

National Drama, Theatre or Performance? Ruin, Revision and Reform in American Theatre

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Abstract: The article aspires to present an overview the national character of drama, theatre and performance, using three selected theatrical works (*Angels in America*, *The America Play*, and *Pursuit of Happiness*) to demonstrate the diversity of formal approaches and content choices in attempting to address national themes. The discussion includes an argumentation about the nature and features of a national theatre, both as an institution and aesthetic form, and extends into a treatise on how political, social and historical issues resonate on the American theatre stage. The article also endeavours to chart the development and changes in the cultural space that have affected theatre art in the past few decades, highlighting the global and more multicultural approach to theatremaking.

Keywords: Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, national theatre, political theatre, African American history, liquid modernity.

In an attempt to paint a comprehensive portrait of the United States of America in times of national crisis (AIDS epidemic in the mid-1980s and the climax of the arms race during the Cold War), Tony Kushner wrote *Angels in America*, a play that would soon after its premiere in 1991 become a national phenomenon, connecting as well as dividing the country's citizens in a cultural debate over such issues as gay rights, democracy, religious bigotry, abuse of political power, diversity and, perhaps most interestingly, the relevance of international political development in the late 1980s in Europe.

The questions that Kushner's play has brought up are significant also for the discussion about national literature and its relevance for not just a local or national culture, but also for a global culture. In this text, I would like to trace some of the parallels between the complexity of Kushner's approach and two more specific ways to address issues of national importance – one being Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* (1995) and the other Nature Theater of Oklahoma's performance piece *Pursuit of Happiness* (2017). My aim here is to analyse the three works through the prism of how they respond to issues of national relevance, and how this response reflects on their character as works of national literature. I will endeavour to observe the ways in which theatre (drama as well as performance), as represented by the above selection, is a relevant agent in the development

of national literature, and how its content and approach changes, mapping the social, political and cultural progress in America.

The period in which the works were created covers almost three decades of dynamic advancement in matters of public (national) interest – from the end of the Cold War all the way to America under Donald Trump. The national character of the three works of theatre art, however, lies in their subversive features, as opposed to a generally acceptable style and discourse. This, understandably, challenges the idea that there can be a national type of theatre (or, indeed, as many European countries are familiar with, the idea of a National Theatre both as an institution and aesthetic form).

Culture and art often mirror the turbulent social and political changes, which is why they tend to become instruments that shape the structure and content of cultural activity. The mere existence of national theatres reflects what Lawrence Levine, in his account of the cultural development in the United States in late 19th century, calls “[a] drive for political order [that results in] a push to organize the cultural sphere” (Levine, 1990, p. 228). According to Levine, culture is hierarchized in a search for control both on the social and cultural level. National culture also faces the challenge of over-institutionalization, as Joe Kelleher suggests when he calls the London National Theatre an entity that feels “overly familiar” to its audiences because it produces theatre people are “supposed to already know, supposed to feel comfortable with” (Kelleher, 2005, p. 46). Convention defies artistic experimentation and art suffers from insufficient freedom, creativity or energy to be politically and socially critical.

The conventional attitude in national institutions producing socially relevant art also influences the content of their production. Victor Corti, for example, posits that the National Theatre in London is set to be an institution that by definition “emphasizes interpretation rather than creation and aims at impressing according to rigid social rules of behaviour” (Corti, 1969, p. 186). Critique aimed at stiff social relations and cultural circumstance often goes amiss in such conditions and authors deliberately seek either to transgress the dimensions of such expectations or desire to change the existing structures altogether. In the 21st century, the fleeting nature of theatre as a medium is suitable for capturing the transitory reality, the fluidity and rapid pace of life, as envisioned and analysed by Zygmunt Bauman, who in this context speaks of “immediate, ‘on-the-spot’ fulfilment [as well as] immediate exhaustion and fading of interest,” and then describes the instantaneity of modern life as consisting of “only ‘moments’ – points without dimensions” (Bauman, 2000, p. 118).

Bauman’s notion of inconsequential and superficial fragmentation and liquidity of modernity develops Benedict Anderson’s well-known and much discussed idea of nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2016, p. 7). Such communities obstruct meaningful and coherent narratives from entering the national discourse on identity and culture, unless these narratives, too, are imagined and constructed. For the role of theatre in a modern, fluid society, Jill Dolan’s concept of hopeful, or “utopian performative[s]” seems to be more apt, as it presents theatre and performance as an art form that can very effectively produce what she calls “an affective vision of how the world might be better” (Dolan,

2005, p. 6). It is in the affective realm, the theatre's emotional response where audiences may look for nationally relevant material.

