla Queen, because the characters "are always alluding to their performance, or stopping the action, or commenting on how the production derives from movies--the characters are drawing attention to the conventions of theatre"[1] and ultimately to the realization that the play is occurring now in the theatre. Each play is a Happening, an immediate experience. These playwrights are not involved with how time changes us; they are interested in manipulating time to more fully explore and apprehend the present.

Collage

The proliferation of disjunctive and changing images, the presence of an undifferentiated group rather than a protagonist, the shifting elements of time and place are the basis for the collage structure that characterizes the avant-garde plays from this period. These plays are mosaics; they have a multiplicity of focus.

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[1]Ibid., pp. 200, 201.

It is important to note, however, that elements other than structural elements contribute to collage in these plays. As explored in two subsequent chapters, the fracturing of both character and language makes for additional contrasts. Similarly, continual variations in movement patterns, disharmonious sounds and the selective use of objects and set pieces supplements the multifaceted texture of these works.

Unity

Despite the emphasis on disparate images and multiplicity of focus, the avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s do not eschew the goal of unity; of necessity, unity is the result of the successful carrying-through of guidelines appropriate to the structure of collage. Thus, Richard Schechner writes about Viet Rock:

> We see a war unfold, from birth to death, from death back to life; we see both sides, more than two sides; there is irony, parody, seriousness; there are dramatic scenes and music, patter scenes, monologue, pantomine. A grab bag as impertinent as anything the Elizabethans concocted; a conglomeration of styles, sources and effects. Yet the play has a unity. Why, and where is it?[1]

Schechner answers his own question in two ways. First, he suggests that the ensemble workshop situation, out

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[1]Schechner, "Megan Terry: The Playwright as Wrighter," Public Domain, p. 134.

of which Viet Rock slowly evolved, lends a unifying performance style to the piece. This performance style, he indicates, is directly related to another stylistic feature, the transformation device, which permeates every dramaturgical element of the play. Indeed, if we were to examine Viet Rock even more closely, we would see that images, place, time, characters, language, and spectacle are all subservient to the nearly instant changes brought on by the transformation technique. The transformation lends stylistic unity to the piece.

> What emerges is a peculiarly powerful unit which is at once loose and tight, free and formed, massive and light. Serious scene and parody, sentimental moment and satire, brutal death and vaudeville gag are all knitted into the complex crossweave of the sudden transformation.[1]

Additionally, the numerous facets are linked thematically by their relationships to the Vietnam experience. "These references . . . are the concrete bricks with which Miss Terry makes her images and actions."[2] Continuity of theme as well as consistency of style supply unity in Viet Rock.

But, we might rightly ask, what of plays from this time that do not employ the transformation device as overtly or uniformly as Terry does in Viet Rock? The guidelines for unity still apply. Rosalyn Drexler's Home Movies (1964)

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[1]Ibid., p. 142.

[2]Ibid., p. 141.

has unity because stylistically it is in conscious opposition to the realism of the previous decade and thematically it takes the premises of the conventional family drama and wreaks havoc with them, consistently inverting the attitudes of the 1950s. The family that stars in Home Movies does not take itself or anyone else seriously. In the home of Mr. and Mrs. Verdun, anything can happen and usually does. Mrs. Verdun tries to seduce a number of men who come to the door, including both a close friend of her husband and a delivery man. Mr. Verdun, whom no one can find, eventually is delivered to the house in a packing crate, and the Verduns' daughter wanders about seeking to be deflowered, in token of which she often displays a daisy-encrusted brassiere. This determinedly unstaid household is also peopled by sundry homosexuals, a Catholic nun and priest who have wandered from the fold and a black maid who refuses to do housework.

In terms of structure, the play has no beginning or end; it is a series of images of chaos that rise to farcical anarchy. No one cares about the past or the future. These characters are simply playing in the present. And although there are references to bedrooms and a kitchen, the ease with which characters break out of the cacaphony of the play to sing or to otherwise address the audience is a conscious indication that this play is really only taking place in

the theatre. Yet the consistently absurdist farce style with which the characters carry through their antics unifies the script, as does the play's thematic coherence.

CHAPTER III

REVOLUTIONS IN CHARACTER

The Definition of Character

The revolutions in character among the avant-garde plays of the 1960s can generally be summarized as a series of moves away from characters created through the small, recognizable details of daily life. The characters in plays from the 1960s avant-garde are often larger than life; they are imagined from the figures of popular culture or the public scene, they represent ideas, they are symbols. Where the characters in the majority of the realistic plays of the previous decade are amalgams of psychologically analyzable motivations and of responses to events in the fictional communities these characters inhabit, the characters in plays by such writers as Terry, Shepard and Fornes are more often abstractions drawn from the material of cultural myths and of events in the American community at large.

The shift in the nature of character comes in part because these playwrights are refuting the idea of character as a fixed entity. In the realistic dramas and comedies of the 1950s, we see characters existing in a

specific set of recognizable circumstances and we can envision them living in some recognizable situation long after the story of the play has ended. We see them only at one moment in a life's continuum. Indeed, this is what gives them their dramatic unity, that they are coming from one place in their lives and going toward another point, usually a goal they want to attain. Thus, even though they may develop as a personality from the time the play begins to when it ends; even though, in other words, they may undergo a change, sudden or slow, a character is always the same character. Willie Loman is always Willie Loman, whether in his mind he is in the present with his sons or in the past with his brother; the shifts in psychological reality only reveal to us another facet of the same personality.

In the avant-garde plays under discussion here, however, identity is often unfixed, subject to transformations. In Megan Terry's Viet Rock, for instance, a performer can be by turns a mother, a doctor, the mother of a soldier, and a war-protester. The shifts are sudden and they are complete. In Sam Shepard's La Turista, Kent is now a tourist, now a swaggering cowboy ghost, now a patient, now a doctor in a Hollywood sci-fi thriller, and the next instant a monster, all these shifts being made

without transitions or logical motivation and without return to the original persona we first see on stage. Bonnie Marranca terms these transformations "a nonpsychological, action and image-oriented conception of character which negates the notion of a fixed reality or situation in favor of the continuous displacement of one reality with another."[1] Not that all the plays of the 1960s avant-garde employ this conception of character. In Molly's Dream by Maria Irene Fornes, for instance, the heroine "dreams herself into a 'role': she and those around her are continually transformed into figures of her subconscious, . . . bittersweet dream world."[2] The technique is similar to that of the flashback or to any theatrical structure in which a character injects himself into a fantasy and then returns to the "real" situation eventually (an example of this technique in a play from the 1950s might be Arthur Laurents' A Clearing in the Woods). But Fornes, in a play like The Successful Life of 3, does employ the transformation technique, in this case through transformations of the situation which in turn call for the characters to shift personalities. Identity in these plays is generally a

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[1]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey. p. 183.

[2]Ibid., p. 58.

looser, more open concept, and also a less stable concept than in the traditional plays of the 1950s. Unity of character is no longer a desired goal on the part of a playwright. Instead, character, like structure, often becomes fractured into successive images that may or may not have any relation to each other and often do not have any causal connection. The idea of character as a coherent whole is not necessarily an ideal.

This shift in the nature of character also comes about because the definition of reality in the theatre has undergone a change. Playwrights and actors are not seeking to create the illusion that the performer is not on stage. In Viet Rock, for instance, a performer enters the playing space, lies on the stage and presents himself to the audience as an actor before he transforms into a character. But even in plays where the actor as actor is not acknowledged so overtly, there is what artistic director John Dillon describes as "acceptance of . . . present reality."[1] This acceptance enables the playwright to avoid answering the question of "why" a character does a particular action and instead allows the playwright to let a character simply be any role or in any situation the playwright chooses at a particular moment. It is this acceptance of present

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[1]John Dillon, "Chaikin at the Barricades," American Theatre (September 1985), p. 37.

reality that gives the concept of character such freedom, and yet at the same time lends an undercurrent of anxiety and uncertainty to the images these playwrights create.

Types of Characters

"The raw material of character is people . . ." writes critic Eric Bentley in The Life of the Drama.[1] Indeed, in realistic plays, characters are reflections of ourselves or of people we meet in day-to-day life. The material of character is the detail of past and present emotional experiences, relationships and environments. In Cat on A Hot Tin Roof, Maggie, as she herself explains to Brick, derives much of her present aggressiveness from her impoverished upbringing:

> Always had to suck up to people I couldn't stand because they had money and I was poor as Job's turkey. You don't know what that's like. Well, I'll tell you, it's like you would feel a thousand miles away from Echo Spring! . . . That's how it feels to be as poor as Job's turkey and have to suck up to relatives you hated because they had money and all you had was a bunch of hand-me-down clothes and a few old moldy three percent government bonds. My daddy loved his liquor the way you've fallen in love with Echo Spring! -- And my poor Mama, having to maintain some semblance of social position, to keep appearances up, on an income of one hundred and fifty dollars a month on those old government bonds! . . . So that's why I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof![2]

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[1]Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 35.

[2]Gassner, Best Plays, pp. 49-50.

Maggie the person is also revealed through her attitude towards Brick's brother and sister-in-law, whose dishonesty she despises; through her appreciation of Big Daddy, whose zest for life is much like her own; and through her determination to remain with Brick in their bedroom and fight his emotional and sexual passivity. The feminine clothes Maggie wears, the alluring slip in which she parades in front of Brick, the relentless stream of conversation with which Maggie taunts, cajoles, threatens, and finally makes love to her husband are all elements of behavior designed to show us a character in the image of a recognizable human being.

Characters in the avant-garde plays of the 1960s are largely abstractions. They are not so much people as they are ideas and types. In van Itallie's Interview, for instance, the automaton-like Interviewers and the near-automaton-like Applicants have only the semblance of human characteristics: they have names, they can perform functions, they can talk, albeit in a comparatively detached way, about certain emotions they experience. But by and large they are almost equally faceless, nearly without personalities, and they barely interact with each other, reminiscent frequently of characters in the expressionist plays of the 1920s. And in van Itallie's Motel, figures do not even have the appearances of human beings; the figures are dolls, whose actions seem almost programmed, as they move

about the motel room in robot-like imitation of human behavior.

Other characters, indeed the majority, seem more like echoes of characters and character types we encounter in films and on television, in comic books or serialized magazine stories, on stage or in romanticized historical novels. These images and figures are from the world of American popular culture. Joel Oppenheimer, in his play The Great American Desert (1960) and Sam Shepard in Cowboys #2 (1967), The Holy Ghostly (1969) and The Unseen Hand (1969) focus on the cowboy, that mythic hero of the old west and of movies about the old west. Maria Irene Fornes, Megan Terry, Tom Eyen, and Ronald Tavel draw on the sometimes romantic, sometimes lurid heroes and heroines of Hollywood films for their characters. Tom Sankey's The Golden Screw (1966) uses the fate of a folksinger-turned-celebrity to point a moral about the American dream, and Sam Shepard's Melodrama Play (1967) is about a rock star who suffers the pressures of fame.

In their fascination with popular culture, these avant-garde playwrights were responding partly to a movement that had seized the arts generally during the 1960s and the visual arts as early as the middle of the 1950s, when the painter Jasper Johns used materials from everyday life in pieces such as "Target with Four Faces" (1955), for which he

used encaustic on newspaper on canvas. Painters such as James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, and Andy Warhol drew even more directly on the stuff of mass culture for their work: Rosenquist draws on the world of mass advertising; Lichtenstein on comic books and newspaper comic strips; Warhol on celebrities, from Jacqueline Kennedy to the American Coca Cola bottle; and Linder, in an oil painting entitled "Rock-Rock" (1966-67), takes inspiration from the world of rock and roll. Critic and art historian Daniel M. Mendelowitz writes about "Rock-Rock" that

> The electric guitar that bisects the composition is no more hard and polished in its forms than the player, sexless and anonymous behind dark glasses, long hair, and leather. The bold stripes that radiate from the background, the chevron sleeve patterns, and the shiny surfaces of guitar and music project an image of the youth of the sixties and their music--strident, contemptuous of sentiment or prettiness, and radiating physical vitality.[1]

Just as the physical paraphernalia of mass culture becomes emblematic for the pop artists of the 1950s, so the words, phrases, poses, and figures of mass culture become a source of artistic inspiration for the avant-garde playwrights. Consciously rebellious, they draw on elements of culture that have heretofore been considered inimical to a "high art" such as theatre. There is also a sense from these playwrights that the use of mass culture in the

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[1]Daniel M. Mendelowitz, A History of American Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), p. 448.

creation of characters unlocks some key to the American psyche. More than any previous generation, the writers who began careers during the 1960s had been raised on popular media: films; television; advertising slogans; and the fantasies these media purvey. Mass culture was part of their heritage, their childhood. They sensed that in some fashion they and their fellow Americans had been shaped by the enormous faces and exaggerated personalities shining down on them from a distant screen: gangsters; gunslingers; femmes fatales. Indeed, because of the frequency with which writers like Shepard, Fornes and Eyen draw on popular culture to build their characters, we have to assume that they see in these figures and images some significant American iconography. "Contemporary playwrights," writes critic George Stamboulian, "share with artists Warhol and Lichtenstein and novelists Barth and Barthelme the knowledge that our own and therefore our country's identity is largely determined by the figures, images and myths of our popular culture."[1]

If some avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s create characters drawn from popular culture, they also introduce certain figures from daily life that American dramatists had

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[1]George Stamboulian, "A Trip Through Popular Culture: Mad Dog Blues," in American Dreams, pp. 79-80.

either long avoided or presented in less than realistic fashion. One such figure is the homosexual. Like other minorities who were in overt rebellion at this time,--youth, women, blacks--homosexuals were determined to liberate the theatre from judgmental rhetoric and dramatizations. Previous American plays such as A Streetcar Named Desire and Tea and Sympathy had dealt indirectly and generally negatively with homosexuality. In A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche refers to her first husband's homosexuality indirectly, albeit with her and Williams' characteristic poeticism.

