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Towards freedom and social awareness: Hopeful narratives and performatives in American theatre and literature

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Abstract

The paper addresses the complexity of social issues in contemporary American society through the prism of its reflection in theatre and literature. The characteristic features of American narratives and performatives are freedom and an almost utopian belief in diversity and social understanding. At the same time, the discussed works present a comprehensive look at social issues using a great variety of forms and genres, and appealing to the aesthetic sensitivity of different groups of recipients. In the face of future problems in the political arena, American art offers an interesting transatlantic perspective on the complexity of 21st-century issues which are relevant all over the world.

In his poem *The Freedom of the Moon*, Robert Frost endows his speaker with an amazing ability – to move the moon around the night sky as he (or she?) likes. The speaker plays with the moon as if it were some kind of toy, or jewel, claiming he can put it “shining anywhere I please” (1995, p. 224). He picks it up from the branches of a tall tree and pushes it skyward next to an evening star, before drowning it in a lake. At the end of the poem, the reader realizes that the speaker is not an omnipotent entity, a modern-day Atlas, but a regular human exercising his free will during a night hike – he can put the moon wherever he pleases because he himself is walking around, changing his position and perspective.

I consider this individual capacity for free movement, free thought and free will to be the embodiment of a typically American value, namely the determination to create, and ultimately tread, one’s own path to freedom. In this paper, I aim to show both the hopeful and hopeless side

of this fortitude, which ultimately shapes American individualism. The kind of Emersonian individualist mindset is thus a productive and progressive instrument, as well as a dark, often problematic aspect of American consciousness. In order to show this, I focus on a variety of literary and theatrical works – ranging from 19th-century literary classics all the way to contemporary theatre performances – to prove that American values are deeply embedded in an understanding of cultural diversity and humanism.

In her book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan writes about theatre performances which communicate hope when discussing issues that seem to be devoid of any hope, for example, hate crime. To talk about this, Dolan coins the term “utopian performative” and defines it as “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present” and, in doing so, the audience can experience “a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (2005, p. 5). Theatre performance can do this on several levels, but mostly in interaction with the audience, which not only passively watches the performance but also becomes immersed in it to such a degree that it can co-define the performance’s meaning.

This, of course, echoes not only Brecht, his breaking of the fourth wall and the concept of alienation or estrangement (the well-known *Verfremdungseffekt*), but also the genre known as forum theatre, envisioned and practised by Brazilian activist and dramatist Augusto Boal. His approach to theatre has become popular with proponents of democracy, human rights and freedom, for example, students of theatre at American universities who desired to communicate their discontent with politics. One fitting example of this is *Tea Party: An Interactive Performance for the Election Year* written and produced by doctoral student of theatre Elliot Leffler at the University of Minnesota in 2012. In a devised and very interactive production, Leffler tried to come to terms with the consequences of the polarized society in America when Barack Obama was running for President for the second time. The inability, or unwillingness, to understand a different point of view, inspired Leffler to present what Boal calls “osmosis” in performance or theatrical ritual (Boal and Epstein, 1990, p. 37).

The notion of osmosis allows ideas and emotions to flow freely from the actors towards the spectators and back, thus enabling a freer and more open discourse. It can be an answer to the irrationality of polarized discourse – in Leffler’s poetic world one that resembles the tea party in

Lewis Carroll's story, a scene in the novel that gave Leffler's performance its title. The tea party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is so chaotic and incomprehensible that Alice leaves perplexed and disturbed, calling it "the stupidest tea party" she has ever been to (Carroll, 1866, p. 111). Of course, this is because she is unable to understand a completely different worldview and its signification via language. Alice's incomprehension stems from her inability to project herself onto another type of experience and results in her anger and confusion. In reference to the potential problems with the polarization of society, or simple empathy perhaps, philosopher Martha Nussbaum's posits that "[o]ne can hardly treat another person's intellectual position respectfully unless one at least tries to see what outlook on life and what life experiences generated it" (2012, pp. 109–10).

One entire presidential term later, the significance of the dividing line between the voters of Donald Trump and the voters of practically any of the Democratic Party candidates has become even more obvious. The political era of Trump's presidency is now being referred in terms of chaos and American literary and theatrical legacy has spiraled back to the need for the political aesthetics of the early 1990s, most notably of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Some of the issues Kushner introduced in his reaction to the Republican domination of the 1980s are coming back with a vengeance – geopolitical tension, intolerance and roughneck politics, environmental issues and so on. The world, and America as its principal messenger, seems to be waiting for what Kushner considered to be the inspiration for his two-part epic: Paul Klee's 1920 painting *Angelus Novus*, or the Angel of History, so aptly interpreted by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In it, Benjamin describes Klee's angel as a confused being that is looking at a past which is full of destruction, chaos and ruin. Unable to fix it, the angel is caught by a mighty storm coming from the past and thrown towards the future – a storm that represents progress (2007, p. 257).

A similar storm might be brought about by the destructive force of Donald Trump himself – there will be chaos and there will be ruin, but progress will ultimately propel civilization into its future. The famous playwright David Mamet expressed a similar idea: "We live in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world, where things really don't come out even. The purpose of true drama is to help remind us of that. Perhaps this does have an accidental, a cumulative social effect – to remind us to be a little more humble or a little more grateful or a little more ruminative" (2010, p. 811). Mamet puts words like "debauched" and "savage" right

next to “interesting”, thus signalling the progressive aspect of the contradictory present – where there is interest, there is action. But where there is apathy, there is nothing.