At their core, all three presented works hold a national idea in their centre – Kushner has subtitled his play *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, introducing a dialectical concept in which gay issues blend with national themes and are theatrically presented by fantastical means, a kind of magic realism in theatre. Suzan-Lori Parks chose a slogan-like title – *The America Play* – to play challenge the content of big national narratives and to critically address the potential emptiness of words and historical narratives. Finally, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma not only nods to the Declaration of Independence and its famous set of inalienable rights – one of which gave the performance its title, *Pursuit of Happiness* – but also offers a transnational, if not outright multicultural approach by employing a cast from all over the world and using a name for its ensemble that comes from Franz Kafka's novel *Amerika*.

I will look at the selected works through the prism of three principal elements that motivate their content and form: ruin, revision and reform. In other words, I will follow the lines along which the three works identify what is wrong with the societies they aim to represent and show us their destruction and disintegration, then revise the existing status quo by offering alternatives and seeking for new content, before finally providing a hopeful narrative/performative to reform itself and envision a potentially better future.

For example, in *Angels in America*, the big national themes, which Kushner presents already in the title of his epic play, might suggest an observation of the complexity of multicultural America in the late 20th century – and observation that will be both personal and political. As Kushner himself posits, his theatre aims to apply “the magic of perception and the political, ideological employment to which the magic is put” (Kushner, 1997, p. 27). Kushner's characters are torn between liberal-minded tolerance and a total rejection of empathy towards the nationalistic forces – for example Louis, who is unable to reconcile his feelings for Joe Pitt and his loathing of Joe Pitt's conservative political persuasion. Louis is also unable to stop talking, much in the style of the narrator of *Pursuit of Happiness*, about academic contexts behind the reasons why democracy has succeeded in America (Kushner, 1992, pp. 89–90). Another character, Belize, former drag queen and an example of a tolerant and understanding American is driven to bitterness by the unfairness of political and social conduct in his country:

Belize:

I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you.

The white cracker who wrote the National Anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word “free” to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me (Kushner, 1994, p. 61).

Patriotism alone cannot save America, Belize claims, or religion, or pure political thought. It is not big, empty words and political concepts, but rather a chain of events, ranging from

devastation, through renewal, all the way to reconstruction (after all, the second part of *Angels in America* is subtitled *Perestroika*, meaning reconstruction, rebuilding) that can redeem it. The importance of destruction and ruin in Kushner's play, as has been frequently pointed out, has its source in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* that depicts an "angel of history," a figure standing on the ruins of civilization it seems, perceiving "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" and hesitating whether it is at all possible to "make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 257). The wreckage, fantastically swirling above the angel's head in a heavy storm becomes the principal element for advancement: "[The] storm irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 257).

As opposed to a historic angel, Suzan-Lori Parks employs the character of Abraham Lincoln, or rather his lookalike, ideally performed by an African American actor who, at the beginning of the play, is seen standing above a hole. This, as the audience learns, is "[a] great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" (Parks, 1995, p. 159). By working with the notion of an empty space, a void, Parks highlights the significance of the missing African American cultural history and therefore also identity. To avoid constructing identity from opposition to the dominant white culture, Parks presents an idea of creating culture, identity by collaboratively filling an already existing hole.

A similar concept is apparent in the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's *Pursuit of Happiness*, a performance that defies genres – it ranges from poetic lines written in iambic pentameter and recited by characters expressing their existential angst amid slapstick scenes of brawls in a saloon in the Wild West, to verbose texts narrating a dance group's journey into the Middle East in search for authenticity and artistic success. The character Ida, during one of the philosophical ruminations, prompts her fellow actors and actresses to engage in an academic argumentation:

Ida:

Thoreau wrote: "The majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Luke, do you agree or disagree, and why?¹

However, Ida's call is left unnoticed and followed only by more fighting among the characters – the fights are well choreographed, absurd and in line with Florian Malzacher's idea about Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's art using "an idiosyncratic form of script [and] an unmistakable manner of speaking [which is] at the same time highly authentic and artificial" (Malzacher, 2012, p. 117). The existential anguish we feel when Lada tells us about her experience with domestic violence, or when Jeffrey finds his tedious job mentally and

¹ The quotations from Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's performance *Pursuit of Happiness* come from an unpublished copy of the script selflessly provided by Pavol Liška and Kelly Copper.

emotionally devastating, creates a similar void and wreckage as in *The America Play* and *Angels in America*.

The empty space then becomes fertile ground for the creation of content – narratives, interconnections, or even fantastical liminal spaces. These are defined, redefined, and always filled with cultural content. While in *Pursuit of Happiness*, an aspiring narrative is created by the performing dancers who embark on a quest to prove that their art need not be mundane and benign, but ground-breaking and world-changing. The hole of history, in which Suzan-Lori Parks sows her African American search for identity offers a chance to go beyond solely “subjective-idealistic conception[s] of literary development” (Nikolyukin, Leighton, 1973, p. 575). Also, the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’s international cast of dancers/performers subverts a one-dimensional perception of a national narrative and offers a transnational (though primarily Anglo-American) position. All in all, empty spaces are typical for the establishment of “a semantic relationship between [absent history] and the need to revise such history to make it whole” (Bernard, 1997, p. 688).