> There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking--still--that thing was there.[1]

Underlying Blanche's words is the sentiment that homosexuality and manliness are mutually exclusive. In Tea and Sympathy, the real and the suspected homosexuals, the teacher who is fired and the innocent student, are ostracized. In The Zoo Story, Albee deals with Jerry's possible homosexuality obliquely. The avant-garde playwright of the 1960s not only deals with homosexuality overtly but is usually sympathetic as well. Lanford Wilson's The Madness

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[1]Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, in New Voices in the American Theatre, with a Foreword by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), p. 70.

of Lady Bright (1965) is an empathetic portrait of an aging queen alone in his one-room apartment, talking to himself and desperately remembering affairs long past. In Georgie Porgie (1968) by George Birimisa, a chorus that chants the ideological positions of the French Revolution, with its cries for equality and freedom, serves as ironic counterpoint to scenes in which Georgie, a homosexual, is humiliated and abused by various representatives of contemporary society. At the end of the play, Georgie commits suicide, since in the world that Birimisa is depicting that seems to be the only solution for the person who tries to survive as a homosexual in modern western culture.

The homosexual as drag queen is the main figure in the so-called "camp" plays from this period, notably the plays by Ronald Tavel and Charles Ludlam. Susan Sontag writes in "Notes on Camp":

> The particular relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it's not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. . . . But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard--and the most articulate audience--of Camp. . . . Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness. . . . Obviously suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals.[1]

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[1]Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," Against Interpretation (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 291-292.

Indeed, in the plays of Ronald Tavel and Charles Ludlam from this time, all the characters seem to be variations on one persona--the drag queen. On one level, characters in plays such as Tavel's Gorilla Queen or Ludlam's and Bill Vehr's Turds in Hell (1968) are simply caricatures of Hollywood stars or well-known fictional characters; but superimposed on all these figures are the verbal rhythms, the poses, the double entendres of the drag queen. In an essay about the Theatre of the Ridiculous, Stefan Brecht writes that

> The drag queen is the central figure in these spectacles: not as a character in the play nor in terms of plot, but by his costuming & deportment on the stage--alone (in disdainful rejoinders, in careful entrances & exits) or en masse (as chorus when there is an excuse for a mass scene, a huddle of negligently draped snidely quipping queens). The perfect female impersonator, the would-be-beautiful but clearly male transvestite, the definitely male (cigar-smoking, beer-drinking) androgenous transvestite, the woman-mocking ugly male in female dress, the male in romantically elegant male costume affecting occasional or sustained female intonations or gestures . . . playing the star, the high priestess, the haughty lady, the coy innocent, the slut. . . .[1]

While it is difficult to infer from the written scripts exactly when and how the camp behavior was superimposed, clues are occasionally discernible, as in the following description of Queen Kong from Gorilla Queen:

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[1]Stefan Brecht, "Family of the f.p.," The Drama Review 13 (Fall 1968): 139.

> Queen Kong is played by a male actor of huge dimensions, dressed completely in the gorilla outfit so dear to Hollywood's heart; long, shabby hair, fierce face, etc.; rhinestone tiara and pretty little rambling roses fixed on his head; emerald and ruby rings on his fingers and toes. Kong, growling and roaring, pounds his chest; then the fierceness peters out into a very effeminate gesture with his hand: a broken wrist, the "violet limp wrist."[1]

Or this description of Taharanugi White Woman:

> . . . a brownskin male actor, ravishing in a tight white sarong and wig of long raven hair; barefooted with ankle bracelets, huge round falsies, thick lipstick, and long lashes.[2]

As with The Madness of Lady Bright and Georgie Porgie, the plays of the Theatre of the Ridiculous embody a protest against contemporary, resolutely heterosexual American society. But where Lady Bright and Georgie go down to defeat because of their supposedly aberrant sexuality, and because of their inability to sustain identities as homosexuals in the face of persecution, the rambunctious sexuality of the characters in the Theatre of the Ridiculous poses the possibility of a world in which there are no sexual restrictions and no impediments to alternatives to heterosexuality.

This free-wheeling acceptance of sexuality often finds its way into the characterizations of women in the plays by

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[1]Tavel, Gorilla Queen, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 209.

[2]Ibid., p. 201.

women from the 1960s. While the problems or joys of being a woman may not have been the main subjects in the work of the avant-garde women playwrights, the sexual freedom these women assumed when they wrote, and which they often transmitted to certain female characters, prefigures the consciously feminist plays of the 1970s. The women in Rosalyn Drexler's comedies are unabashedly raunchy, as are the elderly ladies in Megan Terry's The Gloaming, Oh My Darling, the local whore in Rochelle Owens' Futz, and even the central character in Owens' Beclch.

Function

One significant function of character in these plays is to represent ideas in the service of the playwrights' themes, and while this function in itself differs little from that performed by characters in traditional plays, this function is more prominent in the plays under discussion here where there are no longer individuals whose desires, loves, hates, and needs dictate the direction of a plot. In the majority of these avant-garde plays, the characters are symbols whose function is to carry out what is often the critical intent of the playwright. In The White Whore and the Bit Player (1964) by Tom Eyen, Eyen uses a Marilyn Monroe-like star at the instant of her suicide as a vehicle for exploring the ongoing American

dilemma of the truth or illusion of images. "On the one hand," writes Bonnie Marranca, "Eyen seems to be a star-gazer infatuated with glamour and image-making; on the other, he wants to comment moralistically on the way people are trapped in their images, how the innocent are corrupted."[1] Through the split character of the White Whore, who is both a "famous image, a washed-up blonde,"[2] and the Bit Player, who is a nun, a virgin--the repressed side of the star and also her goodness--Eyen explores the questions of how we see ourselves, how we want to be perceived, and how others see us and create our identities for us:

> WHORE: I? /I Who played Venus with arms to complete her perfections/ I/ who made Juliet take a weaker sleeping pill so she would be awake when Romeo arrived/ My face was the mirror of the world/ I could transmit emotion with the flick of an eyebrow/ I could cure the sick with my reflection/ . . . .[3]

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[1]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 227.

[2]Eyen, Ten Plays, p. 313.

[3]Ibid., pp. 314-315.

Through Eyen's surrealistic prism, this character is both laughable and tragic. The empty picture frame that Eyen calls for on stage implicitly asks which image is real, which half of this woman is her real self. At the end, after numerous transformations, the questions remain. She herself still does not know, nor do we. The only solution to the dilemma appears to be suicide.

In Sam Shepard's La Turista (1967) the two main characters, Kent and Salem, bear the names of well-known cigarette brands. Symbols of American commercialism, these two are unable to survive outside their own culture; they are truly "turistas," and as such are easy prey for both foreign hucksters and for Mexico's legendary intestinal ailment. "Suffering from the food and climate of Mexico," writes Ruby Cohn, "they cannot be cured by the traditions of that country, to which they feel superior."[1]

But even within their own environment, on home ground, they do not know how to survive. They are unsure of their identities. Kent especially cannot find a reality for himself and so, as often with Shepard characters, he seeks an identity by trying on the personas of figures from popular myths and culture. Through transformations in language

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[1]Ruby Cohn, "Sam Shepard: Today's Passionate Shepard and His Loves," in Essays on Contemporary American Drama, eds. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1981), p. 163.

and attitude, Kent becomes by turns a movie-style gunslinger: "Don't move, Sonny, or I'll gun you down";[1] a Perry Mason type of lawyer: "Now why in the world--I ask myself why in the world would a doctor from a respectable clinic want to disconnect the phone of a dying man";[2] a sci-fi monster running through the streets of a city; the doctor who created the monster; and as the doctor, finally liberated, Kent runs "toward the upstage wall of the set and leaps right through it, leaving a cut-out silhouette of his body in the wall."[3] Although he is unable to discover the true nature of his identity, Kent can at least invent himself as he goes along. And as with so many of the characters in Shepard's plays, this auto-invention means appropriating the personalities of figures from America's mythic past and present.

By the time Shepard writes The Unseen Hand (1969), he has mastered his use of mythic figures as emblems for his vision of America. In The Unseen Hand, Shepard pits heroes of the Old West--the brothers Blue, Cisco and Sycamore Morphan--and a visitor from outer space named Willie, against The Kid, who spouts technocratese and represents

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[1]Sam Shepard, La Turista, Four Two-Act Plays (New York: Urizen Books, 1980), p. 54.

[2]Ibid., p. 55.

[3]Ibid., p. 62.

20th-century American government. Unfortunately, the three Morphan brothers are no longer the tough hombres they once were, and only with the help of the sci-fi character Willie, who is in rebellion against The Unseen Hand, do they annihilate the product of modern civilization and save the world for . . . what? "My people need me now more than ever," says Willie in true sci-fi Hollywood style, as he prepares to return to his galaxy. "Now we can start to build our own world." "What's the matter with this one?" asks Blue. "This is your world. Do what you want with it,"[1] is Willie's unhelpful reply. But Sycamore, Cisco and Blue do not know what to do with it. They move off, not knowing where they are heading. Sycamore suddenly ages and crawls into an abandoned Chevrolet "to let things go by."[2] An icon of a once-proud industrial society lies rusting, and the figures of the American West, who once represented what was most spirited in the American ethos, can offer no help; they only remain wonderful in our memories.

Indeed, the high incidence of satiric comedy among the avant-garde plays of the 1960s seems to have encouraged the use of characters as abstract symbols. In this regard,

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[1]Sam Shepard, The Unseen Hand, The Unseen Hand and Other Plays (New York: Urizen Books, 1981), p. 45.

[2]Ibid., p. 50.

these satires differed from some by previous American playwrights, Patrick for instance in The Teahouse of the August Moon and George S. Kaufman, in whose satires characters have some of the three-dimensionality and obsessiveness that we usually associate with the idea of the comic character as portrayed by Moliere. Thus in Bertha, by Kenneth Koch (1959), the heroine is a cartoon-like creation whose fanatical obsession with military might is the key to Koch's attack on western military interventionism and war-mongering. In Bertha, that ruler's peaceful musings never last for long:

BERTHA: Ah, how sweet it is to take the Norway air
And breathe it in my own lungs, then out again
Where it again mingles with the white clouds
and blue Norwegian sky.
For I myself, in a sense, am Norway, and when
Bertha breathes
The country breathes, and it breathes itself in,
And so the sky remains perfectly pure Norway.

MESSENGER: Bertha, the land is at peace.

BERTHA: Attack Scotland.[1]

Similarly, in The General Returns from One Place to Another by Frank O'Hara (1964), the American military and United States foreign policy both come under fire, largely through the character of The General, who is an exaggerated amalgam of all the stupidities and insensitivities ever associated

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[1]Kenneth Koch, Bertha, Bertha and Other Plays (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), pp. 36-37.

with obsessive military leadership. The General at one point wanders about in a field of flowers and comments that "there may be something inherently wrong with any situation where beauty exists,"[1] and "the tragedy of architecture is: the only truly useful thing a building can do is let itself be bombed."[2] At the end of the play, The General dies in his field of flowers, killed by the beauty to which he is so allergic.

In Beclch, Rochelle Owens constructs a grotesque despot who functions in an equally satirical, although more frightening fashion. Beclch is virtually an animal, a ruler who gives in to her every desire and rules by intimidation. "Beclch is a pure sensualist," writes Bonnie Marranca, "an anarchist who lives beyond the bounds of social order, kills humans and animals at whim. . . ."[3] Through the exaggerated character Beclch, Owens presents tyranny in its most extreme and terrifying incarnation, "taking as its focus this female Idi Amin to show the debasement of people by power and excess."[4]

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[1]Frank O'Hara, The General Returns from One Place To Another," Eight Plays from Off-Off Broadway, ed. by Nick Orzel and Michael Smith (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), p. 35.

[2]Ibid., p. 36.

[3]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 162.

[4]Ibid., p. 163.

In many of the plays from this decade, notably the "camp" comedies, characters function in addition as a source of entertainment. They serve a theatrical purpose as well as an ideological one. Thus in Rosalyn Drexler's Home Movies (1964), "Characters exist merely to bounce off others, serving for the most part as foils to the unending barrage of puns and language games in which they all engage."[1] And critic Richard Gilman writes:

> None of the "characters" in [Drexler's] plays is interested in the "meaning" of his life or of anyone else's, in overt moral truth, in social or psychological values; none is in "lifelike" relation to the others; none has a history or a future, a place to go after the play is over. They have all been invented only in order to rush madly around, . . . so that they might do nothing else than establish an atmosphere of freedom. . . .[2]

As Gilman implies, the anarchy these characters create among themselves, and the anarchy within each character individually, are also part of the satirical intention of the play. The characters in Home Movies function as part of Drexler's overall goal of debunking the traditional ideal of American family life and the traditional ideal of American family drama. The title itself is a kind of pornographic pun on the middle-class preoccupation with shooting films of

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[1]Gautam Dasgupta, "Rosalyn Drexler," American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 209.

[2]Richard Gilman, Introduction to The Line of Least Existence by Rosalyn Drexler (New York: Random House, 1967), p. xi.

children growing up and families at play. Indeed, the games this family plays are considerably more raunchy and uncontrolled than the 1950s ideal, and the stage antics more disorderly than the well-controlled behavior of the traditional 1950s family drama. Similarly, the anarchy created on stage by the characters in a comedy by Tavel or Ludlam gives riotous pleasure to the audience, which relishes the totally nonsensical carryings-on of the characters. Yet at the same time, the no-holds-barred activity is a comment on a contemporary world where sex, morals and certainly theatre are viewed as too rigid and unimaginative.

