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At War in the Deepest Trench

In her essay “Thinking Feeling: Criticism and Emotion”, Jennifer Doyle observes that sentimentality is often considered unwelcome in the world of literary and artistic criticism.¹ We are taught that complicated and inaccessible works are “deep,” and that romance novels are “shallow.” Like most stereotypes, these assumptions are partially founded in reality. For instance, we can clearly see that James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a novel that mirrors the structure of Homer’s *Odyssey* whilst arguably perfecting stream-of-consciousness narrative, displays more scholarly merit than, say, Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, a saga themed around romance between vampires, werewolves, and humans. Fortunately, while anti-sentimentality dominates criticism (which we can perhaps blame Plato and Aristotle for due to their emotionally-absent essays on what makes “good” theater²), playwrights continue to utilize the “human” aspects of theater, namely physical and emotional, to directly implicate their audiences into rich discussions about the human condition. In this paper, I will compare the works of playwrights Tony Kushner and Nilo Cruz in order to demonstrate that artists can achieve depth through emotional content. I will then demonstrate how the “platonic”³ sentimentality of the authors’ works, particularly Kushner’s *Angels in America* and Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics* and *Two Sisters and a Piano*, connects to relevant political contexts.

At the heart of Kushner and Cruz’s respective plays are relationships and romances. While Kushner and Cruz undoubtedly write with political fervor (less noticeably in *Anna in the Tropics*), we can see two subdivisions at play. We have various names for these partitions, such as love and politics, or soap opera and war. The former can be rephrased as personal drama (on the small scale),

and the latter as regional, national, or global, drama (on the large scale). It is pertinent to remember that however large these works attempt to be, they all begin on the stage. We are direct observers to the ephemeral performance, and in order for Kushner and Cruz to transcend into heavier topics, the playwrights must broaden the stage. Thus, the performances are rooted in tangible relationships and romances.

Once a play adequately imitates⁴ small-scale reality, consisting of day-to-day interactions with close acquaintances, we may ask if something so ostensibly familiar could be art. The answer is polemical, but proven through our fascination with romance novels.⁵ Love is globally attractive and easily understood by most individuals, and thus is fascinating and enrapturing to playwrights and audiences alike. In an interview, Kushner revealed the foundations of *Angels* when he said, “All I knew... was that I wanted to write about gay men, Mormons and Roy Cohn.”⁶ While the relationships between the three subjects may seem strained and political, Kushner stated only that he wanted to write about people, with no adverse mention of politics. Similarly, Cruz says, “The politics in my plays are very simple... *Two Sisters* is about women who make the best out of their lives, even though they live in very harsh conditions.”⁷ Cruz talks about subjects on a very small scale even when he describes the “political” aspects of his plays, since the essence of his work is reliant on people. We see that these playwrights (and many more) write about relationships and people because this is a place where art begins.

Another purpose of love and relationships in theater is for the sake of honesty. Jesse Green writes, “But in art, emotional ripeness trumps statistical reality... You might as well call metaphors dishonest” (Green 72). Kushner and Cruz’s works depict gritty, raw, and challenging emotions. In *Angels*, Louis undergoes internal turmoil as he tries to cope with his lover Prior’s procurement of AIDS. Louis tries to confide in a rabbi, revealing that he fundamentally may not be able to coexist amongst “vomit,” “sores,” “disease,” and “death.” (Kushner 31). Even though this response is

rational, it grips with the hands of love. Prior confronts Louis, “I’m dying... Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means...” to which Louis replies, “I have to find some way to save myself” (85). The ambivalent empathy felt for both Louis and Prior makes the situation feel more human and realistic, and thus more honest. In *Anna*, Conchita confronts her husband Palomo about his affair. After a long, strained conversation with Palomo, Conchita asks, “I’d like to know what she’s like. And what does she do to make you happy?” (Cruz, *Anna in the Tropics* 30). Her inquiry is laced with sorrow and a feeling of inadequacy. The situation is further complicated when Conchita decides to have her own affair with the lector Juan Julian. We then begin to empathize with Palomo, as he solemnly watches his marriage slip away and his wife have an affair with another man.⁸ Palomo is both perpetrator and victim to the crime, and his sadness is testament to the human missteps he made with his own affair. Through these ambivalent perspectives, Kushner and Cruz depict honest love, as they prioritize the literal, physical relationship over potential political agendas.

