American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

I Robinson – 979-10-231-1795-0

SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ PRESSES

If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

American dramaturgies for the 21st Century

SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ PRESSES
Paris

Ouvrage publié avec le concours de Sorbonne Université,
du PRITEPS, de l'Initiative Théâtre et de VALE

Les SUP sont un service général de la faculté des lettres de Sorbonne Université

PDF complet – 979-10-231-1793-6
ePub – 979-10-231-1808-7
ISBN DES TIRÉS À PART EN PDF :
Foreword – 979-10-231-1794-3
I Robinson – 979-10-231-1795-0
I Sidiropoulou – 979-10-231-1796-7
I Maxwell & Jouve – 979-10-231-1797-4
I Fernández-Caparrós – 979-10-231-1798-1
II Lee & Vatain-Corfdir – 979-10-231-1799-8
II Davies – 979-10-231-1800-1
II Rigaud – 979-10-231-1801-8
II Willis – 979-10-231-1802-5
II Vasak – 979-10-231-1803-2
III Monot – 979-10-231-1804-9
III Benea – 979-10-231-1805-6
III Sigal – 979-10-231-1806-3
III Anderson, Hines & Haley – 979-10-231-1807-0

Couverture : Michaël BOSQUIER
Maquette et mise en page : 3d2s (Paris)/Emmanuel Marc DUBOIS (Issigeac)

SUP
Maison de la Recherche
Sorbonne Université
28, rue Serpente
75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

sup@sorbonne-universite.fr

https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr

PART I

Realism Deposed, Reclaimed and Exposed

NO ADJECTIVES: NEW AMERICAN REALISM

Marc Robinson
Yale University

Theater taxonomists hoping to assign *Three Sisters* to a stable genre—one that remains after the play's various teasing invitations to tragedy, farce, and melodrama have fallen away—often point to the moment near the end of Act One when a minor character, Fedotik, arrives at Irina's name-day party to take a family photograph. He asks the sisters and the various friends, hangers-on, and actual or aspirational spouses gathered around the dining-room table to "wait a minute...hold still" before snapping his picture. It's easy to agree with W. B. Worthen, who imagines that Chekhov offers this scene as a standard by which to evaluate his own art—to see here an image not just of the extended Prozorov family but of the detachment the playwright strives for in his own attention to his characters' anxieties, resentments, and passions.[1] It is also, Worthen adds, a counterexample. Only when the performance returns to instability, after the picture-taking, does it depict reality as it is lived, not merely posed. Yet Chekhov suggests a third, less noted use of the camera. As the family relaxes back into their celebration, Fedotik addresses Irina, who has inexplicably stayed behind, still motionless: "You may move now, Irina Serghyeevna," he says, "that is, if you want to."[2] And only when she does move, or is on the verge of doing so, does he snap one last picture. One assumes the resulting photograph will be a blur—why, we might wonder, did he wait until she started walking to take it? Here—and again when Fedotik gives Irina a top as a present, hypnotizing her by demonstrating how it spins—Chekhov's measured realism admits a disruptive saboteur, strives to accommodate kinetic energies capable of dissolving its poise and smearing its tableaux.

This perplexing scene seems to hover behind Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Really* (2016)—a play that also stages the work of photography, in this case allowing it to fill the entirety of an hour-long performance. Here, as Drury's title suggests, real life in all its unpredictability is always eluding or defying a photographer's (or playwright's) aims

1 W. B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1992, pp. 12-13.

2 Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, trans. Elisaveta Fen, in Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959, p. 270.

to contain it. There is always a deeper core or heightened intensity of experience—the "really" real—that even the most meticulous or obsessive mimetic art cannot seize, frame, and reproduce. As Drury writes in a stage direction from an earlier work, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915* (2014), "the performance calls for real contact, as opposed to realistic contact."[3] In *Really*, she stages a no less demanding encounter, along with its recoils. Here, a young woman known only as Girlfriend makes a series of portraits of her late boyfriend's mother, known only as Mother. Dissatisfied with every image, she keeps adjusting the tension between the sitter's stillness (necessary for the image's clarity) and animacy (true to the subject's life). "Don't move your shoulders," she says at one point, and then repositions the mother's feet so the pose is just slightly unnatural and hard to sustain. "Don't move," she says again, then adds, "I mean you shouldn't be still, you can move, but don't like *move* move."[4] She waits, and then her shutter clicks. In its taut contradictions, the scene illustrates one of Drury's epigraphs, from the scholar Geoffrey Batchen, paraphrasing views of the nineteenth-century inventor Henry Fox Talbot: "Photography [is] an effort to capture both eternity and transience in the same representation."[5] It also foreshadows the many frustrations of that effort throughout the play. The mother, resistant to the girlfriend's attention, or simply destabilized by it, won't stay put, or stop talking. At other points in the play, dissolution takes different forms. A character drops a glass, shattering it. Another person falls from a high bookcase, thudding to the floor. Later, the lights go out and the stage is plunged in darkness, disabling sight. Even when the action isn't so disruptive, the photographer's desire to penetrate the object of her attention—to know this defended, exquisitely hostile woman (a hostility that might have something to do with the fact that her white son's girlfriend is black)—repeatedly brings her up against her medium's inadequacy.

Chekhov's accommodation of a blurred or collapsed realism also predicts the work of several other contemporary theater artists. The playwright Richard Maxwell, who not incidentally directed the premiere of *Really*, ends his own coldly observational play *The Evening* (2015) with its central character, Beatrice, escaping the realist cliché of a

3 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen, 2014, p. 4.

4 *Id.*, *Really, American Theatre*, September 2016, p. 59.