Collage

Another primary function of character in the avant-garde plays of the 1960s is to contribute to the structure of collage. The transformations that characters undergo in plays like Viet Rock or La Turista add to the pattern of fragmentation through the characters' constant changes from one identity to another. Even in plays where the dramatist is not consciously employing the technique of transformation as developed in the Open Theatre, a character still functions as part of the collage. The new conception of character as an entity made up of diverse images, such as we find especially in surreal plays like The White Whore and the Bit Player or He Wants Shih!, adds another thread of

disjunctive images to the larger tapestry of images created by the shifting elements of situation, time and place.

CHAPTER IV

REVOLUTIONS IN LANGUAGE

Distrust and Fascination with Words

The avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s present a dichotomy in their approach to language, a dichotomy similar to that experienced by the absurdist playwrights of the 1950s. The playwrights under discussion here are both disgusted with what they perceive as the contemporary misuse of language and fascinated by it as well. For these playwrights, as for many expressionist playwrights of the 1920s, and for the absurdists, the words of a technocratic and slogan-riddled society are both an indictment of that society and a potential tool with which to examine the culture creatively. And although these particular sixties playwrights were working at the same time that non-verbal theatre was in vogue, and indeed van Itallie in particular wrote texts for work by the Open Theatre that was almost more physical than verbal, many of these playwrights are as enamored of words as any traditional dramatist, certainly as enamored as Williams and Miller at their best. Most of these avant-garde playwrights, however, are attempting to go beyond the language of realism and reach toward a

language of surrealism, a language that prefers metaphor and illogicality to concreteness and logic.

These playwrights' distrust of language was not born with the dawn of the 1960s; it went back at least to the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy's career--1950 to 1954--when the Wisconsin demagogue had displayed an ability to use innocent people's words against them and spread fear on the basis of his own unfounded words. The often unsubstantiated rhetoric of later politicians such as John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson, especially the latter's "credibility gap" between word and deed, caused further distrust of the language of the establishment. The manipulation of language was also an accomplishment of the increasingly powerful advertising industry, which not only tortured syntax but used words to exaggerate the efficacy of commercial products.

The general distrust of language that characterized the counter-culture during this period is reflected by the avant-garde playwrights in three major ways. One response, in which these playwrights were following the lead of the European absurdists, was the general abandonment of language as rational discourse. The following excerpt from Promenade, for instance, contains the kind of non-sequitur usually associated with the plays of Ionesco:

Mrs. S. Let's have a song.
(105 and 106 stand, and get ready to sing).
Miss I. And who are these?
(105 and 106 realize they have been indiscreet and conceal themselves).
Miss O. They must be friends of Mr. S.
(They all laugh).
Miss I. You hit it on the nail.
Mr. S. If I am sometimes in the company of this and that, it's only because I like to study life.
(They all laugh).
Mr. R. The song. The song. Let's have a song.
(He points to Miss O).
Miss O. The song can wait.
(She smiles coyly and sings).[1]

The idea of language presenting ideas that build on each other has been replaced in most instances by language as a series of words, sentences or speeches that are not necessarily related to what is said before and do not necessarily cause what is said after. A society in which people do not listen to each other is a society in which people do not communicate in give and take fashion. Thus, the characters in these plays often seem to talk in parallel lines. In Interview and Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down characters largely address the audience rather than each other. Shepard's characters in particular announce their thoughts through arias that emerge suddenly, often not in response to another character's thoughts or questions. Kent's transformational monologue at the end of La Turista

[1]Maria Irene Fornes, "Promenade," in The New Underground Theatre (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968), pp. 7-8.

is a stream of consciousness fantasy that bears no logical relation to what has been said by anybody else in the play. The Boy and The Man in the last image of The Rock Garden have no physical connection to each other on stage, nor do they speak with any recognition of what either has said. The Man is largely involved with his plans for building the rock garden; The Boy's final monologue about his sexual experiences seems to explode out of nowhere. But the monologue is so emotionally charged in contrast to The Man's dry words, that The Man is literally knocked out of his chair.

Another response to the distrust of language was an attempt to experiment more imaginatively with words, even with the slogans and clichés so hated by the counter-culture. Thus some playwrights consciously use the platitudes of contemporary America, while others invent new words--nonsense words on occasion--or invent images that make for a freshly poetic and metaphoric language. In practically all cases, playwrights insist on the freedom to use language that is overtly sexual and scatological, even offensive.

> In a fundamental sense these playwrights were in revolt against the word. . . . The language which they were forced to use in order to communicate was historically strained. It was more than a symbol of the coercive power of society; it was a primary agent of that power. The demeaning language of the racist, the sexist and the politically dominant had already infected the nature of daily discourse.[1]

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[1]Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to the Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. III, p. 293.

Breaking the Barrier of Vocabulary

One of the primary new tools of the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s was an uninhibited vocabulary. The playwrights of the previous decade had largely refrained from Rabelaisian expressions; the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s had no such qualms. The dramatists took their cues from writers such as Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer, from contemporary counter-culture groups such as rock singers, stand-up comedians, and underground journalists, and from the language of the streets. Like other literary and non-literary rebels of the 1960s, the playwrights used the new vocabulary as part of their challenge to authority.

In 1960, just a year before comedian Lenny Bruce was arrested in San Francisco for saying "cocksucker" during his club act, Joel Oppenheimer wrote The Great American Desert. The play is unusual for its time because of the preponderance of street language:

> Young Cowboy: Sheeit! What you take me for? A little dewy-eyed boy? Course I ain't talkin' about things like steak. I talkin' about pussy, some good old couze, even just a little old bit.[1]

Billy the Kid, up in heaven, has one of the foulest mouths in the West, a humorous way in which Oppenheimer inverts the heroic image of the famed gunslinger:

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[1]Joel Oppenheimer, The Great American Desert, Eight Plays from Off-Off Broadway, p. 137.

> . . . just 'cause I come from Hell's kitchen they act like I was the first J.D. or somethin'. Oh yes, I know what they sayin' about me, calling me a goddamn J.D. just like I was some fuckin' P.R., or shade or somethin', man I'll burn those mothers, all of them, they come pokin' their holier-than-thou noses in here up in heaven. Mothers.[1]

Sam Shepard, in The Boy's final graphic monologue from The Rock Garden, expresses all the liberated, aggressive sexuality of the adolescent, and of the decade:

> When I come it's like a river. It's all over the bed and the sheets and everything. You know? I mean a short vagina gives me security. I can't help it. I like to feel like I'm really turning a girl on. It's a much better screw is what it amounts to. I mean if a girl has a really small vagina it's really better to go in from behind. You know? I mean she can sit with her legs together and you can sit facing her. You know? But that's different. It's a different kind of thing. You can do it standing, you know? Just be backing her up, you know? You just stand and she does down and down, until she's almost sitting on your kick. You know what I mean?[2]

The sexual explicitness of dramatic language continues throughout the decade, probably reaching its apogee with the plays of Ronald Tavel. Tavel, like many of the so-called "camp playwrights," delights in sexual world play:

> Taharah: (Sizzling) I am Taharahnugi White Woman! Men are attracted to me and men who are attracted to me soon crack-up!
>
> Clyde: (Fingering the falsies bulging out of the top of Taharah's sarong) I can believe it-- that's a real crack up front you've got there. . .[3]

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[1]Ibid., p. 153.

[2]Sam Shepard, The Rock Garden, Angel City & Other Plays (New York: Urizen Books, 1980), p. 226.

[3]Tavel, Gorilla Queen, The Off Off Broadway, Book, p. 201.

If it's got a pipe, pump it.
If it smells too much, dump it.
If it hymen has, rump it.
If it's got a hole, hump it![1]

The frankness in speech did not always result in memorable language. Ironically, however, it is one of the revolutions from this time that has persisted, both in mainstream drama and among avant-garde playwrights.

The Functions of Language

In Jean-Claude van Itallie's early plays, notably the trilogy titled American Hurrah, language functions as an indicator of the loss of meaning in American life. The assumption here is that language, whether written or spoken, is no longer a means of communication.

In the world of this play, words are often not used any more. The Man Doll and the Woman Doll in Motel do not communicate verbally beyond the writing of obscenities on the walls during what passes for their lovemaking. The Motel Keeper, for her part, never talks to anyone directly but speaks only through taped monologues.

If, in addition, language was once descriptive, even metaphoric, as it may have been in the distant past, van Itallie implies that language is now without imagery. If we look again at the first part of the Motel Keeper's monologue, during which she tells about the origins of violence,

[1]Ibid., p. 230.

we see that the language which refers to the past is indeed both descriptive and metaphoric.

> A Roman theatre; roofless stone place where the heat of the sun and the cheers of the people break loose the fangs of the lion. There was that room too, a railroad carriage in the Forest of Compiègne, in 1918, and again in 1941. There have been rooms of marble and rooms of cork, all letting forth an avalanche. Rooms of mud, rooms of silk. Within which they happen. There is another room here. And it too will be slashed as if by a scimitar, its balconies shuddered, its contents spewed and yawned out.[1]

But as the Motel Keeper shifts into a commentary on the modernity of her motel, the language becomes increasingly less poetic. Underneath the surface cosiness of her monologue are clichés and the echoes of advertising slogans:

> All modern here, but, as I say, with the tang of home.[2]

> The toilet flushes of its own accord. All you've got to do is get off.[3]

Her conversation is filled with the trite but hardnosed chatter of the roadside innkeeper:

> Any children? Well, that's nice. Children don't appreciate travel. And rooms don't appreciate children. As it happens it's the last one I've got. I'll just flip my vacancy switch. Twelve dollars please. In advance that'll be. That way you can go any time you want to go, you know, get an early start. On a trip to see sights, are you? That's nice.[4]

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[1]Van Itallie, Motel, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 83.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

Soon the Motel Keeper's monologue transforms into a mere list of the objects in her "cat-a-logue";[1] she reels off the names of items that have no logical association, and they begin to sound like nonsense words:

> Cablecackles (so nice), cuticles, twice-twisted combs with corrugated calisthenics, meat-beaters, fish tackles, bug bombs, toasted terracotta'd Tanganyikan switch blades, ocher closets, Ping-Pong balls, didies, capricorn and cancer prognostics, crackers, total uppers, stickpins, basting tacks. . . .[2]

Language, at the end of Motel, deteriorates into a recital of things, for they alone are the products of American civilization.

In van Itallie's plays, language also functions as an indicator of the loss of individualism in American Life. In Interview, the Interviewers all speak an identical computerese, brief monosyllabic sentences which do not vary no matter whom the Interviewers address:

> Are you married, single, or other?[3]
>
> Have you ever earned more than that?[4]
>
> What is your exact age?[5]
>
> Have you any children?[6]

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[1]Ibid., p. 84.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Van Itallie, Interview, p. 22.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 21.

[6]Ibid.

The questions are impersonal, designed to elicit impersonal and factual responses.

The Applicants, however, at first attempt to individualize their experiences. The Third Applicant, for instance, describes his fear and isolation:

> Well, it started, well it started, I said, when I was sitting in front of the television set with my feet on the coffee table. . . . I tried to get a hold of my self. I tried to stare straight ahead; above the television set, at a spot on the wall I know. I've had little moments like that before, Doctor, I said. Panicky little moments like that when the earth seems to slip out from under, and everything whirls around. . . .[1]

But the Psychiatrist, like all the authority figures in this play, treats the Applicant like a thing rather than a person. The Psychiatrist himself speaks like a thing, mouthing a wonderful parody of trite, meaningless therapy, until at the end of each line he says the only word that has meaning for him:

> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, HOSTILE.
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, PENIS.
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, MOTHER.
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, MONEY.[2]

All the "interviewers" of our culture, whether psychiatrist, priest, or politician--talk nothing but empty words. Finally, they reduce the Applicants to robots, who, like themselves, speak a mechanical refrain:

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[1]Ibid., p. 47.

[2]Ibid.

My fault.
Excuse me.
Can you help me?
Next.
My fault.
Excuse me.
Can you help me?
Next.[1]

If van Itallie uses language as a barometer of the emptiness of American life, a number of other playwrights use language in the aid of caricature. In Kenneth Koch's Bertha (1959), for instance, slogans and headline-like sentences have the action-packed ring of the comic strip. They seem to have been written with quotation marks around them:

Messenger: Bertha arrives, at the head of teeming
troops!
On her arrival from Scotland all Norway
has rallied to her banner!
Millions of Norwegians surround the castle
shrieking, 'Bertha, Queen of Norway!'

Barbarian Chieftain:
Let us be gone! We cannot withstand such
force.
Quickly, to the tunnel![2]

Bertha herself speaks in soliloquies that parody the style of an introspective Elizabethan monologue:

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[1]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[2]Koch, Bertha in Bertha and Other Plays, p. 41.

> Ah, how sweet it is to take the Norway air
> And breathe it in my own lungs, then out again
> Where it again mingles with the white clouds and
> blue Norwegian sky.
> For I myself, in a sense, am Norway, and when Bertha
> breathes
> The country breathes, and it breathes itself in,
> And so the sky remains perfectly pure Norway.[1]

The effect of the cartoon technique, and of Bertha's pretensions to philosophic thought, is to make the figures and the action of the play appear ludicrous. Thus, through language does Koch satirize the autocratic ruler and the whole idea of unlimited power.