Kushner and Cruz must retain the same honesty when they delve into politics. Kushner and Cruz are “successful” in their political discussions because they write about subjects they are personally and culturally involved in.⁹ Kushner is a gay playwright whose major work (*Angels in America*) is subtitled “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.” *Angels* chiefly involves numerous gay relationships, and it also contains detailed scenes portraying Jewish culture.¹⁰ *Angels* is politically charged around the treatment of AIDS, a disease initially associated with homosexuals,¹¹ so Kushner attempts to raise awareness about the disease and separate society’s perception of it as isolated to a distant subset of the population in America. Similarly, both *Anna in the Tropics* and *Two Sisters and a Piano* take place in Cruz’s birth nation, Cuba. Both plays “give voice to the stories, struggles, and sensibilities of Cubans” (Gener 23) in regards to social change (*Anna*), government oppression (*Two Sisters*), and other topics. Furthermore, Cruz states that his inspiration for *Anna* was “not political but personal,”¹² even though he also states that there are political themes in the play.¹³ Kushner and

Cruz strengthen their political themes by implicating themselves as much as they implicate us, because a dishonest political message is propaganda rather than art.¹⁴

Regardless of its political theme, a political play should inform the audience of something most likely not previously known or appreciated, and thus implicate the audience in a discussion that transcends the theater space. Kushner does so explicitly, as Prior directly speaks to the audience at the end of *Angels*, “Let’s just turn the volume down on this, OK?” (Kushner 278). Prior continues, “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins” (Kushner 280). In response to the events that transpired in *Angels*, Kushner directly tells his audience to get up and continue to spread the themes of his work. David Richards writes, “Time and time again, the playwright ventures out on a limb, then reaches back and pulls the audience out with him.” Kushner takes us through his magic realist universe, and when we come out of the other side we realize Kushner’s world is our own. Cruz implicates his audience more subtly in *Anna*, but the audience undergoes the same process of entering a new world without leaving its own. While Kushner is more abrasive and surreal, Cruz is more poetic and romantic, appealing to his audience’s empathy in order to involve them in the action. In *Anna*, Cruz uses *Anna Karenina* to relate a familiar romantic tale to the one he portrays. Furthermore, the various instances of heightened language in *Anna in the Tropics* and *Two Sisters* can be seen as breaking the fourth wall, as they remind the audience that the performance onstage is a performance onstage. Thus, the audience is a direct witness to the action, and the world onstage is brought into our world.

We have observed the importance of love in art (specifically theater), and we have observed that playwrights can be political with their work, so now we may ask; Is this form of political expression effective? Responding to an AIDS-awareness poster, Jesse Green similarly asks, “Could something so clearly political... *be* art? And if it was art, could it really do anything?” (69-70). We can answer a partial *yes*, as we demonstrated that “something so clearly political” can “be art,” but

success is difficult to quantify. Do we say that political art is successful only if it causes a cultural shift, or can it be successful if it only affects certain individuals? If the former is true, then we may see *Angels* as successful and Cruz's works as unsuccessful. Kushner's work can be seen as a dramatic phenomenon, with cheap tickets that helped to nationally raise awareness for AIDS.¹⁵ On the other hand, Cruz's more political work, namely *Two Sisters and a Piano* and others, "have not been uniformly well received, nor have they attracted the widespread interest of [*Anna in the Tropics*]."¹⁶ And, since *Anna* is not nearly as political as *Two Sisters*, do we say that Cruz has failed at writing a political play? Meanwhile, if the latter is true, in which art only has to affect one individual to be successful, then I am evidence to the success of both playwrights' works. This essay is further evidence of that, as I am so moved by the writing that I have written an essay describing why these works are effective. Even if my argument has logical fallacies, my writing of it and passion towards these works is proof enough. Suffice to say, I believe political theater to be an effective art form.