5 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997, p. 177. Drury's epigraph (mistakenly attributed to Talbot himself) appears on p. 58 of *Really*.

drab bar and walking into the stage's suddenly revealed upstage depths, a borderless void misting over with white haze until we can no longer distinguish her from the engulfing climate (**fig. 1**). Her last words mark the triumph of time over mimetic space. As the play ends, Beatrice says "she continues," deferring her sentence's object in perpetuity, and employing the third person to keep us at an even greater distance from herself.[6] In this, *The Evening* recalls an earlier Maxwell play more directly skeptical of realism's promises, the aptly named *The End of Reality* (2006). In this work, among its many other challenges to realist hubris, characters interrupt the action to gaze numbly at supposedly live-feed closed-circuit TVs, where undramatic goings-on—a vacant parking lot, an empty waiting-room, monotonously streaming highway traffic, and at times mere static—prohibit all access to the private behavior such technology is meant to probe.

1. *The Evening*, written and directed by Richard Maxwell, New York, 2015. Photograph courtesy of New York City Players.

6 Richard Maxwell, *The Evening*, 2015, unpublished manuscript, p. 26.

David Levine, an even more conceptually ambitious if ambivalent realist, also relies on extreme "continuing" in his most notorious works. *Habit*, first presented in 2010, stages a deliberately hackneyed realist drama inside one floor of a full-scale, four-walled, multi-roomed house. A 2015 version took place in New York's cavernous Essex Street Marketplace, where spectators could come and go at will: there was no admission fee, nor seating; exit doors were left open onto Essex Street. Audience members took positions outside the glassless windows of the house to spy on the banal doings among a group of three vaguely delinquent millennials (**fig. 2**). The 45-minute play was on a loop, and the whole performance lasted 8 hours—long enough, in other words, for Levine to be confident that few if any spectators were committed, or masochistic, enough to see the entire thing.

2. *Habit*, created and directed by David Levine, New York, 2012. Photograph by David Levine.

Levine's staging of *Bauerntheater* (*Farmer's Theater*) in 2007 spanned an even longer period: a solitary male actor prepared, planted, and tended to a field of potatoes in the German countryside over a period of thirty ten-hour days. Spectators were invited to watch him work, sometimes at a considerable distance, but most of his labor

(which included muttering text from Heiner Müller's 1961 play about land reform, *The Resettler*) and his rest from labor (the hours he slept), were invisible to them. So, too, in *Actors at Work* (2007), in which Levine registered the day jobs of a group of performers with Actors Equity, filing applications and signing contracts to regulate their employment (as receptionists, editors, "poster distributors") as union-approved showcases. Here again, Levine transforms actual, not represented, much less framed, work into performance—and reminds us that performance is work. Of course no one saw even a fraction of these latter performances—no one, that is, who wasn't at the office with the actors, unaware that they were watching art. For Levine, this mode of acting—and by implication all acting—becomes "a metaphor for privacy," upending traditional notions of theatrical presence. At a day job, he once said, "you keep yourself to yourself…it's not 'you' doing it…you're giving the most convenient performance you can to get by." This idea of acting relies on, and deploys, "the part of yourself that makes you seem not present."[7]

In all these works, Levine pursues a realism so pure in its intention and so fervent, even fundamentalist, in its execution that it ends by exhausting the genre altogether. But he also clarifies it—enabling us to identify the premises of a form usually considered transparent, at least in the theater. Indeed, realism is a form that we think requires transparency in order to be persuasive: if we can see the dust on the camera lens or the seams of the fabricated scene, we're taught, representations won't seem real. Yet what of a realism that shines a light on that dust and runs its fingers over those seams (as it were); and as a result not only fails to disillusion us but in fact persuades us with a force unavailable to more habitual realists? Or a realist practice that refuses to compromise with the efficiencies of theatricality—that declines to tailor its representations to a spectator's short attention span, desire for variety, addiction to spectacle, or even expectation of orienting contexts, cogent arguments, and generously expressive disclosures of interior lives?

Levine may be an extreme case, but many contemporary American realists are equally committed to alienating the style that enchants them. The enchantment is as important as the estrangement. Their analytical sharpness derives from their ecstatic surrender to the real. Their best works contest the promise of realistic embodiment

7 David Levine in Christian Hawkey, "A Conversation with David Levine," *The Believer*, no. 60, February 1, 2009, p. 72. See also Marvin Carlson, "David Levine's *Bauerntheater*: The Return of the Matrix," *TDR*, vol. 52, no. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 34-43; Sarah Kozinn, "Making Theatre Art: David Levine's *Habit*," *TDR*, vol. 58, no. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 171-76; and Shonni Enelow and David Levine, *A Discourse on Method*, New York, 53rd State Press, 2020.

even as they seem to zealously fulfill it. How much can one magnify or scatter the focus, or rinse affect not just of melodrama but all drama, and still foster our engagement—even achieve a pathos that would be unavailable to more embroidered modes of theatricality? Character, here, emerges not from artificially eloquent and graceful acts of self-revelation, but rather from unnuanced presence—a manner of display that, in its disarming candor, actually serves as a wall against invasive spectatorship. Similarly, action progresses not from suspense or argument but from the completion of non-expressive tasks or simply submitting oneself to (and directing attention to) the slow drip of time's impersonal passage. Doing precludes pretending, as Richard Maxwell once argued, rejecting the simulacra of authenticity in favor of a less importunate form of action.[8]