Similarly, in The General Returns From One Place to Another (1964), Frank O'Hara satirizes the American military, and ultimately the concept of American warmongering, through his caricature of the central figure, an American general. Again, the caricature is created primarily through language. O'Hara's General is, first of all, long-winded; he likes to hear himself talk, and the speech he delivers upon arriving at the Singapore airport is self-indulgently lengthy. He is bigoted: "Know what this is?" he asks his unseen public, as he speaks into a radio microphone at the airport, "It's a spray of orchids given to yours truly by the sweetest little Eurasian girl you ever saw."[2] He is

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[1]Ibid., p. 36.

[2]O'Hara, The General Returns from One Place to Another, Eight Plays from Off-Off Broadway, p. 28.

self-important: "That's respect for you--though I was the Viceroy of India, as if India had a viceroy any more."[1] And he is ill-informed: "It doesn't, does it?--better check that inch with Central Int."[2] Indeed, his frame of reference is no wider than Hollywood:

> We all know that it takes handling, handling, to get anything done, to get anywhere. Now let's take a simple example. Does anyone actually believe that if Marion Davies had been properly handled she wouldn't have been a bigger star than Norma shearer? That's what I mean by handling. Handling is taking a poetic, no I'll go further, an optimistic view of reality--AND MAKING IT STICK. That girl had everything (Marion)--big blue eyes, a gorgeous chassis, a voice--good God, she made a movie with Bing Crosby, didn't she? And what did Norma have?[3]

And of course he is anti-Communist:

> Now this problem is the most important one of our time and should be taken up with the U.N. It's at the root of what in the thirties used to be called "All Evil". Well, these are better times, but not much better, and the free peoples of the world had better take all of this into account when deciding the fate of all the free and unfree peoples of the world. I'm not going to go into the career of Louis B. Mayer in the latter connection right now, it's too upsetting.[4]

By putting chauvinistic and reactionary clichés into the mouth of this symbol of American might, O'Hara draws a bead on American power and interventionism.

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., pp. 28-29.

[4]Ibid., p. 29.

One of the most intensive uses of clichés and slogans for the purpose of satire is found in Megan Terry's Viet Rock (1965). Here, language is often a collage of catch phrases, fad words, advertising slogans, and shibboleths used to mock both the American culture and the people who speak the language. For instance, after the play's opening song "The Viet Rock," the actors lie on stage while a taped voice recites a mixture of clichés and inversions of clichés:

> Things could be different. Nobody wins. We are teams of losers. Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Or isn't life the dream of those who are dying? It's only by virtue of our eyes that there are stars. I've been a long time a-comin' and I'll be a long time gone. Let us persevere in what we have resolved before we forget. Look out for number one. What you don't know can kill you.[1]

The effect is both humorous and poignant, a tonal combination that Terry creates in the same manner at other times in the play. At one point, the actors, as soldiers, crawl on their stomachs across an "open rice paddy as the mortars go off and sniper bullets zing by."[2] In an attempt to give themselves courage, they resort to phrases and images drawn from advertising and popular culture.

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[1]Terry, Viet Rock, in Four Plays by Megan Terry, p. 28.

[2]Ibid., p. 81.

> Hello, young lovers.
> Green Mint Formula 47 gives you confidence about your mouth.
> I dreamed I saw J.F.K. last night alive as you and me.
> Six percent of the world's population controls sixty percent of its wealth.[1]

In the midst of such a grotesque situation, the use of phrases that come from now distant and unhelpful capitalist America is both comic and awful.

Terry also uses clichés to point up the truth. At the beginning of Act Two, a GI, his Mother and his Girl face the audience and speak the sort of lines that might be written in letters home or in letters to a GI in the field. At the start of the scene, the letters are full of trite cheeriness, especially from the two women in the States:

> Girl: March 9, 1966, Kittitas City, Washington. Hi, darlin'. Hi, honey! Hello, my lemondrop kid; Boy, Eugene, am. . . .
>
> GI: Hi, Mom. I'm staying warm. The sun here's about two thousand degrees. My feet are still coal black from. . . .
>
> Mother: I wish I could be making you some chicken and dumplings. They called me from. . . .
>
> Girl: I'm counting the days till your tour of duty is up. How's the sightseeing in the rice paddies?[2]

By the end of the scene, and implicitly after some passage of time and the growth of reality, the tone of the letters changes:

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid., p. 69.

Girl: I want you. I'll write you again before I go to bed. . . .

Mother:
I love you with all my heart. . . .

GI: . . . Your loving son, Eugene. . . .[1]

The clichés are a defense against real feelings; once reality becomes too intense to ignore, the clichés fall away, and the actual sadness and loneliness of the wartime situation emerges.

Terry also parodies the language of public figures to satirize their incompetence. In one scene of the play, a number of men and women come before a Senate investigating committee, apparently asked to give their opinions on what to do about the war. One "grand old American Woman Statesman"[2] has the halting speech pattern of Eleanor Roosevelt, exaggerated for satirical effect:

> People--of--America! . . . When--Mr. Thant--and--I last--spoke--we were still saying--that--it--should be entrusted--to--the U.N. How else can World--Law take hold--to--People of America? I--implore you--to support--the United Nations of the World. . . .[3]

Another figure of whom Terry implicitly makes fun is the prize fighter Cassius Clay. Like Eleanor Roosevelt, what he says really has no relation to the subject at hand, but only represents his particular interests:

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[1]Ibid., p. 71.

[2]Ibid., p. 57.

[3]Ibid., pp. 57-58.

> The greatest. That's me. Yeah, yeah, oh yeah. The greatest and the prettiest and the sweetest that you'll ever see. Yeah, yeah, oh yeah. Oh yeah.[1]

A "highly placed and trusted high-ranking high Government official"[2] makes a speech that is a paradigm of vacuousness.

> . . . my American fellows and gals, I want to tell you that this Administration to which I am a party indulges in nothing but realism. I want to go on to say that realism does not rule out the hope that hope could come in the not too distant future. . . .[3]

When this Senator goes berserk toward the end of his speech, another Senator tries to explain his colleague's statement and in turn comes forth with his own brand of doublespeak, a collection of contradictions and mixed metaphors. At the end, he sounds like a computer gone haywire.

> I want to assure you, sirs, and interested observers around the galaxy that we've begun to turn the tide. The moon is with us, we're not quite over the hump, but don't swallow the first deliberate propaganda line you see, but as free men learn to assess words. Words don't mean what they say. Actually the north is tactically defeated, but we haven't begun to see the end of this thing. Some of my colleagues are encouraged, some see a war of attrition, some are optimistic in my transistors and capacitors, but on certain days my entire circuit is in deep despair.[4]

O'Hara's and Terry's use of clichés and slogans is part of a wider trend toward borrowing phrases and whole

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[1] Ibid., p. 58.

[2] Ibid., p. 59.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 60.

linguistic styles from the canon of American popular culture. Playwrights such as Tom Eyen, Maria Irene Fornes and Sam Shepard, among others, draw on the language of films, burlesque, television, rock music and folk music, as part of their attempt to explore the range of language. Unlike the plays of O'Hara and Terry, however, whose use of trite phrases is heavily ironic, the plays of Eyen, Fornes and Shepard often use borrowed styles of language in a playful fashion--satirically but affectionately.

The Successful Life of 3 (1963), by Maria Irene Fornes, both a gentle parody of our idea of romance, especially as presented in films, and a delightful mixture of puns, running jokes and one-liners of the sort usually found in vaudeville routines (the play is subtitled "A Skit for Vaudeville").[1] The very title of the play is a pun, since "3" is both a character in the comedy and one of the trio whose story this is. The pattern of straight lines feeding comic lines is established at the very beginning:

3: What are you doing?
HE: Waiting.
3: What for?
HE: For the other shoe to drop.[2]

There are one-liners worthy of Groucho Marx:

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[1]Fornes, The Successful Life of 3, in Eight Plays from Off-Off Broadway, p. 207.

[2]Ibid., pp. 207-208.

HE: A moment ago I was thinking of marrying you.
SHE: You just saw me for the first time.
3: He figured he'd see you a few more times if he married you.[1]

Verbal "bits":

SHE: . . . I don't think I'm going to marry you.
3: Why?
HE: I can ask my own questions, if you please. (To SHE). Why?[2]

Verbal confusion of the "who's on first?" variety:

3: How about some popcorn?
SHE: I'll go.
3: Don't go. Let him go.
HE: You go.
3: I'm tired.[3]

In addition to the vaudeville routines, which give the script its playful quality, light parody of Hollywood dialogue mingles with the word games:

3: I'll stay put now. Ruth, even if you're getting old and decrepit, I still want you. Jail makes a man want a woman.
HE: You disgust me. You spend three days in jail and you don't learn anything.
3: I did so. I organized the prisoners and now I'm the head of the mob. If you want I'll make you my bodyguard.
HE: You call that a body?
3: I know. I have to do some exercise. But in the meantime it's all right to call it a body.
HE: It's not all right with me. I'm leaving.
3: Like Shane. . . .[4]

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[1]Ibid., p. 212.

[2]Ibid., p. 217.

[3]Ibid., p. 219.

[4]Ibid., p. 239-240.

In Molly's Dream, Fornes' gently parodistic style draws on specific Hollywood film dialogue, for instance this play on Ingrid Bergman's line from Casablanca, "Play it Sam. Play 'As Time Goes By'":

> Molly: Mack, play something amusing, Sam.[1]

In the following lines, there is conscious imitation of Marlene Dietrich as heard in The Blue Angel:

> Fly away, mein kleiner vogel, baby. Esse alle Wurmer die du kannst. That means: fly away, my little bird. Eat all the worms you can.[2]

The parody, however, is not for its own sake, it is not self-indulgent. There is method behind Fornes' light mockery, as in this barroom seduction from Molly's Dream:

> MOLLY: (Standing) Double?
> JIM: Don't bother.
> MOLLY: It's no bother. That's what I'm here for.
> JIM: I changed my mind. I don't want a drink.
> (Molly sits).
> MOLLY: Are you broke?
> JIM: No.
> MOLLY: It's on the house.
> JIM: Why?
> (Molly stares at Jim and speaks distractedly. He recognizes the look and becomes cautious).
> MOLLY: Oh, I don't know. I just thought I'd buy you a drink.
> JIM: Why?
> MOLLY: Why? . . . That's how I felt. . . . I felt like buying you a drink.
> (She walks toward Jim).

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[1]Fornes, Molly's Dream, in The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 315.

[2]Ibid., p. 313.

JIM: Oh, God . . . Well, don't buy me a drink. You go on out in there.[1]

Unlike in the movies, Molly's dream goes awry. Instead of welcoming her seduction, Jim runs away. Where Marlene Dietrich or some other star of the silver screen always succeeds, Molly fails (albeit, rather amusingly). Fornes spoofs not only the film world but also all of us who have made Hollywood the stuff of our desires.

Exploring Imagery

As indicated in Chapter III, with the writing of La Turista in 1967 Sam Shepard became one of the playwrights who drew on the popular media most imaginatively. But with Shepard it is not a matter of playing humorously with well-known lines from films.. Nor, like Fornes, does he appropriate types of scenes and reproduce their linguistic format. Fornes, in plays like The Successful Life of 3 and Molly's Dream, tries to remind us of the film life she is burlesquing. Her way of getting us to laugh at our own Hollywood romanticism is to recall for us the shape of that romanticism.

Shepard's approach to the various tongues of popular culture is of a different sort. In plays like La Turista or

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[1]Ibid., pp. 306-307.

The Unseen Hand, he borrows several linguistic styles and tones but creates such unique imagery that he takes his use of popular culture out of the realm of mere parody. Indeed, part of the humor and richness of Shepard's plays from the late 1960s is the contrast between appropriated styles of speech and his own distinctive, sometimes even eccentric, language. In Act I of La Turista, for instance, when Kent emerges from the bathroom after having died from his bout of dysentery, he has been transformed into a gunslinger; he is "dressed in a straight brimmed Panamanian hat, a linen shirt, hand-made boots, underwear, and a pistol around his waist."[1] The tone of his subsequent monologue evokes our idea of the western hero, as fueled by Hollywood and popular fiction. Indeed, his monologue has a note of familiar western-style machismo. But the content is that of the western hero if he were to visit the second half of the 20th century and see all the "lily-livered weaklings" like Salem and Kent:

> Yes, Sir! Nothing like a little amoebic dysentery to build up a man's immunity to his environment. That's the trouble with the States you know. Everything's so clean and pure and immaculate up there that a man doesn't even have a chance to build up his own immunity. They're breeding a bunch of lily-livered weaklings up there simply by not having a little dirty water around to toughen people up. Before you know it them people ain't going to be able to travel nowhere outside their own country

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[1]Sam Shepard, La Turista, Four Two-Act Plays, p. 27.

> on account of their low resistance. An isolated land of purification. That's what I'd call it.[1]

Shepard's comment on American isolation is more amusing, and also more pointed, when it comes from the ghost of the hard-riding cowboy who knew no fear. We respond to the swaggering tone, a tone we recognize from numerous popular sources, and then we laugh at the old but perhaps appropriate image of this plains tough guy deriding our yellow-bellied contemporary civilization.

Shepard uses a similar technique in The Unseen Hand. The play opens, in fact, with a character named Blue Morphan, one of the three fierce Morphan brothers (read James or Earp or any legendary family of gunslingers) sitting in a '51 Chevrolet convertible and talking to himself. What is this incarnation of the Old West doing in the back seat of a Chevy? Again, like Kent, he is speaking with the accents of popular myth but commenting on contemporary America, an anachronism that is both entertaining and provacative.

> Used to be a time when I'd take an agency job. Go out and bring in a few bushwackers just for the dinero. Usually a little bonus throwed in. But nowadays ya' gotta keep to yerself. They got nerve gas right now that can kill a man in 30 seconds. Yup. A drop a' that on the back of a man's hand and poof! Thirty seconds. That ain't all. They got rabbit fever, parrot fever and other stuff stored up. Used to be, a man would have hisself

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[1]Ibid., pp. 27-28.