I look to David Richards to summarize my expectations for theater: "It may amount to no more than the acknowledgement that we are all in this grim mess together." "Grim" may be relative to the performance, but "mess" seems to be ubiquitously applicable to the difficult situations we witness onstage. Kushner and Cruz write holistically different plays, but the playwrights successfully connect their audiences to relevant political contexts. The playwrights use familiar and tangible emotional challenges to gradually let individuals into a loftier, more complex realm of discussion. Without raw emotions, the ulterior¹⁷ motives would be irrelevant, as they would not be understood or paid attention to. In one word, Kushner and Cruz write "human" plays, as they involve our own trials and tribulations, where the depth of these works is not derivative from their political nature, rather from love and relationships.

Notes

¹ See Doyle's aforementioned essay in *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, pg. 77. Although I do not further cite Doyle's essay in my own, her argument is fundamental to my reading of Kushner and Cruz, and I would highly recommend reading Doyle's work for examples of (maybe ostensibly) non-political sentimentality in avant-garde theater.

² For more reading, see Plato's *Republic*, Book X, as well as Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is worth noting that Aristotle was Plato's student, and that scholarly theater critique was mostly nonexistent before these works.

³ I use "platonic" ironically here, both in reference to Plato's contradictory anti-sentimental discussion of theater, and to the often-sexual-but-politically-removed depictions of "pure" love (as in, predominately physical and romantic) in the plays I discuss.

⁴ The notion of "imitation" is taken from Plato and Aristotle. Plato explains that the artist is separated from reality by three degrees, as God created the first image (first degree of separation, which is the original), which was then produced practically (second degree). Finally, the artist imitates the product from the second degree, creating what is potentially a distorted representation of the original form (third degree). In my use of the word "imitate," I don't mean that the playwright deceives the audience, rather that he or she depicts something familiar and understandable from the non-dramatic world to the audience.

⁵ This is a topic that Jennifer Doyle discusses in her essay.

⁶ Quote taken from Bruce Weber's interview with Tony Kushner, from the New York Times Magazine article, "Angels' Angels".

⁷ In interview with Randy Gener, quote taken from “Dreamer from Cuba: for Pulitzer-winner Nilo Cruz, exile is a window into hothouse landscapes of the imagination”, pg. 90.

⁸ Palomo’s voyeurism is depicted in several scenes. For example, pg. 36-7. Not everyone will empathize with Palomo, but the scene is sad regardless as it represents a failing marriage.

⁹ You do not necessarily have to be a part of a culture or climate in order to be “successful” or effective when talking about it, but it does grant Kushner and Cruz more ground to stand on.

¹⁰ Jewish culture can be seen in the first scene with Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz, pg. 15-7. This is not the only example, but the first and most obvious one.

¹¹ This can be seen when Roy Cohn, after learning he has AIDS, says, “AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (Kushner 52).

¹² In interview with Bruce Weber, although the quote was paraphrased in the article.

¹³ Cruz stated, “It’s like that old saying: I read this book, and it changed the way I see the world, or I saw this movie, and it changed my life... For me, that theme is also political” (Gener 25).

¹⁴ The distinction I make between propaganda and art is honesty. There are many examples of propaganda that are artistic (see *Battleship Potempkin*), but the art I discuss in this paper comes from an individual’s perspective, not a government’s perspective.

¹⁵ See Bruce Weber’s “Angels’ Angels”, from the New York Times.

¹⁶ From the New York Times, Bruce Weber, “Tapping Cuban Roots for American Drama.”

¹⁷ This is a loaded term, but my discussion focuses on plays founded in relationships that end up discussing political topics. Thus, I find the term aptly used here.

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