Earlier playwrights have tackled some of these same questions, in pursuit of more intricate variations on realism's established themes. In the 1950s and 1960s, the British playwrights David Storey and Arnold Wesker trusted in the processes of labor alone to sustain theatrical interest: actors erected a huge tent over the course of Storey's *The Contractor* (1969), cooked real restaurant meals in Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1957). In the 1970s, the German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz, in such deliberately unconsoling plays as *Farmyard* (1971) and *Request Concert* (1971), conducted a fluorescent scrutiny of unvoiced suffering and other kinds of debasement. Even some textbook realists of the nineteenth century tested their genre's premises, dissenting from the policies they helped codify. David Belasco's object-fetishism transformed his sets into installations, so obsessively assembled as to alienate the genre. *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) is a representative example, as is his staging of Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way* (1909). Emile Zola's 1873 play *Thérèse Raquin* (as Amy Holzapfel has shown) exposes the violation inherent in portrait-painting, photography, and seeing in general. In the process, the work renders morally ambiguous, if not corrupt, realism's vaunted objectivity.[9]

8 "Remember your task…return to your task," Maxwell often told actors in rehearsal for *The End of Reality*, reports Sarah Gorman. "The acting can't take the place of the action." As Gorman writes, Maxwell is less interested in establishing a "throughline to explain [a] character's psychological motivation" than in enabling an actor to "genuinely invest in the task of turning the page, or reading the newspaper." The motivation clarifies only when the task is underway. Sarah Gorman, "Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players—*The End of Reality* (2006)—Exploring Acting," in Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (eds), *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2010, p. 185 and p. 191.

9 For more on Belasco as a practitioner of "realism against itself," see Marc Robinson, *The American Play*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2009, pp. 134-51. On Zola, see Amy Holzapfel,

All these writers help us feel the current rushing under apparently tranquil settings in contemporary realism. Spectators at Maxwell's *Good Samaritans* (2004) might recall the unlikely aura that haloed a container of dish-soap on the otherwise drab rehab-center set. Poised on the edge of a functioning sink, it was mesmerizing, sunflower yellow, luminescent, throbbing. No mere reality effect, it seemed capable of distilling the bright desolation of the play's characters into a sign. So, too, the long silent minutes in *Really* in which the Girlfriend loads film into her camera. Seizing back the time stolen by digital efficiency, she allows us to read in her capable hands and their measured manipulation of film cartridges, barrels, wrappers, levers, and buttons a seriousness that, later in the play, sustains her under the assault of other people's distrust and infantilizing disdain. Dull work—yet, as we've seen, such undramatic activity, conscientiously executed, gestures toward impalpable emotion and controls interior turmoil. It roots its subject in the room, and in the body, on which she will come to depend as anchoring forces.

In a related way, Young Jean Lee's *Straight White Men* (2014) dissents from the culture announced by its title in the quietly, and on occasion not so quietly, subversive manner of its presentation. As Lee writes in a prefatory note: "the pre-show music, curtain speech, and transitions...should create a sense that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men." [10] The loudness of that music (black feminist hip hop) and the mutedness of the scene changes (when gender-nonconforming stagehands fastidiously and, it sometimes seems, pointlessly move items around the single living-room set) teach us to acknowledge the choices resulting in this deceptively unmarked realism. Everything—a taupe sofa, a brown recliner, beige wall-to-wall carpeting, white tube socks, a bowl of chips, a denim workshirt, a *Star Wars* glass—now emits a signal, a code that communicates the factitiousness not just of the environment but of the identities of its inhabitants. Nothing is natural despite the naturalism. Only after the stagehands frame the play's object world with their clinical demeanor, handling props and furniture like curators caring for perplexing artifacts, can we see the performance with the analytical awareness Lee expects from us.

At first sight, the décor of all these productions seems to confirm the wisdom of Bert O. States about the realist environment's explanatory function. An "art of pinning

Art, Vision, and Nineteenth-Century Realist Drama: Acts of Seeing, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 47-78. An important precedent and companion text to *Really* is Ibsen's own critique of realism, *The Wild Duck* (1884), especially its skeptical attention to the work of photographic retouching.

10 Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men,* in *Straight White Men / Untitled Feminist Show*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2020, p. 73.

things down," States calls nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century realism—with the stage as "a laboratory where heretofore unarticulated social processes and species could be examined under the strong light of the new electrical lamp"[11]—a formulation that is recalled by Stanton Garner's later comparison of Zola's theatrical naturalism to "vivisection."[12] States continues: "Space is destiny" and "furniture is visible history" in realist and naturalist theater. Even though "the dialogue says, in effect, 'We are…free to go elsewhere,' the setting says, in effect, 'It will all end here!'"[13] States seems to build on Raymond Williams's understanding of realism as an art of "enclosed rooms" from which their inhabitants try to "extricate" themselves.[14] The punitive nature of all these formulations is significant. Verisimilitude doesn't simply support the action but becomes active itself, a mercilessly restraining force. The accuracy of the scene is not reassuring—one of realism's typical justifications—but disorienting. Despite its familiarity, we cannot place ourselves, or rather, we are placed there too brutally: the space suffocates us as much as it does the characters. Alisa Solomon has memorably read Nora's plight in *A Doll's House* in just these materialist Williamsesque terms.[15] Hal Foster, writing about superrealism in painting, even more directly identifies the aggression implicit in the style. It is "an art pledged not only to pacify the real but to seal it behind surfaces, to embalm it in appearances."[16]

This legacy haunts contemporary American realism. Its most sophisticated twenty-first-century practitioners often push back against such claustrophobia. Mimesis, in these recent works, is aerated. Their reality effects are exhibited in spaces that—in their minimalist restraint, or museum-like decorum, or Brechtian separation of elements—heighten the expressiveness of any single object, and do so without coercive cues nudging us to particular conclusions.[17] As these scenes maintain an unemphatic

11 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985, p. 61.

12 Stanton B. Garner, Jr., "Physiologies of the Modern: Zola, Experimental Medicine, and the Naturalist Stage," *Modern Drama*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2000, p. 530.