> a misunderstanding and go out and settle it with a six gun. Now it's all silent, secret.[1]

But Shepard's love affair with the various tongues of American popular culture, whether films, sports, gangsters, or cowboys, is only part of his love affair with language generally. For Shepard, language not only defines role and identity, it has sensuality, emotionality; it is the most flexible and expressive element of his plays. "Language," Shepard has said, ". . . seems to be the only ingredient in this play that retains the potential of making leaps into the unknown."[2] "What I'm trying to get at here is that the real quest of a writer is to penetrate into another world. A world behind the form."[3]

Indeed, in the arias that are the hallmarks of Shepard's plays, there is an illogicality evocative of dreams. These monologues proceed by images rather than by following coherent thoughts; it is as if they were guided by a child fantasizing or telling a story. The character speaking is in touch with interior feelings and sensory perceptions, and he relates what he feels emotionally and what he sees,

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[1]Shepard, The Unseen Hand, in The Unseen Hand and Other Plays, p. 5.

[2]Shepard, "Language, Visualization and The Inner Library," American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard, p. 216.

[3]Ibid., p. 217.

touches, smells, tastes, and hears, rather than proceding by logical and intellectually guided thought processes. The following monologue of Carol's in Red Cross is filled with sensory details.

> They'll see my head. (She crosses to the stage right bed and stands on it facing Jim and begins to act out the rest as though she were skiing on a mountain slope.) It'll be in the snow somewhere. Somewhere skiing on a big white hill. In the Rockies. I'll be at the top of this hill and everything will be all right. I'll be breathing deep. In and out. Big gusts of cold freezing air. My whole body will be warm and I won't even feel the cold at all. I'll be looking down and then I'll start to coast. Very slowly. I'm a good skier. I started when I was five. I'll be halfway down and then I'll put on some steam. A little steam at first and then all the way into the egg position. The Europeans use it for speed. I picked it up when I was ten. I'll start to accumulate more and more velocity. The snow will start to spray up around my ankles and across my face and hands. My fingers will get tighter around the grips and I'll start to feel a little pull in each of my calves. Right along the tendon and in front, too. Everything will be working at once. All my balance and strength and breath. The whole works in one bunch. There'll be pine trees going past me and other skiers going up the hill. They'll stop and watch me go past. I'll be going so fast everyone will stop and look. They'll wonder if I'll make it. I'll do some jumps and twist my body with the speed. They'll see my body twist, and my hair, and my eyes will water from the wind hitting them. My cheeks will start to sting and get all red. I'll get further into the egg position with my arms tucked up. I'll look down and see the valley and the cars and houses and people walking up and down. I'll see all the cabins with smoke coming out the chimneys. Then it'll come. It'll start like a twitch in my left ear. Then I'll start to feel a throb in the bridge of my nose. Then a thump in the base of my neck. Then a crash right through my skull. Then I'll be down. Rolling! Yelling! All those people will see it. I'll be rolling with my skis locked and my knees buckled under me and my arms thrashing through the snow. The skis will cut into both my legs and I'll bleed all over.

> Big gushes of red all over the snow. My arms will be broken and dragging through the blood. I'll smell cocoa and toast and marmalade coming out of the cabins. I'll hear dogs barking and see people pointing at me. I'll see the road and college kids wearing sweat shirts and ski boots. Then my head will blow up. The top will come right off. My hair will blow down the hill full of guts and blood. Some bluejay will try to eat it probably. My nose will come off and my whole face will peel away. Then it will snap. My whole head will snap off and roll down the hill and become a huge snowball and roll into the city and kill a million people. My body will stop at the bottom of the hill with just a bloody stump for a neck and both arms broken and both legs. Then there'll be a long cold wind. A whistle, sort of. It'll start to snow a little bit. A very soft easy snow. The squirrels might come down to see what happened. It'll keep snowing very lightly like that for a long time until my whole body is covered over. All you'll see is this little red splotch of blood and a whole blanket of white snow.[1]

Despite the improvisational aura of this speech, it actually builds slowly and carefully from the original image, snow. The images increase as Carol's imagination and consciousness expand, yet in the end, in a kind of post-orgasmic quiescence, we are left with the same single image of snow.

Shepard's style, on one level, is simple. The images are created very simply, they are made up of nouns and verbs; Shepard hardly ever uses an adjective here, except the word "red" to describe blood in the snow. There is nothing pretentiously poetic about the language. In

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[1]Shepard, Red Cross, in Chicago and Other Plays, pp. 101-102.

addition, words are mostly monosyllabic and the sentences short, the whole creating a starkness that allows the images to stand out clearly:

> Then my head will blow up. The top will come right off. My hair will blow down the hill full of guts and blood. Some bluejay will try to eat it probably.[1]

Beyond the starkness, however, is complexity. The speech is full of contrasts--Shepard's method, as quoted earlier, of "penetrating into another world . . . behind the form." What begins as a peaceful coast down the mountain turns into a horror, as the beautiful mingles with the grotesque. Red blood splotches the white snow. Hair and guts combine. Familiar images, such as the smell of "cocoa and toast and marmalade" are followed by fantastic and grotesque images: "My whole head will snap off and roll down the hill and become a huge snowball and roll into the city and kill a million people."[2] Such contrasts lend this passage a frightening tone that is representative of the surreal quality of the entire play. The central image of this monologue, that of the white snow tinctured with red blood, presages the final concrete visual image of the play: a totally white room and a stream of blood running down Jim's forehead. "In the rarefied world of this play," writes

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[1]Ibid., p. 102.

[2]Ibid.

critic Michael Bloom, "set in a perfectly white box, the trickle of blood down Jim's face signifies the advent of a horror that has the dimension of an apocalypse."[1] The language of Red Cross demonstrates Shepard's early ability to use verbal imagery in order to give his work a metaphysical dimension.

Shepard is not alone in exploring the imagistic possibilities of language. Rochelle Owens' plays are rich in imagery and general linguistic inventiveness. He Wants Shih! (1968) is especially diverse in this respect: water imagery, colors and animal imagery abound; the language is largely metaphoric; and a good portion is invented Chinese words. There is a surrealist cast to the language, the sense of characters talking as if in dreams, where images rarely seem coherent. The beginning of the play, for instance, finds the Empress in an opium-induced stupor:

> Cover the animal sheng tak hei hold down her toes
> fingers one hundred one thousand driven down man
> kuo monkeys jaws teeth thick fat bodies shrunk
> female male spread this and that way black rottings,
> China wraps up the heads of the newly born. . . .
> Ends and completes us.[2]

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[1]Bloom, "Visions of the End: The Early Plays," in American Dreams, p. 77.

[2]Owens, He Wants Shih! in The Karl Marx Play and Others, p. 130.

Lan, the central figure of the play, speaks in a disjointed, apparently illogical way that resembles thoughts rising up from the subconscious:

> An absolute matter of fact fan mei lao. Really and truly . . . true chen sha. Only . . . only . . . my eyes bite your slender neck . . . bird-throated girl . . . the perfect ideal tsang yen fang kuan . . . is locked in my heart. Two men . . . male and male . . . one and one . . . the whole . . . quiet . . . quiet . . . in a turn of the eye. . . .[1]

Lan is a soul divided: he loves the youth Bok and he loathes the Princess Ling; he is a combination of beauty and ugliness, love and hate, female and male. Owens has given him sadistic imagery and beauteous imagery. When he recounts making love to the Princess Ling, there are images of pain, dirt and grotesquerie:

> I make my arms hard against her softness . . . she sighs. Her love for me is my weapon. The feeling ceases . . . in me . . . and her feelings increase . . . her skin under my fingers feels like blood not yet dry . . . a star on fire! And I feel wrath in me . . . and melancholy . . . and ice against my teeth and also . . . a tiny joy. If I said to her what was inside me . . . the words would be . . . I will punch you . . . to pulpwood! (Laughs.) The sounds I would make would be the screams of a vulture against her throat. Her mouth and legs . . . are open . . . but my mind is working. (Laughs.) It's heaven's will, shua hsi! In my mind I smear the mucus from my nose on her breasts . . . and drop ants into her two mouths. (Laughs.) And she calls me the divinity of the mountains and streams and I think of how it would be to urinate on her! She calls herself happy

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[1]Ibid., p. 151.

> and blessed and how she feels privileged to love me and protect me so that I will never feel lonely or frightened again! And I'm thinking how it would be to throw her into a pig trough--the pig slop squashing under her buttocks and her breasts jiggling like rabbits.[1]

However, when he recounts his love for Bok, whom he has not seen since childhood, the images are longingly erotic and sensuous. The grotesquerie is absent, the metaphors lyric: instead of a vulture, the lovers are like "twin birds";[2] instead of seeing animals in bed while making love (as he does with Ling), with Bok "our mouths turned into leaping fish";[3] and "The moon," is "in bed with us."[4]

Unlike Shepard, whose imagery in Red Cross, for instance, is stark and direct, Owens' imagery is figurative and indirect. She uses metaphors, similes, metonymy, and other figures of speech to create the dreamlike environment of her play. The action of kissing is described as "our mouths turned into leaping fish!";[5] the tutor Feng describes Ling's ugliness as "She moves like a cricket from out of a

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[1]Ibid., p. 160.

[2]Ibid., p. 164.

[3]Ibid., p. 164.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

jar."[1] Lan, open as he is to his own imagination and feelings, cannot name an action or a thing without comparing it to something else: "You sigh . . . like the sound of a fanning wing of a bird";[2] "The melancholy wailing of the whistles carried by the pigeons . . . they are wheeling in midair! It reminds me of the souls of the dead roaming about in space seeking for a resting place."[3] Indeed, it is Owens' extensive use of metaphors and indirect descriptions that gives this play so much of its oriental tone.

But if Owens' basic technique is different from that of Shepard, the two are similar in that they both use words to reveal a universe behind and beyond the concrete, material one. For Shepard, in Red Cross, this metaphysical world is filled with mysterious horrors, sensed by his characters but not able to be understood. For Owens, in He Wants Shih!, the metaphysical world is made up of the unleashed desires and fantasies of our psyches.

Language in the Creation of Anarchy

If the majority of the avant-garde playwrights from this time were exploring what they deemed to be the fresh

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[1]Ibid., p. 144.

[2]Ibid., p. 149.

[3]Ibid., p. 162.

resources of language, other playwrights were not so much non-verbal as anti-verbal. Language in their plays is almost violent in intention; it seems to exist not only to refute the language of a previous generation of playwrights, as in some of the work of Rosalyn Drexler, but to create such anarchy through language that the idea of art itself is undermined.

Rosalyn Drexler, in Home Movies, uses language to help create the play's farce. "Comedy and farce," writes Eric Bentley, "presuppose accepted standards, and when the playwrights don't respect those standards, they resent them. . . . where there is no established virtue, there can be no sense of outrage, and farce . . . is no less 'outrageous' than tragedy."[1] In Home Movies, Drexler's disrespect and resentment are directed against several established virtues, but the key to Drexler's revolution is sex. The characters in Home Movies, per the pun in the play's title, think and more importantly talk about nothing but sex. Thus the language of the play first and foremost wreaks havoc with sexual puritanism. There is, for instance, a hymn that glorifies all things scatological:

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[1]Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce," in Let's Get a Divorce and Other Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1966), p. xi.

Glory be to thee, adsurdum:
Glory be to thee in admasculum,
Glory to glory in Gloria's glorious and thy . . .
A mania.
I would fink and I would be finked.
I would smear and I would be smeared.
I would be bought, being hole and nought,
Being whole and nought,
A Mania.
Crap danceth. I would crap. Crap ye all.
A mania.
Wherefool I lay, loose walls decay: lament ye all.
A Mania.[1]

Things religious are profaned:

Mrs. Verdun: Haven't you forgotten something?
Vivienne: Let's see. Oh yes (. . . she chants). Ad infinitum, ad infinitum menstrualis, mensturalis corpus christi, finiculus umbilicalis.
Mrs. Verdun: Later I expect you to express your devotions with emphasis on Vesica Urinaria, your patron saint.
Vivienne: He achieved sainthood in such a lovely way . . . his huge male hands up to the elbows in soapy water, scrubbing the underwear of those village women, while they jeered and brought him fresh supplies.[2]

A parody of the famous china scene from Wycherley's The Country Wife is less subtle than the original:

Mrs. Verdun: I think fruit is so nice in the summer, don't you?
Peter: Oh yes, I adore fruit in the summer.
Mrs. Verdun: So refreshing.
Peter: So succulent.

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[1]Drexler, Home Movies, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 32.

[2]Ibid.

Mrs. Verdun: Ripe.
Peter: Juicy!
Mrs. Verdun: Dripping.
Peter: Ever so wet.
Mrs. Verdun: Would you care for a fruit?
Peter: But your bowl is so delightful to look at, I wouldn't dream of disturbing the arrangement. If, of course, you have more in the kitchen . . . I prefer peaches.[1]

When the language is not full of sexual innuendo, it is purposefully topsy-turvy. Bad puns proliferate:

Peter: He is not a man to take limbo lying down, but in love and death we all lean back to die.[2]

The wordplay is unbridled and absurdist:

Violet: I'm glad you 'ppreciate my efforts, otherwise there'd be no recompense. No recompense, wreck-um-pants, pants-um wreckum.[3]

Or:

Peter: You need the muse. I've written a poem.
Mr. Verdun: Go ahead, abuse the muse.[4]

And:

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[1]Ibid., p. 33.

[2]Ibid., p. 34.

[3]Ibid., p. 33.

[4]Ibid., p. 41.