And so, because revision (or re-creation) become the launching pad for hopeful progress and development within a national framework, the characters and their stories present situations where such reconstruction might be possible. Harper Pitt’s final monologue in *Perestroika* is a good example of this:

Harper:

Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired (Kushner, 1994, p. 96).

The ruins of history scattered under the feet of the angel of history are restored and the world is reconstructed through destruction. Souls of dead people mend the ozone layer to save the living. Or, as James Fisher posits, “[the] ruins of history [are] the price for progress” (Fisher, 2011, p. 54). In Kushner’s dramatic world, like in the imagined world of Suzan-Lori Parks, spaces and holes are metaphors that are both frightening and hopeful. Their existence is intimidating, but also promising – it opens gates to different stories, forms and experience. By going beyond conventional form, *Angels in America*, *The America Play* as well as *Pursuit of Happiness* adopt different languages to tell their stories and use images, gestures, sounds, even silence (Roach, 2001, p. 307).

Obviously, the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma is the most experimental, or alternative, of all three selected theatre undertakings. The mere fact that dancers perform movements along effusive narration provided by one of the actors creates an overload of stimuli which, paradoxically, hovers above the emptiness of what the story is trying to communicate:

And one and two and three and four, we fan out into a straight line, and each do individual but related choreography. Five, six and seven and eight, one, two, we break into seemingly disorganized chaos. There appears to be no intelligence at work in our dynamic, constantly morphing formation, but I assure you, there's nothing chancy about our signature En-Knapp choreography. We're always über-organized, every move is calibrated and recalibrated and absolutely integral. If a single element fails, the entire sophisticated but precarious structure falls apart.

It feels more like a commentary on the nature of their endeavour than the establishment of a narrative voice to present a coherent story. But again, the effort here is to challenge the conventional perception of dance communicating only with movement and to combine it with ideas and dense narration. This allows a slightly Brechtian breaking of the fourth wall because the audience is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, action and visual stimuli and establishes a distance from the emotional and potentially cathartic appeal of the story. It is, in fact, very similar to Tony Kushner's subtly Brechtian approach, recognized by Janelle Reinelt, who is convinced that Brecht in *Angels in America* is more of a "specter, like Ethel Rosenberg or Roy Cohn in the play: a specific historical presence conjured up, but as a dramatic fiction, to haunt the play through both limitation and aspiration" (Reinelt, 1997, p. 235).

Even in *The America Play*, the absence of substance is ultimately replaced by the rich image of a tableau, in which we see the deceased Abraham Lincoln lookalike. He now fills the great hole of history, literally by being placed directly in it:

[O]ur newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hissel! Note: body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole – thuh great black hole in thuh great head. – And how this great head is bleedin. – Note: thuh last words. – And thuh last breaths. – And how thuh nation mourns – (Parks, 1995, p. 199).

The final tableau emphasizes both the necessity and futility of revision and reconstruction. While the bartender and narrator in *Pursuit of Happiness* ends on a bitter and cynical note that art cannot change anything, the effort itself to challenge the existing status quo and subvert conventional form is what matters most in the end.

In conclusion, the selected works demonstrate that a community, a society, or even an entire nation, may reform itself owing to its acquired "strength from the hard lessons of the past" (Fisher, 2011, p. 58). In doing so, it can feed on hope, but also go beyond hope itself, as Prior Walter, the protagonist of *Angels in America* aptly puts: "I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do" (Kushner, 1994, p. 89). In many respects, all three plays represent the idea that it might just be possible to keep "a nation that can still be in the future something different that it is at the present: something that genuinely and lovingly offers more life" (Scapp, 1997, p. 99). Filling voids and utilizing empty spaces might ultimately help prevent what Francis Fukuyama has defined as the critical state of so-called strong states

resulting from a “crisis on the levels of ideas” (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 13). In this sense, national literature, theatre, or art in a broader sense, is meaningful; it can become useful as an identity quest aimed at addressing potentially baffling concepts such as the European Union, whose perception of free movement of people might contradict the very idea of national art: “[T]e greater movement between countries facilitated by the EU, as well as the effects of globalisation, further complicates the concept of a national literature” (Elkin, 6 Oct. 2008). And so, while being complicated and capable of complicating things further, the national character of art remains a very relevant aspect of dramatic and theatrical production – and not only in the United States.

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