13 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

14 Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, London, Verso, 1980, p. 130 and p. 141.

15 Alisa Solomon, "The New Drama and the New Woman: Reconstructing Ibsen's Realism," in *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 46-69.

16 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 141.

17 In this regard, Devin Fore's *Realism After Modernism,* and especially his reading of

reserve—a kind of agnosticism about their meanings, and meaningfulness—we may find ourselves roused from the spectatorial complacency that theatrical realism often forgives, directing our newly alert compassionate eye to what had been hiding in plain sight.

Indeed, when arranged in such a manner, objects and actors may, for all their illusionist or ethnographic accuracy, seem suddenly anti-realistic—strenuous rather than natural, lurid rather than subtle. The shift is salutary. Alain Robbe-Grillet, in his influential 1963 essay "From Realism to Reality," identifies the key to what was then the "new realism" not as the "little detail [that] 'rings true'" but, "on the contrary, the little detail that rings *false*"—"the stone abandoned for no good reason in the middle of the street, the bizarre gesture of a passer-by.... Partial objects, detached from their use, moments immobilized, words separated from their context...whatever...lacks 'naturalness'—it is precisely this which rings truest." [18] Such strangeness and diffidence are also fundamental to the theatricality of these American plays—that, and what Robbe-Grillet calls a "hallucinatory effect [that] derives from [the] extraordinary clarity" of objects, gestures, and words. He concludes, in words that still serve to illuminate present-day realist experiments, "nothing is more fantastic, ultimately, than precision." [19]

*

To move from such forceful estrangement to someone who at first seems to be realism's mildest contemporary practitioner may seem counterintuitive: what could Richard Nelson, in plays of unhurried domesticity, have in common with the stark exposures in Maxwell, Drury, Lee, and Levine? Especially lately: Nelson's engagement, early in his career, with history and international politics has modulated to a more thoroughgoing investment in private life. His shift in priorities was apparent even before a character in one play, *Sorry* (2012), is seen reading Philippe Aries and Georges Duby's magisterial *History of Private Life*. Yet not even that character settles into her realist interior easily. Nelson's people are always aware of what is just outside their doors—sometimes literally so, as in the quartet of plays from which

Brecht's *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* (1938), is pertinent. Brecht's characters, "perceived as mediatized images" capable of "*reproducing* emotion without *expressing* it," exist on a stage that "liquefies" traditional realism, "restoring the dynamic metabolism between the individual and his environment." Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2012, p. 148, p. 155 and p. 175.

18 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 63.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Sorry originates, collectively called *The Apple Family* (2010-13).[20] Here, Nelson's characters are continuously monitoring their house's borders even as their talk seems desultory—looking toward the open windows that let in too much outside sound, or to doorways that accidentally let out the dog, or that admitted a relative who failed to call ahead, or that are weak barriers against the whims of a wandering uncle with dementia. Characters in many Nelson plays also struggle to preserve their therapeutic distance from wider public spheres that threaten their composure more grievously—environments stained with the indelible memory of personal and communal tragedies, or that undo the moral or ethical contracts on which they've long depended, or that rob them of the clear-thinking and self-knowledge they've long assumed their strongest suit. In *Sweet and Sad,* set on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the Apples count the miles between the still-recovering city and the small town of Rhinebeck, two hours away, to which they've fled. In *Farewell to the Theater* (2012), the artists taking refuge in Williamstown, Massachusetts, are safely removed from, yet persistently haunted by, World War I, which is raging as they talk Shakespeare. *Nikolai and the Others* (2013), set in a Connecticut country house where Balanchine and Stravinsky collaborate on their 1948 ballet *Orpheus*, is only deceptively idyllic. The characters' retreat is encircled by both Stalinist and McCarthyite surveillance.

Amid such uncertainty, Nelson's characters work to rebuild a sense of security from the ground up, and they do so with simple rituals of fellowship—most notably and frequently, sharing food. To attend any of Nelson's recent works is to be witness, at the start of the action, to actors setting the stage on which they will play, a stage that often includes one or more tables at the center, chairs, tablecloths, and on them, appliances, dishes, and utensils for preparing, serving, or eating a meal. It is as if the performers must assemble the very idiom, realism, in which their characters will later exchange filial intimacies. When the food arrives, it becomes the currency in which to do so—to forge a collective bond against individual anxiety. In *Sorry*, characters pick at left-over Chinese food, a tin of cookies, tangerines, and grapes. *Sweet and Sad* has turkey, cole-slaw, lima beans, and carrots. *That Hopey Changey Thing* (2010) offers a menu of chicken, boiled potatoes, and another bean salad. *Nikolai and the Others* is the most lavish. The Russian emigrés gather around a long table laden with foods from the lost homeland: *katletka*, *pirozhki*, *schuba*, *Salade Olivier* (**fig. 3**). In these plays and others, the characters cultivate, and guard, their

20 *The Apple Family* has since been joined by other works that strike related, but distinct, notes: *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family* (a 2016 series of three plays) and *The Michaels* (2019). Nelson has also revisited the Apples in a trilogy for *Zoom*, premiering during the coronavirus pandemic: *What Do We Need to Talk About*, *And So We Come Forth,* and *Incidental Moments of the Day* (2020).

fellowship without pretending that it compensates for the loss of absent, deceased, or estranged kin. Yet there's always room for one more chair—an adjustment that Nelson stages as a way of gesturing toward the larger emotional negotiations that resist speech. In *Farewell to the Theater,* the host extends the table by another leaf, the circle of friends opens, and then it closes more tightly around itself.

3. *Nikolai and the Others* by Richard Nelson, directed by David Cromer, New York, 2013. Photograph by Sara Krulwich / *The New York Times* / Redux.