> Violet: Woman's is got a more rounder an' shinier skull wat a man's got, but spite a dat news de truth is dat both is infinite-dismal. However, de proportions is jest right. Dat is to say, he ain't g'wine put down de chick brain wave in any sense, since however even the inferior wall outside of Jerusalem.[1]

No word is too fine to invert, no literary reference exempt from parody, no joke too dirty for Drexler to include. The idea of language as something to be revered is jauntily destroyed; instead, Drexler's intent seems to be to say all the forbidden expressions never uttered in polite company--company in this case being the American stage and the American theatre audience. By ushering the often infantile libido on to the stage, Drexler tries to reveal puritanism to be hypocrisy. This is the real American family, she implies, spouting irreverences, stripping verbally as well as physically. Like children left in a house to play by themselves, Drexler's characters break every rule, especially the one about not writing "bad" words on the walls. Indeed, words are the primary instrument of destruction here, for through them, Drexler's characters tear down all the artificial defenses of so-called proper society.

If Drexler's play has the kind of violent release and aggression that Eric Bentley attributes to farce, it

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[1]Ibid., p. 36.

nonetheless is less destructive in tone than the plays of Ronald Tavel and Charles Ludlam. In the plays of Tavel and Ludlam, these writers seem to be swinging wild, striking out at everything at once.

Both Ludlam and Tavel were cognizant if perhaps self-congratulatory of the destructive impulses that underlay their writing. "A genuine work of art," writes Tavel, "will, by necessity, undermine the social structure and the moral cadre on which our existences are postulated."[1] Ludlam, for his part, admits to the intention of creating pieces that are consciously chaotic: "Our art is to bring everything in," he tells critic Dan Isaac in an interview for The Drama Review; ". . . our art is to include everything until we finally admit that the world is our work."[2]

Some of this striking out has an air of playfulness about it. The playfulness exists in the erotic freedom of the language and in the inventive misuse of words to create humor. At times, the language has the sense of play that commedia dell' arte must have had; indeed, in performances, much of the dialogue was often improvised.

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[1]Quoted in Dan Isaac, "Ronald Tavel: Ridiculous Playwright," The Drama Review 13 (Fall 1968): 106.

[2]Dan Isaac, "Interview": 116.

But unlike Drexler, these two authors are opposed to art of any sort; even, one suspects, any they might be able to create themselves. They seem resolutely opposed to meaning, organization and taste, and language becomes one more victim of their intent to undermine the very idea of an aesthetic object. As Stefan Brecht writes,

> . . . the language is in all ways deliberately low, cheap and second-rate, its predominant banalities set in relief only by plagiarisms. (Vaccaro makes contempt for text and comprehensibility a directorial principle). If it works out as a generic parody of American dialogue, this does not redeem its ridiculous quality. In vocabulary, syntax and delivery it relates to that of burlesque, nightclub and radio comedians. The wit is undergraduate and queer, a weapon for fake personal combat--catty, bitchy, unsubtle, and not really wounding (e.g., the use of "comic" ethnic accents). The language is further degraded by being dirty--so much and routinely so that titillation is transcended if not bypassed, as in the army. These vulgarities shatter the cultural aura by which the theatre stands off from the movies.[1]

The humor is collegiate and in bad taste:

> Karma: Oh!--care for a drink, Investigator Carries? Perhaps, some liquor?
> Mais Oui: Lick 'er where?[2]

Vehr and Ludlam's puns and word play elicit groans:

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[1]Brecht, "Family of the f.p.," p. 124.

[2]Tavel, Gorilla Queen, The Off Off Broadway Book, p. 213.

> Orgone: Maybe she had the rag on today. . . . I used to subscribe to Mothers' Monthly--it's a periodical. You write to the Department of Labor Pains, Washington, D and C.[1]

They parody any literature, but their preferred target is Shakespeare:

> Orgone: Thou, nature, art my goddess. To thy law my services are bound. why should I stand in the plague of customs and submit for the curiousity of nations to deprive me? Just because my mother dumped me? Why hunch-back? Wherefore pinhead? How come sex maniac?[2]

Brecht's contention is that, in their attempt to destroy any element of theatre that could possibly be aligned with the establishment they detest, they "make fools of themselves as authors." Thus, after the initial audience response of enjoyment, the result is often boredom. Indeed, as Brecht implies, it is possible that the authors who wrote for the Theatre of the Ridiculous did not finally want to entertain so much as disintegrate meaning and the elements of form, because coherence and art objects are the totems of a society which these writers deem perverted. By making language ridiculous--not illogical, as with absurdist theatre--pointless, infantile and compulsively

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[1]Charles Ludlam and Bill Vehr, Turds In Hell, The Drama Review 14 (September 1970): 119.

[2]Ibid., p. 127.

repetitive--they are destructive of all dramatic art, their own included. "The theatre of the ridiculous," writes Stefan Brecht, "is radical social satire & protest--anarchist . . . possibly nihilist."[1]

Finally, as with character, one of the additional functions of language in these plays is to contribute to the total collage. We see this in plays like Tom Paine or Viet Rock, through the many types of language the playwrights employ: chants; slogans; songs; political speeches. In a play like Fornes' The Successful Life of 3, the language is a melange of one-liners and puns from vaudeville skits and cliché phrases from any number of films. In He Wants Shih! the density of metaphors and other poetic images lend the language of that play a diversity of texture. The language of the majority of plays under discussion here is variegated and adds to the heterogeneity of these works.

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[1]Stefan Brecht, "Family of the f.p.," p. 141.

CHAPTER V

REVOLUTIONS IN THEME

In the view of the avant-garde playwrights, the drama of ideas that had come to the fore with Ibsen during the last third of the 19th century had weakened to an echo of itself in the realistic plays and comedies of the 1950s. To be sure, there were exceptions, notably in the two plays by Arthur Miller that appeared on Broadway. Tennessee Williams, although he had never been associated critically with the drama of ideas so much as the drama of sensibility, was nonetheless increasingly chagrined by the insensitivities of the modern world, an attitude that permeates his plays from the second half of the 1950s. But as noted in Chapter I, even the plays that purported to be "about" certain subjects, such as A Hatful of Rain (drug addiction) or Tea and Sympathy (homosexuality) were basically purveying the attitude of liberal consensus that no problem was a problem for long in America.

> Within this framework are a number of reform ideas and sophistications--the most recent left-wing ideas to have been assimilated by the right wing--such as the evil of racial prejudice, the worthiness of illegitimate children, alcoholism as a disease, juvenile delinquency as society's fault and responsibility, insanity as mental illness, and

> so on. Despite their apparent worthiness these are nearly all platitudes, many of them ill conceived. They represent the comfortable ideals of a comfortable society that has lost the interest, and consequently the power to think for itself. They also represent past progress.[1]

Only the American absurdists, particularly Albee, attempted to struggle with problems and ideas that went beyond the day-to-day difficulties of love, marriage and family life, in both The American Dream and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? using the American family as a metaphor for the breakdown of American culture and Western civilization.

By contrast, nearly all the plays under discussion here are informed by a critical attitude that seeks its targets not only in the establishment values of the 1950s that were perpetuated during the 1960s but also in the contemporary social and political issues that erupt violently during the sixties.

> . . . it is obvious in retrospect how the same nexus of things in the first half of the 1960s that invited political violences also invited aesthetic ones. The increasingly obvious bureaucratization of society, the evasion of personal responsibility by many of those in positions of authority . . . the use of "reasonableness" as a means of dominance and manipulation, the attempted promotion of an unnatural and stultifying urbanity of behavior and feeling . . . the unparalleled reduction of art to objects to be "consumed" by the well-to-do . . . the unspoken conviction that nothing could any

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[1]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided: The Postwar American Stage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 49.

> longer seriously disrupt the pattern of business growth, technological imperialism, and the professionalization of the intelligent young--contemplating those and allied phenomena, the legitimacy in principle of the various efforts to break the pattern during that decade seems hardly open to question.[1]

In addition to revolutions in structure, character and language, the avant-garde drama demonstrates revolutions in theme, by which I mean content. Since this drama distrusts rational discourse, these plays eschew argument as their primary method of presenting ideas. Still, ideas are implicit in the approaches to structure, character and language.

> The left-wing has turned away from realistic, didactic plays that seek or provide answers to social questions. Straightforward content has become repellent to it. It does not conceive of its plays in terms of message delivery services but as theater works--plays that happen. When there is an idea behind the play, it is implicit.[2]

The plays under discussion in this dissertation generally fall into four categories thematically: plays about traditional human relationships; plays about the individual in society; contemporary issues in American society; art and theatre. The plays in the first category tend to focus on the middle-class conceptions of love,

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[1]John Fraser, Violence In the Arts (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 42.

[2]Gottfried, A Theater Divided, p. 57.

marriage, parenting, and sex, and in this group I place Home Movies, The Rock Garden, Molly's Dream, The Successful Life of 3, Saturday Night At the Movies, Why Hanna's skirt Won't Stay Down, The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year, The Golden Fleece, Futz, and Gorilla Queen. Plays in the second category generally focus on the individual's exploitation by and loss of identity in contemporary American society. Plays in this category include Keep Tightly Closed In A Cool Dry Place, Interview, The White Whore and the Bit Player, The Great American Desert, The Unseen Hand, Georgie Porgie, Tom Paine, Willie the Germ, The Rock Garden, and Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down (these last two, as with a number of plays always, can be placed in more than one category). Plays that tackle contemporary issues in American society usually focus on some of the political and social issues that were in the fore at this time, notably the mechanization of contemporary American culture, the abuse of political and military power, the Vietnam War. Among the plays that concentrate on the sterile and automaton-like nature of American life, I place The Brig, Motel, La Turista, The Unseen Hand, Areatha in the Ice Palace, Sand, and The Golden Screw. Anti-war or specifically anti-Vietnam plays include Bertha, Viet Rock, The Hessian Corporal, and Fruit

Salad. Bertha also fits into a subcategory of plays that focus on the dangers of hubristic power, as do The General Returns from One Place to Another, Beclch, and The Moke-Eater.

Plays in the "art and theatre" category comment indirectly on the nature of contemporary art by including elements from the popular media in the text. Here I especially place the work of Maria Irene Fornes, Megan Terry, Sam Shepard, and Ronald Tavel. Nearly all the plays under discussion in this dissertation, by virtue of their approaches to dramaturgy, make a statement about theatre.

Of the many American institutions that come under attack from the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s, some of the primary targets are love, marriage and the family. In The Rock Garden, Shepard shows the American family to be a bored and boring entity; Home Movies satirizes the staid lifestyle of the traditional American family by bringing characters and language to the brink of obscenity; You May Go Home Again (1963) by David Starkweather is a surreal fantasy about American family life, here shown to be a situation in which no one communicates with anybody else.

Marriage also comes up for ridicule. Saturday Night At the Movies (1966) by William M. Hoffman and The Golden Fleece (1967) by A. R. Gurney, Jr. portray the underside of

marital relationships rather than the candy-coated vision upheld by dramatists during the 1950s. In the first play, a couple named Mario and Helen watch television and take sleeping pills, talk with their friend Lila and argue, rather than making love and delighting in each other's company on Saturday night. In the second play, Bill and Betty talk to the audience while waiting for a visit from their friends Jason and Medea. Jason and Medea never appear, but Bill and Betty tell the story of the famous love affair and in so doing, the antagonisms in their own marriage emerge. In John Guare's absurdist tragicomedy The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year (1966), He escapes from a tyrannical wife by meeting She in the park on Sunday afternoons. The wife, however, eventually hunts the lovers down and murders them with her blue shotgun.

Indeed, the course of true love, which used to fare so well in most of the plays of the previous decade, usually meets with failure. The playwrights under discussion here dislike sentimentality and thus frequently poke fun at that other American icon, romance. Hanna resorts to the breeze hole at Coney Island because, after many years of searching, she cannot find a man as reliable as that pleasure-giving jet of air. The men in her life offer themselves temporarily and then move on, so finally she foregoes her yearning for love, as does her male counterpart Arizona, and they

both remain apart and alone. Molly, in Molly's Dream, has an unrequited love life even in her fantasies, and in The Successful Life of 3, He, She and 3 eventually form a ménage à trois, since the tried and true pairings so dear to Hollywood films do not work for them.

The dramatists of the 1960s are also antipathetic towards the general 1950s view that sex without love is undesirable. The avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s advocate sexual freedom, a rubric under which one finds sex for its own sake and sex with whatever sort of partner one chooses. Cyrus Futz has an honesty and lack of hypocrisy that make his passion for the pig Amanda more natural than the grasping but supposedly normal lusts of his fellow townspeople. The camp, often homosexual, figures in Home Movies, Lady Godiva and Gorilla Queen indulge in whatever sexual thought or action comes to mind at a particular moment. "Tavel's theatre . . . posits a utopian, pansexual society peopled by presocialized beings."[1] The sexual antics of the characters in these plays are not only supposed to be fun for those participating and watching, they are also implicitly critical of a society that rigidly upholds only one kind of sexual relationship as the ideal, yet at the same time commercializes it.

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[1]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 194.

> The sex is comic because of its flat guiltless naturalness: the characters don't beat around the bush. This directness. . . . is not a call for sexual freedom à la Henry Miller or naturalness à la Wedekind but mockery of the contemporary religion of this country: pervert heterosexuality. For ours is a historically unique culture dominated by a cult of sex to which it devotes the proponderance of its vast cultural efforts (advertising, films, advertising, musical comedies, advertising): . . . All is bawdry, but pervert & sterile bawdry. This theatre's bawdry opposes sterotypical role-identification, phoniness, authoritarianism.[1]

The individual is presented in these plays as being both part of a group and at the same time isolated. As part of a group, the individual at times shares experiences with his fellow men. Thus the Interviewers and Applicants in Interview are all participants in America's mechanization, while the characters in Viet Rock, whether GI or Senator, are all participants in the Vietnam War. A play does not have to present a large number of characters for the idea of group experience to apply. The three men in Keep Tightly Closed in A Cool Dry Place participate in the experience of being society's prisoners, literally and figuratively, and the three outlaws in The Great American Desert partake in a loss of heroism.

