Gabriel Drozdov

Prof. Shaw McMahon

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Love Interrupted

Dysfunction seems to imply an internal flaw, which playwrights often seek to diagnose and disclose. Whatever the context, the distinction between "normal" and "dysfunctional" is already a sensitive topic that needs careful consideration when discussing a particular issue. Many playwrights utilize a select few situations in order to communicate each writer's agenda, as these scenarios and relationships allow for an honest discussion in a difficult conversation. For instance, Eugene O'Neill, Tracy Letts, Ayad Akhtar, and Stephen Karam explore the uncomfortable setting of an emotionally charged family dinner, and yet each playwright won a significant award for his applicable work.[1] The instantly familiar and relatable scene allows for the audience to better immerse itself into the discussion. Likewise, Joe Penhall and Tarell Alvin McCraney utilize a shared scenario, estranged brothers who must reconcile with some past trauma, in order to discuss and familiarize the audience with a type of disability.[2] In this paper, I will argue that one purpose of contemporary theater is to actively converse with its audiences about pressing issues, and I will explain how Penhall and McCraney use performance in order to make the audience empathize with subjects and individuals previous unknown or unexplored to the common person.

Western theater history demonstrates a dramatic shift from lofty moral themes to heuristic explorations of everyday problems. In prototypical Western theater, namely Greek theater, the main characters advance the plot whilst the Chorus serves mainly to entertain and meditate on certain themes. That is to say the named characters provide the structural elements

and the Chorus provides the flair. One day Shakespeare must've realized, hey, these choral digressions represent the nontrivial-but-tertiary subplots involving supporting characters. Thus Shakespeare's plays pioneered overlapping plotlines, all bound together through a common narrative thread. Then Brecht, Ibsen, and others shifted the focus to smaller thematically driven stories that never leave the living room, and thus eliminated the necessity and possibility of subplots.[3] What began as an exploration of kings and mythical figures gradually funneled into intimate explorations of the middle class, who are the theatergoers that once went to the theater to escape a stressful reality.[4]

Western theater's shift in tone from distant to personal themes represents performance's effectiveness as a didactic medium. The sentiment that "the Theater must always be a safe and special place"[5] is naïve because it ignores this didactic perspective. Unlike most written literature, theater is meant to be seen and thus is capable of directly impacting an audience. For instance, Italian Futurist theater was specifically designed to convey political themes in an extremely brief amount of time in order to ultimately assist in the spread of Fascist principles.[6] While most playwrights aren't linked with regimes and therefore aren't associated with the spread of propaganda, playwrights still value certain subjects and aim to educate audiences about difficult underlying themes in contemporary society. Several of Joe Penhall's plays, most notably *Blue/Orange* and *Some Voices*, concentrate on the public perception and treatment of schizophrenic patients. Tarell Alvin McCraney's trilogy entitled *The Brother/Sister Plays* consists of three plays that focus on interconnected struggles of family and gender that utilize common West African myths. Each playwright has a focus, and the theater is not "safe" because it aims to demonstrate situations an individual may not be comfortable with but is forced to confront.

In *Some Voices* and *The Brothers Size,* Penhall and McCraney conduct comparable discussions about a certain type of disability. "Disability" is a broad and loaded term that evokes

images of mental and physical impairment, but we can more generally define the term as some barrier that makes everyday tasks more difficult for an individual. In both plays, a character is afflicted by some disability and returns to his brother after a period of separation. The protagonist in Penhall's *Some Voices* is Ray, a man straight out of a 28-day program that was meant to treat his schizophrenia. His brother, Pete, runs a restaurant and urges Ray to stay out of trouble as well as continue taking his medication. Analogously, the protagonist in McCraney's *The Brothers Size* is Oshoosi Size, a man straight out of jail who returns to live with his brother Ogun Size. Ogun owns a car repair shop and urges Oshoosi to work and stay out of trouble. We can see that Ray is afflicted by a disability we'd probably be more likely to expect, which is a mental disability. The troubling result is that Ray has extreme difficulty reintegrating in society. Meanwhile, Oshoosi's disability is his inability to adjust to free life after jail, and he is unable to reintegrate as well. The core conflict of both plays is platonic and color-blind, since Ray and Oshoosi's disability is their inability to reincorporate into society regardless of the intricacies that further define their situations.

Once Penhall and McCraney establish cases for the audience to study, the playwrights must find a way to shed a sympathetic light on their afflicted characters. If we reach a bit further, the goal is to transcend sympathy with empathy and no longer see the characters as fiction but as representatives of larger social issues. To begin, we can rephrase Ray and Oshoosi's disability as the universal, relatable, and perhaps shallow problem of an individual's inability to fit in. (I say "shallow" here because Ray and Oshoosi's situations are not so simple, but an audience member can better relate to and understand a simpler struggle.) In the climax of *Some Voices*, Ray nearly sets fire to Pete's restaurant. Ray pleads to his brother, "[The voices] say very fucking weird things… What do they say to you?" (Penhall 66). When Pete admits that he does not hear voices, we feel Ray's tangible burden through the silence, since the moment gives the audience time to

appreciate the weight of Ray's disability. The climax of *The Brothers Size* bears a parallel moment for Oshoosi. Oshoosi narrowly avoids arrest after his friend Elegba is caught with cocaine, and McCraney reveals that Elegba longs to be back in jail, while Oshoosi has given everything to leave it behind. Oshoosi tells his brother, "[Elegba] just looking. Almost like he smiling. And I see where he at already… He in jail" (McCraney 221). We see Oshoosi desperately try to escape confinement and live freely with friends, but he cannot overcome the barrier and connect to the world outside of prison. Through these moments, Penhall and McCraney insist that Ray and Oshoosi's troubles are human[7] and tangible, and should be understood and treated as such.

To supplement the audience's sympathy for Ray and Oshoosi, Penhall and McCraney introduce a lover that exacerbates the situation. In *The Brothers Size*, we have seen that the lover is Elegba, a close friend to Oshoosi from their time in jail. Elegba is still very attached to Oshoosi and distracts him from his job at Ogun's car shop, which was Oshoosi's way of entering back into the real world and earning money. We have seen that this relationship ends in a tragedy. In *Some Voices*, Laura is Ray's new romantic interest whose involvement with an abusive man, Dave, puts Ray in physical danger from the start. Laura ultimately rejects Ray, most likely due to his condition and a combination of personal issues regarding abuse, but Ray doesn't fully understand the situation and keeps asking Pete how long it will be until she is ready to see him again (Penhall 69). Both Ray and Oshoosi are unable to find a reliable friend in the free world other than their respective brothers, but both plays end on a hopeful note. Pete and Ogun begin to empathize with Ray and Oshoosi, and take more intimate steps to help their brothers. The audience can therefore contrast this authentic, learned love with the lost ephemeral love, and concurrently begin to understand the significant impact of empathy and affection on individuals that need it. Once Penhall and McCraney remove the romantic love, we are left with deep brotherly love that finally transcends (to a degree) Ray and Oshoosi's disabilities.

Some Voices and *The Brothers Size* share a striking amount of details in order best help the audience empathize with difficult themes. In both plays, a man returns to his brother from a rehabilitative program and struggles to overcome what caused him to first enter the rehabilitative world. A love interest then interferes and arouses violence, and the stories end on a somber but hopeful note. The playwrights uniquely utilize this scaffolding by applying different disabilities to the foundation of each story. In *Some Voices*, Penhall concentrates on schizophrenia, and in *The Brothers Size*, McCraney concentrates on race, sexuality, and prison. Regardless, the objective is the same. Penhall and McCraney aim to show the humanity of "disabled" individuals, and consequently help to remove the social burden that affects these disabilities.[8]

Notes

[1] The relevant plays are as follows: O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*; Letts, *August: Osage County*; Akhtar, *Disgraced*; and Karam, *The Humans*. O'Neill, Letts, and Akhtar won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, while Karam was a finalist. O'Neill, Letts, and Karam also won the Tony Award for Best Play, while Akhtar was a finalist.

[2] Suzan-Lori Park's *Topdog/Underdog* also uses this scaffolding, but her play focuses on a different discussion that is not my focus for this paper.

[3] A brief history of Western theater as explained by Charles Mee during a Q&A Talkback, which followed Wesleyan's matinée performance of *Summertime*, 19 November 2016. Further examples from each dramatic period are as follows: for Greek theater, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*; for Shakespearean theater, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; for contemporary theater, either Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or Brecht's *The Jewish Wife*.

[4] From musical composer Stephen Sondheim, "Broadway theater has been for many years supported by upper-middle-class people with upper-middle-class problems. These people really want to escape that world when they go to the theatre, and then here we are with *Company* talking about how we're going to bring it right back in their faces." For more information on *Company's* subversion of audience expectations, please see Ann Pellegrini's "Closing Ranks, Keeping Company: Marriage Plots and the Will to be Single", which focuses on *Company's* resistance to plots that resolve in marriage, such as those in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Tempest.*

[5] As tweeted by Donald Trump on 19 November 2016, "The Theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of *Hamilton* was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence.

Apologize!" The tweet was in response to a political statement made by the *Hamilton* cast when Mike Pence was in the crowd, 18 November 2016.

[6] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "Manifesto of Futurism" describes the values and motives behind Futurist art. "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre", also by Marinetti, defines the particular branch of theater that focused on extremely brief emphatic and abstract performances.

[7] It should be noted that one major difference between Greek theater and contemporary theater is the lack of necessity for tragic heroes in contemporary theater. Many contemporary plays begin with an everyday individual who has already undergone a tragedy, and the play is the individual's life after the aforementioned tragedy. This is not the formula for all contemporary theater (Ibsen's *A Doll's House* does not directly follow this pattern), but Penhall and McCraney stay true to this technique in *Some Voices* and *The Brothers Size*.

[8] I did not feel that the following quote was necessary in my paper, but it summarizes well my arguments relating to *Some Voices*, and also *The Brothers Size*. "Again, Penhall manages to win sympathy even for this unlovely man [Ray], with his anger-management problem and his solemn promise to Laura that "I don't want to be with any other woman in the whole of Shepherds Bush". And that's not just a funny line, for it emphasizes how physically, emotionally and psychologically trapped these people have become" (Nightingale).

Works Cited

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