That process was especially pronounced in the first staging of *Nikolai and the Others*. Spectators seated in the rows nearest the stage at Lincoln Center were unnervingly close to the play's imagined world, but they also faced a wall of backs whenever the actors sat down for their meal. These viewers simultaneously enjoyed intimacy and suffered exclusion: Nelson's actors recovered privacy in the public forum of theater. A different theater for another Nelson play—and a better seat—meant a different invitation. When the Apple Family plays were first produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival, they occupied the Anspacher Theater, where raked seating banks enclose three sides of a small playing area at their base: spectators gathered around the stage just as the actors gathered around their table. The plush atmosphere deepened as the performance unfolded. The actors' subdued demeanors, conversational voices (sometimes audible only to those leaning forward), and limited range of actions (a character doing a jigsaw puzzle is about as eventful as things get) all formed a deliberate rebuke to the declarative

tones, over-emphatic posturing, and relentless frontality found on most other stages, even those claiming to be realist. It "should not be directed out to the audience," Nelson writes about a mummers' play staged in *Farewell to the Theater*. "It should feel like a private, intimate event, done only for themselves."[21] Indeed, when Nelson directs his own plays (as he did with the Apple cycle), he makes clear that their domestic interiors and halting confessions will be persuasive only to the degree they control our claims on them, resist our desire to identify with the characters and enter their world.

Yet the actors' seeming indifference to our presence opens space for other, potentially richer forms of engagement. At the first productions of the Apple plays, spectators looked at each other across the thrust stage, enfolding themselves as much as the actors with their dilating attentiveness. Seeing in this theater was bifocal. Our peripheral vision roamed the margins and probed the depths of our field of vision, reading the quickening, mirroring faces that surrounded the life onstage: they became its context as much as any larger history. Simultaneously, we magnified more proximate landscapes, recording the textures and subtlest tremors on the actors' surfaces, accounting for (not just acknowledging) them. Of course such double vision will be familiar to anyone who has sat in an amphitheater or around any thrust stage. Here, though, the act of attention seemed flush with more palpable warmth, charged with urgency and a greater sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone we see. All of us—characters, actors, and audience—were part of the same world, something especially true for those lucky enough to be seeing these productions on their opening nights—Election Day in 2010 and 2012, the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in 2011, and the fiftieth anniversary of the JFK assassination in 2013—which are also the days depicted in each Apple play. These productions were intensely local without being provincial.

Despite all these markers that, in the hands of another realist playwright, might read as reassuringly familiar—cooking and eating, citing identifiable places and events, relaxing the dramatic structure and indulging in Chekhovian languor, and fostering a close-knit community on and offstage—none of them, in fact, can be trusted. Nelson's characters are often only temporarily resident or not yet fully welcome in these spaces. They are, instead, bound for an assisted-living home in one play, or, in another, tenants of a boarding house, or house-guests, exiles, or people living abroad, dislocated by choice or force.[22] Their precariousness reminds us of our

21 Richard Nelson, *Farewell to the Theater*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012, p. 82.

22 See in addition to *Sorry* and *Farewell to the Theater*, Nelson's *Rodney's Wife* (2004), *Madame Melville* (2000), *New England* (1994), *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1992), and *Some Americans Abroad* (1989), among many others.

own: eventually, of course, we'll also have to leave. Even the rare play occasioned by a return home—*Goodnight Children Everywhere* (1997), in which siblings who had been transported out of England ahead of the Blitz reclaim their family apartment as adults—prevents its characters from settling. In that play, one sister says, "You step outside today—just one foot out of your home—and it all makes no sense anymore."[23]

In a theater where the houses aren't quite homes, and where periods and places sit at a remove from those of social upheaval, character is also a matter of "not quite." Nelson's people are stepmothers confirming they're not mothers, uncles treated as fathers, siblings who serve as parents, devoted ex-spouses, vulnerable new partners. They are forever monitoring their equivocal standing and the shifting ground under them. Nelson finds these states uncommonly expressive—because, not in spite, of their ambiguity. When those characters are artists, as they often are in these plays, that ambiguity is redoubled. Nelson is drawn to actors, composers, and writers who cannot rely on the history of their achievement for security. Benjamin Apple was once a well-known actor, but now has amnesia and can't memorize lines. Another, younger actor in the Apple plays has steady work only in restaurants. Not much better off is the unfulfilled actor in *Nikolai and the Others*, well-regarded in his native Russia but now, in America, cast only in villain roles. To these studies in frustration might be added other kinds of artists: the stunted composer Nikolai who lives in Stravinsky's shadow, or the aging painter who Balanchine didn't hire to design the *Orpheus* scenery, or, in the Apple plays, the industrious Jane, a writer of non-fiction who can't get her latest book published.

Nelson has great compassion for most of these quietly unhappy, strenuously optimistic, or just befuddled characters. But he also has something more than compassion. He recognizes that artists burdened with identities either not yet coalesced or beginning to decay are alert in ways their self-assured fellow characters are not. Their uncertainty is productive, full of the possibility of change. Even some non-artist characters feel this. A politically connected lawyer in *Sweet and Sad* says, in a line that sums up the value of Nelson's approach to character in general: "I don't know where I'm going politically…I know I've—jumped…I'm waiting to see where I land. If I land."[24] The opportunity in such a state of suspension (anything can *happen*!) coexists with danger (*anything* can happen)—as in a key scene from *Sorry*, in which

23 *Id.*, *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, London, Faber and Faber, 1997, p. 69.

24 *Id.*, *Sweet and Sad,* in Richard Nelson, *The Apple Family: Scenes from Life in the Country*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2014, p. 164.