Yet the presence of the group is not reassuring. It emphasizes rather than lessens the sense of the individual's lack of a separate identity. Each character in

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[1]Brecht, "The Family of the f.p.," pp. 136-137.

Interview is equally dehumanized by American society. Each figure in Viet Rock is an equally faceless victim of the war. The constant transformations lend an unstable and transient aura to the characters; they are here one moment and gone the next, unimportant, fodder for a machine.

The characters in these plays are either indistinct one from the other from the start or are eventually frustrated in their attempts to assert individuality. In the worlds of these plays, attempts to establish identity are usually futile. In The Rock Garden, identity is as fleeting as sexual potency, and the father is soon unseated by his temporarily more virile son. The alternative to losing identity permanently, as Shepard later discovers, is to try continually to create a new identity for oneself, as Kent attempts in La Turista. "Shepard's magnificent obsession," writes Bonnie Marranca, "is the loss of individualism through control by unnameable, outside forces which is really fear of the loss of personal space."[1] Kent grasps for identity by transforming continually into other personalities and "acts himself right out of his body."[2]

The majority of the characters in these plays lose their fights for self-definition. Hanna seeks herself

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[1]Marranca, American Dreams, p. 18.

[2]Ibid., p. 32.

in relationships with men and eventually finds solace alone, as does Arizona. The star in The White Whore and the Bit Player, unable to discern which of the many images she has assumed is the real one, commits suicide. The only identity each of these characters can adopt for certain is that of a commodity: Hanna and Arizona as exhibits in a fun house; the star as a love object on the silver screen.

As to heroes, those great individualists of yore, they have disappeared. The Morphan Brothers in The Unseen Hand are pale imitations of the 19th-century gunslingers on which Shepard models them. The three bank robbers in The Great American Desert are paltry in comparison to the four men who look down on them (Wyatt Earp; Wild Bill Hickok; Billy the Kid; and Doc Holiday). And even these supposed heroes are shown here to have feet of clay: Earp was possibly a psychopath; Hickok perhaps a homosexual; Billy is a bigot; and Doc was just a good hustler.

The real heroes are persecuted. Foster's Tom Paine is ignored by a country that has forgotten his contributions, one of which was to lead the fight ensuring that Americans could be separate and distinctive individuals. Like Willie in Murray Mednick's Willie the Germ (1968), an absurdist and grotesque portrayal of the individual as victim, those who are different, those who either challenge the system or simply do not fit into it, are destroyed:

> THE FREAKS ARE . . . PERPETUALLY . . . HUNTED (He is having difficulty getting the words out. He tries harder as the others begin to razz him). I WALK . . . ALWAYS . . . I WALK . . . STRANGERS . . . MIRRORS . . . DRIFTING . . . MY IMAGE . . . (The others get louder, taunting him: Get on with it, Willie. Say it, Willie, etc.) I . . . I . . . MY . . . SELF . . . SELF . . . HOWLS . . . ON . . . MARION-ETTES . . . MAR . . . I . . . OH . . . NETTEES . . . Finally he can no longer speak at al.He rasps and growls, attempting to speak. He cannot. The others come forward. They become as animal trainers, with WILLIE as the terrified animal. He screams and froths at the mouth. He attacks and is driven back. MARTIN helps the other from the floor, shouting and beating on the platform until WILLIE is cornered. Then he sets up a soapbox and microphone on the floor in front of the audience WILLIE makes a last desperate attempt to break the barrier around the platform. A loud, long blast of static, etc. WILLIE screams and crumples into a heap.[1]

Some figures in these plays, however, do have a strong sense of their identities. These characters not only fit into the system but often know how to control it for their own ends. These are the destructive figures, like Bertha, The General or Beclch, who survive in contemporary society by engineering the overthrow of others. Bertha derives her power by arbitrarily waging war; The General is the symbol of American interventionism abroad; and Beclch is that most frightening of human beings, a psychopathic bully who manages to rise to a position of political power.

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[1]Mednick, Willie the Germ, More Plays from Off-Off Broadway, p. 238.

"The radical development of what has been called the New Theatre coincides with unrest in our political life and our large centers of learning, and may, indeed, be motivated by similar dissatisfactions."[1] If the individual is lost, unrecognized or persecuted in contemporary society, that is because, in the views of these playwrights, contemporary American society has defaulted on its responsibilities to human beings and has become instead sterile, materialistic and power hungry. Unlike the majority of playwrights of the 1950s, these avant-garde dramatists approach American values and mores with a highly critical sensibility. "Something in the air that generation had breathed," writes Hodgson. "Television quiz show,[2] perhaps, or the revolutions of rising expectations, or sheer boredom with the pious repetitions of consensus--had predisposed it to skepticism."[3] Indeed, even before the Vietnam War begins to serve as the rallying point for the New Left's disaffection with the Establishment, these playwrights were looking critically at "the utilitarian

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[1]Robert Brustein, The Third Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 35.

[2]Hodgson is referring here to the television quiz-show scandals of the late 1950s, when it was revealed that a number of profitable and popular quiz shows, notably "Twenty-One" on NBC, were rigged.

[3]Hodgson, America In Our Time, p. 280.

values and the bureacratic order of the age of the liberal consensus."[1]

An early target, yet one that continues throughout the decade, is the mechanization of American life. In America, according to this view, people are objects for barter, valuable only to the extent that they fit into the American preoccupation with buying and selling. Thus the Interviewers and Applicants in Interview are functions of the American marketplace. In the world of Motel, human beings have become automatons--dolls--because civilization has become obsessed with making objects, things in a catalogue, and finally has succeeded in making the object that will destroy all civilization, the nuclear bomb. In 1969, with Areatha in the Ice Palace, Tom Eyen is still portraying an America in which things are more valuable than people. In this surrealistic fantasy about an America of the not-too-distant future, Santa Claus makes life-size dolls for the people of the United States. "The technological vision embodied in the play," writes Bonnie Marranca, "is one of an all-powerful machine able to manufacture any fantasy, any dream for commercial purposes, the result being the perversion of all social and emotional values through a mechanization of life."[2]

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[1]Ibid., p. 291.

[2]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 236.

The play focuses on Santa's wife Areatha, whom Santa figuratively and literally turns into an object. For years, she has in effect been Santa's wife-slave, baking brownies for untold numbers of elves and obeying Santa's order never to ask about his work. Now she is 11 and 1/4 months pregnant, and Santa proposes to give her the present of youth. His vision of the ideal young woman, however, is that of a "fuck-me doll":

> You are a lucky man, Santa. You have designed the perfect toy--instant love, eternal gratification, complete compliance in an appliance that will only cost pennies a day to run. A perfect model toy for all of us, for all other outdated toys to emulate. Bravo, Santa! You have truly created something spectacular. You have sacrificed your wife, Areatha, to regain your fantasies, but you have given the world perfection. We all want our own fully-guaranteed fuck-me dolls, Santa![2]

Areatha, however, rebels at being turned into an object and, in Santa's words, "refuses change,"[3] and so he kills her. By murdering her, however, this creator of objects in effect also transforms himself into a machine, because he dehumanizes himself. "The creator becomes the creation," Santa says. "The buyer becomes the product, the terrorized becomes the terrorist."[4]

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[1]Marranca, American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, p. 236.

[2]Eyen, Ten Plays, p. 197.

[3]Ibid., p. 198.

[4]Ibid., p. 197.

Of the many dangers of dehumanization, one in particular that these playwrights depict is that people become slaves to others with wills to power. In an interview with Richard Schechner for Tulane Drama Review, Kenneth Brown, author of The Brig (1963), says:

> The guards in The Brig . . . are the dehumanized members of society. They are the people who have been given the responsibility of caring for and leading the prisoners, or The Living Theatres, or the lower middle class, or, in the present scheme of things, the Negro. . . . I found man's strongest drive is the will to power. Man does not seek to survive for the sake of surviving. Man seeks to survive to rule.[1]

Indeed, if there is another primary comment on contemporary American life that emerges from these plays it is the view of America as a power-hungry, war-mongering nation. This view is portrayed lightly and ironically in early plays such as Bertha and The General Returns From One Place To Another, where the culprits are cartoon-like symbols of power. But as the decade progresses, the criticism becomes more acerbic in tone, and the focus is specifically on the Vietnam War. In 1964, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution led to approved air strikes against Vietnam, and in 1965 the war escalated sharply, with President Johnson asking Congress for more than $14 billion to finance military expenses. The first anti-war mass demonstrations took

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[1]Richard Schechner, "Interviews with Judith Malina and Kenneth Brown," TDR 8 (Spring 1964): 218.

place in 1965. That year, Megan Terry wrote Viet Rock. In her notes for the Open Theatre production, Terry writes:

> We used material that bombarded us every day from television and newspapers. We acted out personal stories and tried to get at the roots of our drives toward anger and aggression. To deal with the bewilderment, shame, and confusion created by this war, I felt we had to explore our negative feelings, drives, and fantasies. . . . Also, we explored loss, grief, and regret. We tried to get at the essence of violence.[1]

As Richard Schechner writes in "The Playwright as Wrighter," Viet Rock "is not propagandistic or dogmatic."[2] Yet it is definitely an anti-Vietnam War play and anti-American militarism. The slogans, the jingles, the cliche phrases in the script are distinctly American, creating a satire that indicts the American civilization which has given birth to this particular conflict. The characters and their speeches support Terry's indication that she and the ensemble looked to contemporary media for sources, for the characters and the language are specific to that time and that event in American history.

Grant Duay's Fruit Salad (1967) is similarly targeted at the war in Vietnam. Here, images of three soldiers hiding out in the jungle of North Vietnam (Banana, Cherry and Melon) alternate with the typically American image

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[1]Terry, Four Plays, p. 21.

[2]Schechner, Public Domain, pp. 141-142.

of a pretty girl in a television commercial. The girl is chopping up fruit and demonstrating how to make a fruit salad. As she begins to eat the delicious salad she has made, the three soldiers are killed by enemy gunfire. The clear, if somewhat heavy-handed, message is that the American Establishment makes money, while American men die in Vietnam.

In 1968, the War was still continuing, although public opinion was more solidly against it than in 1965. One play in particular from the end of the decade again focuses on America's relationship to power, rather than on the War itself; Kenneth Bernard's The Moke-Eater (1968), a particularly harsh and frightening portrait of contemporary civilization. In this surrealistic nightmare, a salesman's car breaks down near a New England town called Monte Waite. Monte Waite contains none of the peacefulness of its obvious theatrical antecedent, Grover's Corners; instead, it offers violence, torture, cannibalism, and tyranny. "Our Town has been rewritten, as it were, by Artaud."[1] The salesman, expecting to find that money will get him out of an unpleasant situation, discovers instead that he is a prisoner of the town and particularly of the town's leading citizen,

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[1]Michael Feingold, Introduction to Night Club and Other Plays by Kenneth Bernard (New York: Winter House Ltd., 1971), p. 6.

a dictator named Alec. At night, Alec forces the salesman to watch a grotesque show, specifically an episode during which an elderly man, perhaps a vestige of an earlier civilization, is attacked by The Moke-Eater, who devours him. At daybreak, Monte Waite appears to be a calm American village, and the salesman, his car now repaired, leaves, only to reappear at the town three hours later when his car breaks down again. Presumably, he will relive the experience forever.

> The new civilization, America, is repression and political violence by day, unexampled grotesquery and horror by night, when those who think we can avoid participation are forced to wait . . . and wait. . . . The city slicker . . . is also the spectator as victim, condemned to hear of and see the horrors that have created him and brought him where he is.[1]

Whether or not violence and repression always existed beneath the surface of Grover's Corners, we cannot know. Certainly it exists now, Bernard implies. Bernard, in concert with writers such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner and Truman Capote, demonstrates that the small town, once thought to be the source of all that is best in American culture, has been disintegrating, and man's most destructive and uncivilized desires have emerged. It is as it mankind has returned to a moral stone age. Indeed, most of the citizens of Monte Waite cannot speak

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[1]Feingold, Introduction, pp. 5-6.

a ccherent language, but mimic words and mutter sounds or bits from old radio shows and films. Perhaps the town's disintegration is related to a monster that it spawned somewhere along the line: the urban world, with its salesmen and the symbol of their livelihood, the automobile. As Feingold indicates, America has become predatory. The salesman meets himself going back. The horrors of Monte Waite are both the guilt of contemporary civilization's recent past and immediate present, and a nightmarish vision of its future.

If the dramatists under discussion here are more critical of contemporary American life than their predecessors, it is because their sense of moral indignation is more virulent. The writers seek not to buttress the status quo, but to dig under or perhaps shatter it, searching for what they perceive is truth. They sense disorder below the complacency that the 1950s handed to them, and as the 1960s progressed, their intuitions seemed to prove correct. Hodgson dates the break-up of the liberal consensus to the assassination of John F. Kennedy in late 1963, an act that suddenly made even the non-questioning liberal concerned about the quality of life in America.

> Never again, after the assassination, did the liberals pour forth their rapture in quite so artless a song. A far more representative reaction was to see the tragedy in Dallas as a symptom of, and perhaps even a punishment for, some tragic moral flaw in American life.[1]

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[1]Hodgson, America In Our Time, p. 162.

For a while, the liberals' anxieties were quelled by Lyndon Johnson's plans for a Great Society, wherein the President committed himself to curing the social ills of America and the political ills of the world at the same time. But this goal eventually brought down both Johnson and certain of the liberals' fantasies about American infallibility.

> . . . the President, in turn, committed the country to two courses of action, which were to divide it until what was called into question was the legitimacy not of Lyndon Johnson but of the presidency, of the liberal ideology, and of almost every assumption and institution in the American system.[1]

Long before the liberals lost faith in their own constructs, however, the New Left was dispensing with established institutions and seeking radical expressions for their disapproval. From 1961 until 1964, students at the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley demonstrated for free speech and against the supposedly repressive centers of higher education; they joined and soon led the freedom rides and sit-ins for integration in the South. Then, after 1965, the Vietnam War became the focus of the New Left, which early on believed the war to be immoral. Soon, political commitment against the Vietnam War joined in spirit with other forms of contemporary rebellion: black power; women's liberation;

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[1]Ibid., p. 169.

rock music; the wearing of long hair by both men and women; smoking dope and doing drugs; engaging in unrestricted sex.

> What gave unity to all these different forms of rebellion, . . . was their shared conviction, vague but unshakeable, of the unity of what they were rebelling against. Behind each specific movement of the sixties there was the underlying Movement, because behind each specific injustice there was perceived, shadowy but all-powerful, the System.[1]

Eventually, the Vietnam War began to dismay segments of American society other than the New Left, although for pragmatic rather than moral reasons. For the old-style liberals, the war disrupted the middle-class economic status of their lives, burdening them with taxes and inflation. For the black community, the war meant that money was being siphoned from the programs of the Great Society to a conflict that seemed to be by and for the white political establishment. In 1968, a year of climax, these various segments of American society shared for a brief while a communal dismay at the course of events in the United States. The Tet offensive early in the year cost America untold dollars and hundreds of lives, and resulted in military defeat for the Americans. At home, violent acts echoed the violence that Americans were leveling in Southeast Asia. Assassins killed the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and prospective presidential nominee Robert F. Kennedy. Then in August, Mayor Richard

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[1]Ibid., p. 309.

Daley of Chicago became the symbol of Establishment abuse of power when the Chicago police attacked apparently peaceful demonstrators in a park near the site of the Democratic National Convention. By the end of the 1960s, the country seemed to have gone haywire. "The center was not holding."[1]

> Military defeat, in the end, was easier to accept than a self-image which now had to expand to include the willful slaughter of peasants, the arrogance of power and the destruction--subtle and not so subtle--of that model of personal integrity and moral action which was assumed to be the basis of American enterprise. Vietnam held a mirror up to the American people in which they say an image irreconcilable with public myths and private values.[2]

Jean-Claude van Itallie would write in 1970:

> . . . The past four years have been shock after shock. It feels like the economic and social structure which is America . . . is falling apart completely; and faster and faster.[3]

The avant-garde playwrights of the sixties are aligned with the counter-culture in that they, too, see the immediate world as being in social and moral disarray. And like

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[1]Joan Didion, Slouching Towards Bethlehem (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), p. 84.

[2]Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, vol. III, p. 315.

[3]Jean-Claude van Itallie, "Introduction," Behind the Scenes: Theatre and Film Interviews from the Transatlantic Review, ed. Joseph F. McCrindle (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. viii-x.

their fellow demonstrators, their goal is not to bring America back to what they perceive as the false order of the 1950s, but to bring that order down, so that America can see its true self. Thus, in their own eyes and objectively as well, these dramatists are as staunchly moral in their thinking as those of the 1950s whose moralizing the avant-garde often ridiculed. The difference is that the writers of the sixties are not concerned with the niceties of day-to-day behavior; they are involved with questions of a country's social and moral responsibilities to its citizens and to human beings everywhere. In contrast to the worlds of the 1950s' plays, where wrong and right refer to rules for governing one's life or the life of a family, the worlds of the sixties' plays generally present interpretations of what is detrimental or positive for mankind as a whole. Thus, bigotry of any kind is detrimental; material productivity can be dehumanizing; war is bad; too much power is dangerous; and indulgence of one's natural instincts can be fun. That the worlds of these plays point more often to what is wrong with society than what can be done to correct the faults not only reflects these writers' critical viewpoints but also results from pessimism about the world outside these plays. The counter-culture was rebellious, but it did not

necessarily know what to offer in place of the Establishment it attacked and on more than one occasion was more interested in bringing down institutions than in rebuilding them. The feelings of anxiety and even negativism were frequently more prevalent than the spirit of hope.

The theme of art appears in these play through the frequent and conscious use of references to, and elements of, the popular media. Fornes, for instance, borrows often from film; The Successful Life of 3 contains inversions of Hollywood movie plots, as does Molly's Dream. Terry uses the styles and phrases of several types of Hollywood films during the transformations in Keep Tightly Closed In A Cool Dry Place, Ronald Tavel draws extensively on films for his camp rendition of King Kong, and Shepard draws on films and the rock music subculture for images in La Turista and Melodrama Play (1967) respectively.

> A remarkably large number of these plays treat the condition of modern America living in a world saturated by the popular media, and in particular by the cliches, fantasies, and stories of the movies. In Gorilla Queen, for example, Tavel uses the camp form of the Hollywood musical and mixes it with philosophy to create a mad portrait of America's cultural insanity. Owens in Istanboul satirizes the scenarios of American movies of the thirties and forties, while van Itallie in T.V. shows how the viewers of television become the images they see.[1]

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[1]Stamboulian, American Dreams, p. 79.

Indeed, as indicated in Chapter III, this generation, raised on films, comic books and television, finds correlations between the myths presented in the popular media and America's conception of itself.

Yet the use of popular media to contribute to structure, character and language in these plays is not only indicative of a social consciousness on the part of these playwrights; it is also indicative of a recognition that the boundaries of art in general and theatre as a so-called high art in particular were shifting.

> What many highbrow critics are still unable to acknowledge is that the line between high culture and popular culture gave way in the sixties and on some fronts was erased entirely. Serious artists in all fields were attracted to the simplicity and emotional directness of popular culture and the complexities of modernist experimentation.[1]

The message from the playwrights of the sixties is that theatre should not be bound by outmoded traditions that exclude the use of such media a priori. Theatre, after all, as Fornes and Tavel in particular often demonstrate, already encompasses popular forms such as vaudeville, burlesque and musical comedy. Like the conscious disuse of logical plot, or the inclusion of language and images previously deemed inappropriate to the American stage, the

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[1]Dickstein, Gates of Eden, p. 186.

use of popular media is a revolt against what these playwrights believed had become an homogenous art form.

Underneath this particular revolution is perhaps also the belief that theatre had failed its history. The art form that first developed as Greek tragedy had, by the middle of the 20th century, become fragmented and given over much of its power to "the new dramatic institutions,"[1] film and television. Thus the turning to popular media is not only a comment on the state of the American theatre, it is also an attempt to give that theatre some of the contemporaneity these playwrights believe it had lost. Indeed, on one level, the plays under discussion here are simply about theatre. They demonstrate what these writers feel theatre ought to be: venturesome; flexible; theatrical; passionate; and responsive to present-day reality.

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[1]Raymond Williams, The Sociology of Culture (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 179.

CONCLUSION

What began as rebellions against the style and rules of the mainstream playwriting of the 1950s took on momentum as the societal problems that fifties realism concealed erupt and come to dominate life in the sixties. "The fifties," writes Morris Dickstein, "were the seedbed of our present cultural situation and the ground against which the upheavals of the sixties sought to define themselves."[1] The two decades form a continuum. Despite the spread in time between the earliest play cited in Chapter I (The Rose Tattoo, 1951) and the latest play cited in the body of this dissertation (Areatha in the Ice Palace, 1969), there is an ever-present tension between the playwriting of the two decades.

> The tremors of the sixties, which shook institutions in so many remote corners of society, were generated from society's own deep core, from all those problems neglected in the fifties that could no longer be wished away. . . .[2]

In the views of the avant-garde dramatists, the malaise in the American theatre was largely due to the realism

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[1]Dickstein, Gates of Eden, p. 27.

[2]Ibid., p. 69.

practiced by playwrights whose work usually appeared on Broadway and whose plays were taken by the American public and the world at large to represent American drama at its best. In another time, playwrights had chosen realism as the style through which to convey their criticism of modern society. Yet, in the minds of these avant-garde playwrights, Broadway-bound writers had weakened the style which Ibsen and Shaw had used with such intellectual fineness, Williams and Miller notwithstanding. Realism as a dramatic style, like many other institutions of the American middle class, could no longer, in the new dramatists' view, be trusted as a vehicle for ideas; it had become an instrument for the expression of sentiment and self-righteousness.

Even if most of the 1950s' playwrights had not employed realism in a self-congratulatory way, there is doubt as to whether the playwrights coming to flower Off Off Broadway in the 1960s would have looked to that style. Realism had come to represent an ordered world, yet in the 20th-century, the universe had become increasingly disordered and frightening. Even more disturbing, despite the advent of the Atomic Age, and despite a society that was becoming increasingly mechanized and materialistic, the middle class that governed America remained self-satisfied

and unwilling to face the problems that rumbled beneath its well-pressed exterior.

The American absurdists--Jack Gelber, Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit--had tried to pierce some of the complacency and to some extent had succeeded. Although the number of their plays from that period is small, it brought American dramaturgy in the late 1950s one step further in terms of expressing critical attitudes and experimenting with form; certainly these absurdists paved the way for the more radical avant-garde of the 1960s. But while the sixties playwrights owe a debt to these absurdists, the new avant-garde would look to antecedents that were angrier, more overtly political and more iconoclastic stylistically.

> . . . one can see too why, during the 1960s, the older artists who seemed in some ways to answer the most fully to human needs, were what might be called explosive ones--Céline, Genet, Strindberg, Bacon, Artaud, Goya, Sade, Buñuel, . . .[1]

The playwrights looked to Artaud and his theory of a highly theatrical non-literary theatre that would assault the senses; to Brecht, for a view of theatre as a political vehicle; to developments in the visual and performing arts that rejected the concept of the highly-organized, perfect art object; to the myths of popular culture.

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[1]Fraser, Violence in the Arts, p. 42.

In addition, the new dramatists absorbed and reflected the spirit of the decade, which was doubting, violent, active rather than reflective, emphasizing change rather than stability. The changes in structure, character, language, and theme were, in their own ways, violent. If the definition of revolution at work here is "a complete or drastic change of any kind,"[1] then that was accomplished, at least temporarily, as these dramatists threw out the traditions that had governed the dramaturgy of their immediate predecessors. Breaking the patterns of art can be revolutionary. If they did not know, or at least did not acknowledge, that their experiments in form echoed some of the experiments of an earlier generation of American writers, this does not detract from the vitality of their work as a whole or from the achievement of the moment, a time when change in the form and content of American dramaturgy may have been absolutely necessary. In this regard, the significant revolutions that dominate this avant-garde drama are the concepts of fragmentation and collage. Fragmentation breaks into disparate images what had previously been the linear progression of structure, character and language. Collage is a way of reunifying

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[1]Webster's New World Dictionary, 1904 ed., s.v., "Revolution."

these images into an artistic whole. In this fashion, the avant-garde's concepts of structure, character and language are truly the themes of this drama, for they demonstrate both a response to a fragmented and violent world and a need for change.

To what extent permanent change was visited on American playwriting by the dramaturgy of the sixties avant-garde is a question worthy of some analysis. The mainstream of American playwriting soon adopted the more obvious and perhaps commercial aspects of the radical dramaturgy, namely the frank language and the freedom to be more explicit sexually, although the mainstream never returned completely to the machinery of the traditionally structured play as described in Chapter I. Gay Theatre can trace its roots to the overt and accepting portrayal of homosexuals in the plays from the 1960s, and Feminist Theatre, while it traces its roots in America at least to 19th-century playwrights, certainly derived an impetus from the radical dramaturgy of the 1960s. Indeed, a number of playwrights who flowered during the Off Off Broadway movement, notably Maria Irene Fornes, Megan Terry, Rosalyn Drexler, and Rochelle Owens, are still writing for the theatre.

As Bigsby writes, however, the conservatism of the 1970s cast a pall on the counter-culture of the 1960s and with it the radical dramaturgy.

> By the mid 1970s the new theatre movement had already lost some of its momentum and purpose. The conservatism of post-Vietnam and then post-Watergate America, exacerbated by economic depression, was reflected in the theatre which, having seen itself as something of a resistance movement, had perhaps come to rely rather too much on the implacable fact of American military imperialism and manifest political corruption for its own significance.[1]

Among the avant-garde playwrights and creators of theatre there was a retreat from the barricades to private experience. Bigsby cites the autobiographical pieces of New York City's Wooster Group in particular and the monologues of Spalding Gray. But we might also add to the list the family dramas of Sam Shepard, who in effect moved out of the avant-garde into the mainstream.

Yet, while Shepard has been moving toward a theatre of logical cause and effect, the avant-garde Robert Wilson has always been moving in the opposite direction, toward visual tableaux, continuing perhaps in a more stringent fashion than the 1960s avant-garde the emphasis on visual image and the deemphasis on words. Nonetheless, this is theatre that might well be described as apolitical, and in that

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[1]Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. III, p. 33.

respect it shares with mainstream drama the fading of the social fervor that had characterized the radical playwriting of the 1960s.

In sum, of the numerous revolutions that the avant-garde playwrights of the 1960s thought they had introduced, few actually took hold in the dramaturgy of either the mainstream or the avant-garde that followed. Perhaps what has vanished most completely is the spirit of revolution itself. For indeed, the form and content of American drama of the past two decades generally reflects a reaching for stability, rather than an eagerness to overturn it.

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