Needless to say, Americans have long been used to paradoxes and the contradictory nature of politics – after all, the conflict between the individual and society has long filled the pages of literary, scholarly and political writing. As early as when the nation was being defined and created, Thomas Paine recognized how “governments were necessary only because of the ‘inability of moral virtue to govern the world’” and keenly observed that “a government’s only function was to provide freedom and security for its people” (McCartin, Paine, 2002, p. 59). Even Walt Whitman, the yawping proponent of personal freedom and democracy, saw and discussed the conflict between “one’s duty and policy” or what he calls “one’s obligation to the State and Nation” and “essential freedom as an individual personality, without which freedom a man cannot grow or expand, or be a full, modern, heroic, democratic, American” (1995, p. 338). Romantic stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville frequently introduced characters whose conflict between their self (sometimes indoctrinated, sometimes not self-aware) and social rules and constructs drove most of the stories’ action. Characters such as Hester Prynne, Billy Budd and Captain Ahab are simultaneously representatives and challengers of transcendentalist individualism and intuition-driven self-awareness.

In the 21st century, the conflict between individual freedom and the proclaimed necessity to protect Americans against terrorist threats has sparked a new debate about Big Brother-like tendencies in domestic and foreign policy. Theatre has reflected the ensuing issues of trust, tolerance, humanity and freedom as resulting from people’s inability to distinguish facts from fiction: “[m]uch of the reality we live in today is in fact ‘socially constructed’ and constructed out of random scraps of myth, propaganda, wishful thinking, prejudice, and fear” (Glassner, 2000, p. 591). In Yussef El Guindi’s play *Back of the Throat*, the Egyptian-American playwright tells the Orwellian story of Khaled, an American citizen, who has been accused of a terrorist act. The Patriot Act gives the investigators a pretext for harassment and violent interrogation which, in a post 9/11 world, makes sinister allusions to Guantanamo and torture practices such as waterboarding. Nonetheless, the play never resolves the issue of whether Khaled was involved or not, but rather shifts the audience’s perception about how important personal freedom is in the face of international terrorism, or, paraphrasing the words of Stuart Camden, director of the 2006

Silk Road Theater production of El Guindi's play, how we know what is evil or tell right from wrong if we cannot penetrate each other's thoughts and feelings (Goddu, 2006).

American history has been marked most strongly by the stain of slavery and resulting racial tension. Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election led many to believe that America had started a new chapter in its history, a "post-racial" period in which "race [is] irrelevant" (Alim and Reyes, 2011, p. 379). However, as Lucia Otrisalová notes in her analysis of racial issues in Canadian drama, narratives that shape national awareness "always [arise] from a dialectics of remembering and forgetting" (2015, p. 132). Memory, or a lack thereof, produces social constructs, stereotypes, often also utopian narratives, such as the one of the first ever African American president. This utopian narrative – similar to Dolan's utopian performatives – then clashes with the reality of social unrest, police shootings of African Americans and racial profiling in everyday life, but above all with the violent history of slavery and its 20th- and 21st-century consequences. These include emotional scars, economic disadvantages, the framing of racial issues, even of African American culture, disregarding the complexity of inter-racial relations and the resulting cultural consequences.

In drama, there are attempts to face this complexity, for example Tracey Scott Wilson's 2012 play *Buzzer*, which challenges the idea that post-racialism is a real phenomenon. The play's action echoes James Baldwin famous claim from 1962 that "[t]here is no reason [...] to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you" (1993, pp. 8–9) and brings forward the consequent problems the characters face because of their "thin racial identity" (Taylor, 2007, p. 634). The characters in Wilson's play reversed stereotypical roles (there is an African-American yuppie, a WASP drug addict, a white underachieving teacher) in a whirlpool of emotions and memories, all traceable to their racially defined past. In *Buzzer*, the racial reality the characters hope to transcend catches up with them because they believe they are beyond race – having been raised on multicultural art, ethnic food and hip hop, as Tracey Scott Wilson herself claimed in the programme notes to the Pillsbury House Theater production.

The complex state of racial affairs in the United States has reflected Tony Kushner's claim that "[e]verything is personal; everything is political" (1997, 22) and given rise to engaged theatre and art. Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, for example, presents African-American history as a "great hole" (1995, p. 159), as something that has to be filled, something whose

absence should be now used to create new meaning. This gap, hole or absence challenges anyone who tries to fill it because the newly defined and told history should not be a copy of the kind of history written by the privileged majority. Like Langston Hughes's poem *Theme for English B*, Parks refrains from writing what she is expected to write as an African American and invents her own, free and independent content, form and style. Deborah Geis posits that by introducing the notion of "a hole", Parks establishes "a new way of 'digging' the past to look at the world" (2008, p. 163). The audience is challenged to look at history and its events in a conventional manner and provoked to fill the metaphorical hole with new discourse.

These are all utopian performatives as Jill Dolan has defined them because they provide a sense of hope in the complexity of conflicting and seemingly non-progressive issues. Just like the appeal of the productions of the verbatim/documentary theatre play *The Laramie Project* – which Dolan aptly recognized as performatives yearning for "human connectedness, rather than a grandiose, fixed vision of *one* perfect future or *one* fixed idea of a better life" (2005, p. 136). Along with the individual capacity to be driven towards freedom and social awareness, this idea of hopeful narratives and performatives lies at the very heart of American culture – despite hardships, intolerance and hatred, despite political corruption and post-factual traumas, American values, particularly when viewed from a transatlantic perspective, are still fixed in cultural diversity, freedom and humanism.

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