Benjamin, exposed and exculpated by his dementia, reads aloud from his journal about his niece, as she and her siblings look on. His confessions of incestuous desire shatter the placid surface of a relationship no one in the family had ever questioned.

*

The trauma of this scene—one character, his identity eroding, no longer knowing and thus no longer heeding boundaries; his witnesses not knowing what comes next—returns us to Drury's *Really*. Her commentary on her play is important to bear in mind, for she warns us away from treating it as photorealism, despite its engagement with photography, and, in an echo of her note to *We Are Proud to Present*..., hopes that her language, as it "come[s] out of someone's mouth" sounds "not naturalistic, or realistic, but true...in some way."[25] The distinction may explain why many of the conversations and disclosures in *Really* turn on the relationship of seeing to knowing—a well-

traveled circuit in many realist works, in which (as Peter Brooks reminds us) the prime epistemological instrument is sight.[26] Drury doesn't echo this claim but unsteadies it. She marks vision's insufficiency, and measures knowledge's failure. The photographer in *Really*, admitting her frustration with her craft, says, "I don't know how to know how to make what I want to see."[27] This percussive confrontation with futility has been building throughout the play. The filler phrase "I don't know" recurs so frequently as to reset the action, to return it to a point from which Drury painstakingly builds up the narrative and raises the emotional temperature, until they inevitably collapse once more. That degree-zero of narrative, situation, and affect is enhanced by Maxwell's direction. His well-known interest in neutrality (as befits the author of plays with such titles as *Neutral Hero* [2012] and *People Without History* [2009]) serves Drury's own desire to contest the legibility of character, in the interest of revealing more nuances of presence ordinarily kept from developing under the stage's bright lights.[28]

---

25 Richard Maxwell, "The State of the Arts: An Interview with the Playwright," *American Theatre*, September 2016, p. 56.

26 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2005, p. 3.

27 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

28 Maxwell's views on neutrality are not fixed. Long opposed to critics who term his work "deadpan" (it only seems deadpan in relation to a theater that habitually italicizes emotions, he argues), Maxwell has recently moved even more forcefully to complicate his work's affective surfaces. "For most of my directing career," he said during rehearsals for *Isolde* (2014), "I've usually asked [actors], 'why are you pretending?'" But for this new play, "I realized I have to ask them, 'Are you afraid of pretending?'... It's not about 'not pretending' but being in a place where they can either pretend or not pretend." Jeremy M. Barker, "Richard Maxwell Discusses 'Isolde'," *Culturebot,* April 10, 2014. In a separate conversation with the playwright Christina Anderson, Maxwell acknowledges that "a neutral play" is "impossible," and explores the ways in which neutrality is a

That is the reward for sustaining our own attention to *Really*'s obdurate surfaces. We gain access to a ruthless vulnerability, a still simmering pain, a febrile self-consciousness—all these rise into view once the habitual forms of character and feeling have been stripped away. (In this, the play's protagonists recall the subjects of Andy Warhol's Screen Tests. Both groups submit to extreme exposure and defend against analysis.) *Really* takes place on a boxy, bare, plywood set, modeled on a *camera obscura* and at one point functioning like one (**fig. 4**). It is illuminated, in part, by visible instruments that the actors manipulate to cast the most interrogatory light on the camera's objects: actors are only barely veiled by illusion. The directness and restraint here recalls one of Frank O'Hara's poems in honor of Edwin Denby: "Feelings are our facts / As yet in me unmade."[29] The feelings' unmadeness matters as much as their factuality. Unrealized, even deeply buried emotions pulse more expressively than those that are fully formed, familiar, and thus potentially inert.

4. *Really* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, directed by Richard Maxwell, New York, 2016. Photograph courtesy of New York City Players.

privilege available only to some characters and performers. Christina Anderson and Richard Maxwell, "On Neutrality: A Discussion Between Christina Anderson & Richard Maxwell," *Culturebot,* January 18, 2013.

29 Frank O'Hara, "To Edwin Denby," in Donald Allen (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara,* Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1995, p. 287.

In Drury's play, the matter-of-fact handling of sentiment does not signal, or breed, indifference. At least not as Maxwell directs it. He once spoke of striving in his own work for a theatricality that is "emotionally drained but not devoid of emotion. It has the gestures of the emotion, but they've become attenuated."[30] Much of that flat but insurgent affect comes from the procedures of theater itself. His stages, regardless of the various landscapes they simulate or invoke, never obscure their reality as stages, nor the particular unease of being on them. "I don't want you to pretend that you're somewhere [other] than this room right now, doing what you're doing," Maxwell once said to an actor. "You're not sure what you're doing. It's uncomfortable. That's all part of the reality here.... I don't want to deny that. I also don't want to deny that we've done this before."[31] All these ideas receive further elaboration in Maxwell's recent book, *Theater for Beginners*, a title reminding us that virtuosity often impedes sincerity.

One section ostensibly describes some warm-up exercises, but it takes little effort to see their traces in finished performances, in Drury's work and his own: "The goal for the actor...is to not communicate any adjectives whatsoever. ...to [deliver] text without an attitude about it." And later: "Try speaking your lines of text as though your job were that of the control room person 'giving' the text to the anchorperson. Give the text so that the receiver can use it: speak clearly, speak efficiently; be accurate, be heard, be understood."[32]

Really is an extraordinarily detailed example of this magnetic transparency. It tacitly argues, among other things, that the work of listening must be as alive as the actors' "clear," "efficient," and "accurate" speaking. Of course, *we* are listening and looking, too—we are "receivers" who "use" the control room's text. And so it is perhaps fair to ask how we might fulfill that role. Drury's attention to questions of form—rendered stark in her and Maxwell's matte theatricality—illustrate the ethics under scrutiny in the play. How we look at the characters in *Really* is as charged as how they look at one another. Our claims to know them by the end of the hour's performance

---

30 Daniel Mufson, "The Hydras of Style and Irony: An Interview with Richard Maxwell" (1999). Originally published in *Alternativetheater.com*, now available on Mufson's website.

31 John Kelsey, "Richard Maxwell," *BOMB*, no. 105, October 1, 2008.

32 Richard Maxwell, *Theater for Beginners*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2015, pp. 21-22, and p. 28. For an exploration of other expressive opportunities in "flattened" or "attenuated" emotion, see Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2015, pp. 191-213. Berlant's subject is a kind of film acting in which obvious markers of psychology get "no traction" on actors' faces—an observation that might also apply to performers of Maxwell's plays.

are as debatable as they are for characters withstanding each other's presumptuous claims of intimacy. The most intrusive of those are exchanged in flashbacks between the Girlfriend and her late boyfriend, Calvin. (His name is the only one we hear, as if in this world identity sets only upon death.) He was a photographer, too, more established than she, and liberal with his advice in a scene in which he takes her picture. "You should listen to me more," he says, "because…I can like *see* you…. If you would just let yourself be what I can see you are."[33] The Girlfriend responds in one of the play's only shows of emphatic action: she shoves him. The scene may make us revise our memory of an earlier exchange, in which the Mother lashes out at the Girlfriend: "You have no idea what kind of person Calvin is."[34]

In the face of all these bruising forms of attention, Drury opts not for more comprehensive portraiture but for impersonality and even absence. One seemingly meaningless bit of stage business sets out the ideal. The Girlfriend refills a Britta pitcher and stands watching the water drip through until the process ends. Silence settles over the stage for two long minutes. Here, the object of attention, the pitcher, sets the pace and controls the mood. In a play filled with clashing proprietary claims, this desired thing will only be seized, literally, when it's ready. And so it is with animate objects of attention. When the box set becomes a functioning *camera obscura*, the actors are offstage, visible only as upside down, ghostly simulacra. Even when present and palpable, the actors, for all their emotional nakedness, more often than not rebuff us. Our looking bounces back upon us—not in the programmatic manner envisioned by Elin Diamond in her famous idea of gestic feminist performance, the actress "looking at being looked at," but in a more diffident manner.[35] Drury's performers are opting out of the culture of showing and looking (which includes looking back) altogether.[36]

33 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

35 Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 82-94.

36 Drury sharpens her critique of spectatorship in *Fairview* (2019), underscoring its complicity in racism. The play, ostensibly inhabiting a realist milieu, begins with an African American character asking her husband, "what are you looking at?!" It then moves into a merciless indictment of how white audiences often see black bodies. In the play's last minutes, a character breaks out of the realist frame to ask white spectators to relinquish their seats and climb onstage. "No one can own a seat forever," she says as she moves into the audience and speaks only to the people of color who stayed behind. "Do I have to keep talking to them… / only to them / until I have used up every word / until I have nothing left over for / You?" Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2019, p. 8 and p. 103.

That choice clarifies the value of the Girlfriend's instructions to the Mother during an impromptu photography lesson near the end of *Really*. As the Mother holds the camera awkwardly, unsure of what to do or where to look, the Girlfriend says, "just see the lines."[37] She is referring to the lines orienting the image in the camera's viewfinder, lines that find their theatrical equivalent in the playwright's and director's own draftsmanship. For the Girlfriend's part, she is interested in what she calls the "space" of intimacy, not in its occupants, and hopes to make "documentary" photos representing that.[38] Ultimately, though, she decides to "never make anything for anyone to see" so that she's not "polluting the future."[39] Perhaps that is the only way to resist photography's (and realism's) specificity, while still remaining true to one's lived experience. As she says in trying to explain her alienation from photos of herself: "I don't feel like any of them are actually me… Or that each is seen too particularly to leave room for me. *(Pause)* It's nice to think of oneself as more than one thing."[40]

That insight about the oppressive particularity of identity should change the way we see Drury's and other playwrights' realism. It may at first seem acute in its own portraiture—the "particular" phenomenon seen for itself—but here a more radical realism suggests itself, one in which the single representation doesn't exclude the "more than one thing" the Girlfriend cherishes: other possibilities for embodiment. Drury's published script calls for a final scene in which the stage walls are filled with many photo-portraits of the Girlfriend, multiple versions of her self, but Maxwell's production did not include them. Perhaps to have done so would have limited the infinite possibilities available only when no images are present. Instead, *Really* ends in the blackness of a sudden black-out, the inverse of the white-out that ends Maxwell's *The Evening*, and akin to the invisible performances in Levine's *Actors at Work*, and even close cousin to the illegible image after Irina moves in *Three Sisters*. All have escaped mimesis in the interest of more expansive, even more humane forms of being. As we look into the nullity of *Really*'s darkness, the closed, roofed, windowless wooden box of the Girlfriend's studio becomes the most open of spaces, and her realism the most variable and unreliable, and her photography (all process, here, and no product) not deadening but vivifying.

---

37 Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Really*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Bibliography

Anderson, Christina and Richard Maxwell, "On Neutrality: A Discussion Between Christina Anderson & Richard Maxwell," *Culturebot*, January 18, 2013.

Barker, Jeremy M., "Richard Maxwell Discusses 'Isolde'," *Culturebot*, April 10, 2014.

Batchen, Geoffrey, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1997.

Berlant, Lauren, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2015, pp. 191-213.

Brooks, Peter, *Realist Vision*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2005.

Carlson, Marvin, "David Levine's *Bauerntheater*: The Return of the Matrix," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 52, no. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 34-43.

Chekhov, Anton, *Three Sisters*, trans. Elisaveta Fen, in Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, Harmondsworth, UK, Penguin Books, 1959.

Diamond, Elin, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 82-94.

Drury, Jackie Sibblies, *Fairview,* New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2019.

—, *Really, American Theatre*, September 2016, pp. 55-68.

—, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen, 2014.

Enelow, Shonni, and David Levine, *A Discourse on Method*, New York, 53rd State Press, 2020.

Fore, Devin, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2012.

Foster, Hal, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996.

Garner, Stanton B., "Physiologies of the Modern: Zola, Experimental Medicine, and the Naturalist Stage," *Modern Drama*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2000, pp. 529-42.

Gorman, Sarah, "Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players—*The End of Reality* (2006)—Exploring Acting," in Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (eds), *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2010, pp. 180-201.

Hawkey, Christian, "A Conversation with David Levine," *The Believer*, no. 60, February 1, 2009, pp. 69-75.

Holzapfel, Amy, *Art, Vision, and Nineteenth-Century Realist Drama: Acts of Seeing*, London, Routledge, 2013.

Kelsey, John, "Richard Maxwell," *BOMB*, no. 105, October 1, 2008.

Kozinn, Sarah, "Making Theatre Art: David Levine's *Habit*," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 58, no. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 171-76.

Lee, Young Jean, *Straight White Men / Untitled Feminist Show*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2020.

Maxwell, Richard, *The End of Reality*, 2006, unpublished manuscript.

—, *The Evening*, 2015, unpublished manuscript.

—, "The State of the Arts: An Interview with the Playwright," *American Theatre*, vol. 33, no. 7, September 2016, pp. 56-57.

—, *Theater for Beginners*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2015.

Mufson, Daniel, "The Hydras of Style and Irony: An Interview with Richard Maxwell," *Danielmufson.com*, originally published in *Alternativetheater.com*, 1999.

Nelson, Richard, *The Apple Family: Scenes from Life in the Country*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2014.

—, *Farewell to the Theater*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012.

—, *The Gabriels: Election Year in the Life of One Family*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2019.

—, *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, London, Faber and Faber, 1997.

—, *Nikolai and the Others*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2013.

—, *Plays 1*, London, Faber and Faber, 1999.

—, *Plays 2*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012.

—, *Rodney's Wife*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006.

O'Hara, Frank, "To Edwin Denby," in Donald Allen (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1995.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain, "From Realism to Reality," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press, 1965.

Robinson, Marc, *The American Play*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2009.

Solomon, Alisa, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, London, Routledge, 1997.

States, Bert O., *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985.

Williams, Raymond, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, London, Verso, 1980.

Worthen, W. B., *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1992.

Notice

Marc Robinson is Professor of English, American Studies, and Theater and Performance Studies at Yale University. He is also Professor in the Practice of Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism at the Yale School of Drama. His books include *The American Play: 1787-2000* (2009) and *The Other American Drama* (1994). In addition, he is the editor of *The Myopia and Other Plays* by David Greenspan (2012), *The Theater of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), and *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (1994). Robinson has been awarded the 2009 George Jean Nathan Award, the 2010 George Freedley Special Jury Prize, the 2012 Lambda Literary Award in Drama, and the 2004 Betty Jean Jones Award for Outstanding Teaching of American Drama.

Abstract

Twenty-first-century American experiments in realist performance commit so thoroughly to the form as to estrange it. Its most conceptually ambitious playwrights and directors—Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard Maxwell, and David Levine, among others—rigorously test its premises and principles, stripping representations of ornament or underscoring their factitiousness. In the process, the artists cultivate in spectators an awareness of how their seeing intervenes in, and sometimes threatens to violate, the objects of their attention. This essay pays special attention to two works at seemingly opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum—Drury's *Really* (2016, first directed by Maxwell) and Nelson's *Apple Family: Scenes from Life in the Country* (2010-13, first directed by the playwright). For all their differences, both playwrights are scornful of coercive forms of mimesis, attentive to subdural emotion, and drawn to interrupted narratives and kinetic, mutable dramatic worlds.

Key words

American theater; realism; spectatorship; theatricality; neutrality; photography; Jackie Sibblies Drury; Richard Nelson; Richard Maxwell; David Levine

Résumé

Au XXI^e^ siècle, l'expérimentation américaine en fait de réalisme théâtral s'en remet si complètement à la forme qu'elle finit par l'aliéner. Les auteurs et metteurs en scènes les plus conceptuellement ambitieux – Jackie Sibblies Drury, Richard Nelson, Richard

Maxwell et David Levine, entre autres – mettent rigoureusement à l'épreuve les prémisses et les principes du réalisme, dépouillant la représentation de tout ornement, ou soulignant son artifice. Ce-faisant, ces artistes cultivent chez le spectateur la conscience aiguë d'un regard qui opère, parfois de manière transgressive, sur son objet. Cet article s'intéresse particulièrement à deux œuvres que leur style semble opposer : *Really* de Drury (pièce de 2016, créée dans une mise en scène de Maxwell) et *Apple Family : Scenes from Life in the Country* de Nelson (cycle de 2010-2013, créé dans une mise en scène de l'auteur). Au-delà de leurs différences, ces deux auteurs rejettent la mimèsis dans ses formes contraignantes pour faire émerger l'émotion souterraine et le récit brisé, au sein d'univers dramatiques mobiles et instables.

Mots-clés

théâtre américain ; réalisme ; réception ; théâtralité ; neutralité ; photographie ; Jackie Sibblies Drury ; Richard Nelson ; Richard Maxwell ; David Levine

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES