American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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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.

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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

FROM GERTRUDE STEIN TO RICHARD MAXWELL: LANGUAGE, PERFORMATIVITY AND SENSUOUSNESS IN 21ST-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMATURGY

Avra Sidiropoulou
Open University of Cyprus

The notably playful, anti-mimetic *écriture* of 21st century American playwriting has introduced into the text elements that point to the act of performance and directly affect the reader's and the spectator's senses. The trend reflects a desire to grant back to language its aural immediacy, and display the dramatic text as an iconopoetic game of words resonating with enunciative and corporeal influences.[1] As performance enters the domain of textuality more assertively,[2] language becomes dense and physical, if conspicuously descriptive[3]—perhaps less a matter of "understanding" and interpreting, and more of a visceral engagement with one's senses. Not only does "drama-in-action" emancipate performers from the demands of psychological acting; it also builds a kind of neuro-sensual dramaturgy based on rhythm, sound, repetition and silence. Given that words are freed up from their signifying structures, plays are treated and celebrated as embodied linguistic installations.

Such performative emphasis had been long anticipated, partly due to mutually contradicting factors: on the one hand, the adulation of realism in American theatre during the larger part of the 20th century; reversely, the scorn of the verbal text in the experimental performance of the 1960s and 1970s; and the rise of "directors' theatre" in the 1980s. In fact, from the late 1960s to the 1990s, the battle for supremacy between dramatic theatre and physical performance dominated the theoretical debate on whether theatre could be the product of a single agency (i.e., the playwright), or a collaborative, more "porous" response to an original (non-literary) impulse. In the early 1990s, in the United States as much as in Europe, reversing the traditional

1 Donia Mounsef and Josette Feral (eds), *The Transparency of the Text: Contemporary Writing for the Stage*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2007, p. 2.

2 Already prominent in Beckett's later drama, where form is inseparable from content, and further developed by writers such as Valère Novarina, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Enda Walsh, and others, in the 1990s. See further Sidiropoulou 2010.

3 For more on language's descriptive function in the theatre see Puchner, *Stage Fright*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins UP, 2002.

roles of author-supreme text and author-servile performance provided the necessary push to alternative dramaturgies, which were accommodated within a wide range of hyphenated practices and intermedial performances. Reawakened interest in less orthodox experiments with writing put the text right back at the core of praxis. The reassertion of the dramatic text was effected through a ritual of purgation: language gradually re-emerged cleansed and empowered, an autonomous entity of high performative value. Significantly, it also became the vector of a certain culture —the circuitous diplomacy and cross-purposes of 21st-century talk, convoluted or empty communication, fearful gaps and "post-truth" verbosities and clichés. Language is culture, and its "failings" reveal the lack of moral compass in a precarious world ruled by hollow politics and meaningless human rapport.

The work of the American experimentalists Charles Mee, Mac Wellman, and younger-generation Richard Maxwell, pays tribute to this hierarchical shift in practice, in which textual primacy is restored after having been filtered through production, design, and delivery considerations. Although it is difficult to speak of direct influences—all three playwrights operating within a different aesthetic framework[4]—one notes a common interest in the non-semantic aspects of language and a zealous investment in the linguistic aspect of plays as a means of developing the theatrical form. Reflecting contemporary life's ambiguity, lack of authentic expression, and indeterminacy, their texts are infused with structural elements borrowed from fiction or poetry, anchored in incantatory traces, in all the "active, plastic, respiratory sources,"[5] which Antonin Artaud had envisioned decades before our time. They include musical notations, excessive storytelling, heightened poeticism and melodic recurrence, neologisms, puns, songs and gibberish, unorthodox grammatical and syntactical construction, alternating narrative angles, and heavy soliloquizing. In fact, they embrace literariness, but also the conviction that the embodied-ness and orality / aurality of drama is not limited to the actor, but can be predetermined by the writing.

Endorsing compositional elements of purely performative nature, Mee's, Wellman's and Maxwell's texts place themselves at the service of the director,[6] who can use them

4 Clearly, Maxwell is part of the New-York "Downtown scene" of artists and companies—such as Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group or Elevator Repair Service—and is indebted to the writing of Sam Shepard and David Mamet.

5 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 120.

6 It needs to be said that Maxwell directs his own plays with The New York City Players. In this context, the role of playwright and author merge into the function of the arch-intepreter *auteur.* For more on the mutually nurturing relationship between director and playwright, see Sidiropoulou 2011.

as malleable *corpi* of meaning in search of contextualization. Blending fact and fiction, they often feature third-person narration and self-dramatization, enactment and demonstration, Brechtian alienation, real conversation and direct audience address, as well as pseudo-dialogue and extensive monologue forms. On many occasions, one is left to determine the play's circumstances, assign lines to alternative personas, isolate action, situation, and character out of a thick pile of words. We are often lured into the novelistic rudiments of long, dense monologues,[7] lack of descriptive stage directions as well as performance-angled playwright's notes, the collapse of logical chronology, the removal of all punctuation, and a disappearance of psychologically defined characters.

In Mee's and Wellman's plays, in particular, traditional dialogic structure has been replaced by an exchange or citation of elaborate speech, which draws attention to the very act of writing, the craft of composition, and the musicality of language. Clearly, there is a celebration of the dual function of the word: as a complex system of mental and symbolic association on the one hand, and a generator of sensory impact on the other. Here, the boundary between the mimetic and the diegetic seems "much more porous and unstable than is usually imagined."[8] On other occasions, as in Maxwell's work, speech becomes minimal to the point of disappearance. While the violence and absurdity of language communicate the displacements of contemporary American society, these texts also build up with words, as Marvin Carlson points out, "landscapes of the psychic imagination, recalling the earlier experiments of symbolism and expressionism"[9]—more notably, Gertrude Stein's whimsical, if ultimately, un-performable, drama. Despite the lack of formal acknowledgment of any direct influence, some of Wellman's, Richard Foreman's and Adrienne Kennedy's plays, among others, echo Stein's *landscape* writing, which reverberates in the powerful mix of "actual physical landscapes of psychic projection with verbal langscapes."[10] For one thing, their circularity, repetitions and lack of distinct punctuation seem indebted

7 While long monologues have been a consistent feature of 20th-century American drama (as in the plays of Eugene O'Neill or Sam Shepard), the novelistic style of 21st-century American playwriting is characterized by an emphasis on narrative techniques that are part and parcel of the genre of fiction. It favors, for instance, the use of third person over the dialogic "I". As a result, the narrative takes on an objective façade, as the omniscient narrator enters the domain of the subjective experience which typically characterizes drama.

8 Brian Richardson, "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama", *New Literary History*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, p.690.

9 Marvin Carlson, "After Stein: traveling the American theatrical 'Langscape'", in Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (eds), *Land/Scape/Theatre*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2002, p.148.

10 *Ibid.*

to Stein's admission that she was "completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on."[11]

Indeed, as one becomes more and more familiar with contemporary dramaturgy's penchant for poetry, one cannot help but acknowledge Gertrude Stein's legacy on playwrights like Maxwell, Wellman and Mee. Simultaneously modernist and postmodern, alternately centripetal and open-ended, Stein's playwriting legacy restored the balance between drama and theatre; more specifically, it reconciled the communicative and multisensory functions of the word on page and its corporal utterance on stage, a reconciliation which is at the heart of the writing Mee, Wellman and Maxwell produce. After all, in her words "plays are either read or heard or seen... and after, there comes the question which comes first and which is first, reading, or hearing, or seeing the play."[12] Engagement with repetition, recurrent phrases, words, or recognizable sound patterns builds emphasis and mood; it also provides narrative structure. For example, in Wellman's *Anything's Dream*, the repetition of the phrases "we hear" and " we see" in different parts of the text, besides building rhythm and creating a formal shape, introduces the content of each section.

> We hear an awful noise. An
> axe upon wood?
> [...]
> We see a large shape
> approach, a hell-mouth proscenium theater.
> [...]
> We see only the myriad tangle shadow of pointed ears.
> [...]
> We hear a match off to one side, and for the
> briefest instant catch sight of the French
> teacher who trembles and attempts to speak
> but is unable.[13]

11 Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (1931), London, Virago, 1988, p. 217.

12 Gertrude Stein, *Last Operas and plays* (1949), Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, p. xxx.

13 Mac Wellman, Anything's Dream, 2008, available as a pdf on the playwright's website, pp. 3-4.

The sensitive application of linguistic musicality, which can be indebted to Stein, may be a way of "exploring the 'problematics of communication' and involving the audience at different cognitive levels."[14] Words function as sound morsels, processed instinctually rather than intellectually. The investment required of the performer is equally exacting, calling, as it does, for a "style of acting different from the usual representation of a character's psychology." In fact, the actor can no longer "simply interpret a prescribed role but must make audible a text, vocalizing its musicality, rhythms, and tempos."[15] This revised and empowered use of language will provide the lens through which we shall examine prevailing and common aspects in each of the three playwrights' work.

CHARLES MEE'S PERFORMATIVE INDULGENCE

Matching a collage structure with the freshness and precariousness of everyday conversation, Mee's scripts are playful, stage-friendly texts that defy linear structure, relying on painterly composition and cubist narrative angles. Conventional dialogue is often replaced by poetic and novelistic speech, which is, nonetheless, curiously "actable" and life-like, despite or perhaps thanks to its immediacy and intentional awkwardness. In *Big Love* (2001), an exuberant play about fifty brides awaiting their wedding day, based on Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*, the repetition of the third person "he" alludes to the novelistic convention of the omniscient narrator. See Guiliano's speech:

> Giuliano – I knew a man once
> so kind and generous.
> I was a boy
> I was on a train going to Brindisi
> and he said, I'm going to marry you.
> He asked how far I was going.
> To Rome, I said.
> No, no, he said,
> you can't get off so soon,
> you need to go with me to Bologna.
> He wouldn't hear of my getting off in Rome

14 David Roesner, *Musicality in Theatre Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 159.

15 Donia Mounsef and Josette Feral, *op. cit*, pp. 2-3.

or he would get off, too, and meet my family.
He gave me a pocket watch
and a silk scarf
and a little statue of a saint
he had picked up in Morocco.
He quoted Dante to me
and sang bits of Verdi and Puccini. [16]

Orestes 2.0, part of Mee's the (re)making project, is inspired by Euripides' tragedy, as well as by a variety of inter-textual sources, including excerpts from *Vogue*, *Soap Opera Digest*, William Burroughs and Apollinaire. Written at the end of the twentieth century, it ushers in major dramaturgical sensibilities of the new millennium. Non-

linear narratives shift between dialogue and monologue forms, interspersed with media imagery and excerpts from the discourse of politics and history. Commenting on the absence of intelligible meaning in the power dynamics between the matricide Orestes, his accomplice sister Electra and the state of Argos, the play is filled with obsessive language, societal disruptions and trauma, carried through linguistically. Fragmentation and pastiche suggest a state of moral chaos, as is especially pronounced in Electra's hallucinatory speech. The excerpt below reflects her inner disintegration:

I think there are some things
that are close and distant at the same time:
Paradise for example.
The relations between a man and a woman.
The course a boat takes across the water.
When I travel I like the sort of luggage
where you can pack a metronome, or a piece of porcelain,
and know it will be safe.
And when it's snowing, I like to have a visitor.
A secret visitor.
And as you wait for him, you wonder: did he forget?

I don't know.
I don't remember.

16 Charles Mee, *Big Love* (2001).

So it's up to me to,
you know,
bring the family back together. [17]

Employing strategies of novelization, the collage technique superimposes one piece of verbal imagery on top of the other. For example, in the trial scene, simultaneous speech structures the play in a cinematic mode. As the stage directions indicate:

> During the Trial, there are two levels of text: one delivered in the foreground, one in the background, sometimes simultaneously. The foreground text, which is mostly what we hear, is all about private—indeed, intimate—life. The background text, which we mostly don't hear, is the text of public life, the trial—which is treated as so irrelevant that even those speaking it sometimes neglect to listen to it. In short, the judicial system is in ruins. [18]

Furthermore, the interplay between the archaic chorus convention and the displaced experience of today's politics creates a parodic effect, as is manifest in the nurses' descriptions of sex habits: "For me, I'm turned down 70% of the time I want sex now. It's been five years since I had as much sex as I want and I keep trying to adjust to less sex. Doing porno films really helps satisfy my appetite"—pitted against the heavy-handed lines of Menelaus, paradoxically receding to an inaudible background: "And I ask myself: shall parents never be safe in their own homes? Shall children be the judges, juries, and executioners of their parents?" [19] Language is a vehicle for portraying cultural disenchantment and, as Elinor Fuchs explains:

> ... plot and character are rhetorical surfaces in precisely the way that ethics and personhood function as emptied out simulacra in the world of [the] play. They are quoted, not objects of exploration; even less are Mee's characters subjects in whose suffering, inner conflicts, recognition, growth or resignation we are invited to take interest. [20]

At the same time, Mee's revised function of language, its representational *descriptiveness*, is also characterized by an element of *prescriptiveness*. In the words of Martin Puchner, "theatrical representation is not left to designers, actors and the

17 Charles Mee, *Orestes 2.0* (2002)
18 *Ibid.*
19 *Ibid.*
20 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character,* Bloomington, The University of Indiana Press, 1996, p. 105.

director but is placed, once again into the hands of the dramatic author." Puchner emphatically points out how descriptive language absorbs seminal functions of visual representation, such as stage props, lighting, and the organization of the space of the stage, as well as movement, choreography, and acting.[21] Suggestive of different representational possibilities, language claims a directorial role, often manifest as notes to actors, whose presence it does not hesitate to acknowledge. See Mee's fully detailed notes for Electra's hallucinatory speech, where his descriptive language combines stage directions, character analysis and *action-ing*; it is as though playwright, director and actor have blended into one single voice:

> Electra – (*Completely shattered and spent, having been awake for six days and nights drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes; long silence as she stares off into space then as though speaking for the hundredth time to a jury, and/or to homicide detectives in a room at the stationhouse, way beyond exhaustion and control, or without any affect at all, taking her time; her job is to explain, make sense of it, make it cohere, and escape blame while accepting it.*)[22]

Mee's work has over the years developed into an intermedial theatre, endorsing space and movement across the page. His language conveys a sound knowledge of the actor's processes and a strong sense of direction. Even the stage directions are performative, incorporating, among other things, notes on the acting and rhythm of each piece.[23] Concerned with how language can facilitate unadulterated communication, Mee employs mechanisms for poeticizing the text, but also for directing the actors in how to enunciate it. In his more recent works, *Hotel Cassiopeia* (premiered in 2006), *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007), or *Life* (2017), the collage of "images and music and other events" such as dance and song, vigorously *performizes* the text. It is as if writing, in the words of Patrice Pavis, "has absorbed a large proportion of the *mise-en-scène*, as if 'the author had already resolved numerous questions of staging: ambiguities that cannot be removed, character that cannot figure, constant changes of key in the acting, of conventions, and of the levels of reality."[24] In this sense, the dramatic score becomes a blueprint for

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21 Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

22 Charles Mee, *Orestes*, *op. cit.*

23 This is certainly the case with some of the stage directions after the trial scene in *Orestes 2.0*: "From here on, the piece takes on a slurred, dizzying speed" (*Ibid.*).

24 Pavis' neologism of *mise en jeu*—a term that he translates as "setting in motion" and "playing"—encourages such generous merging. Pavis explains that it is nearly impossible to "separate writing and *mise-en-scène*, even if the old division of labour continues to define the functions of author, actor, director (and spectator)" (Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scene*, trans. Joel Anderson, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p.98.)

performance and as such, is permeated with linguistic instances of marked visual but also aural value—a quality which is also apparent in Mac Wellman's *oeuvre*.

MAC WELLMAN'S POETRY OF THE (I)LLOGIC

Linguistic subversion and disengagement, together with a thorough obliteration of syntax and a seeming randomness of words, have disentangled theatrical experience from harmful illusionism and attacked preconceived ideas of dramatic linearity promulgated in the Aristotelian poetics. As drama balances between poetry and fiction, relying less and less on traditional dialogue structures, and instead manifesting lyrical rhythms as well as narrative arrangements, words become self-ruling, contemptuous of given grammatical structures. In the following dialogue from Wellman's *Mister Original Bugg* (2001), fragmentation and starkness reach their apogee. Intertextual references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* add to the mock-formulaic tone:

FIRST and SECOND Delight! Delight!
SECOND To be and then to not.
FIRST To vanish in the silence.
THIRD The silence after.
SECOND I am. You are not.
FIRST, SECOND and THIRD
What is clear is
what we hear and how
it's etched out of time
by what is not.[25]

Wellman argues that "it is not interesting at this point in human time to portray the real world as it seems to be in its own terms; but it is interesting to unfold, in human terms, the logic of its illogic and so get at the nut of our contemporary human experience."[26] He frequently mixes structures of poetry into his dramatic pieces to emphasize this absurdity. Some of his plays display a deliberate verbosity, as a statement on the poor quality of our communication. One is often struck by the characters' preoccupation with speaking themselves to the point of obsession. Here is an example

25 Mac Wellman, *Cellophane*, Baltimore and London, PAJ Books, 2001, p. 85.
26 Mac Wellman, "Poisonous Tomatoes: A Statement on Logic and the Theater", in *The Bad Infinity*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1994, p. ix.

from *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of WHITENESS* (2000). If anything, Fraser's soliloquy reveals a fascination with the musical aspects of language:

> FRASER – Can you believe it? I am surrounded by
> maniacs and idiots. It is hard to say
> which is worse, the maniacs or the idiots.
> It is hard to say which is worse, the
> mania of the maniacs, or the idiocy of the
> idiots. For if there is one thing I
> cannot abide it is the mania of maniacs;
> for if there is something I hate even more
> than that it is the idiocy of idiots.[27]

Thriving on repetition and alliteration, Wellman's speech feels washed clean of all the ornamental redundancies which distort the bare realities of the text, while also achieving a comedic effect. In the collection of plays *Cellophane*, the absurdity of human interaction is also embedded in the density of the language. Similarly to Mee, Wellman exploits the strategy of a pseudo-chorus, to act as the public voice, though the universal truths uttered are instances of self-reflexive speech delighting in its stratagems, rather than being endowed with the sagacity of the ancients. In the earlier play *Bad Penny* (1989), a site-specific piece about a bridge in Central Park, the chorus strings together a series of quasi-archaic universal truths, which parody everyday clichés.

> What you don't know can't hurt
> you; make hay while the sun
> shines; soon ripe, soon rotten;
> if every man would sweep his
> own doorstep the city would
> soon be clean; the dog returns
> to his own vomit; the exception
> proves the rule; do as I say,
> not as I do; dead men tell no
> tales; call no man happy
> till he dies;[28]

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27 Mac Wellman, *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of WHITENESS*, 2000, available on the playwright's website.

28 Mac Wellman, *Bad Penny*, in *Cellophane, op. cit.*, p. 147.

Or, again, it celebrates its mock-prophetic tone:

> Let the world be covered with cobwebs.
> Let the world be covered with shadows.
> Let the world be covered with dead leaves.
> Let the world be covered with rat fur.
> (Repeat)[29]

Here, repetition adds humorous emphasis, generating a circular impression; it also comes across as an attempt to extract meaning by trying out different, random variations on a theme. In Keith Appler's view:

> Wellman's bad-writing plays demonstrate or feint toward meaning repeatedly and even repeat the same gesture, but meaning is never fully produced. There is the intensity of recognition in the meaning that comes into view, and the intensity of its immediate withdrawal, what Wellman means in referring to the "pulled punch."[30]

Such "bad-writing" style is a suitable frame for accommodating Wellman's *penchant* for the popular and the trivial, revealing the satirical aspects of his work. Moreover, the unusual ways in which Wellman's texts are structured generate sensory effect, rendering tonality, inflection and repetition prevalent aspects of dramaturgy. To the readers / spectators, these plays offer an experience of immersion into the world of his language together with an intriguing exercise in decoding a basic plot-line through the rhythms and silences of the script. The underlying notion that rhythm is inseparable from meaning is prevalent also in Richard Maxwell.

RICHARD MAXWELL'S LINGUISTIC PRESENT

The desire to marry text and performance is particularly pronounced in plays of which the writer is also the director. New York City Players' director Richard Maxwell has produced what one could call "performance plays", namely, texts that are notionally directed as they are being written. His work pushes theatrical representation to its limits, stretching dramatic dialogue to incorporate the "realness" of everyday exchanges, in all their hesitation and disenchantment. At the same time, his plays disintegrate

29 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
30 Keith Appler, "Mac Wellman and the Language Poets: Chaos Writing and the General Economy of Language," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism,* vol. 24, no. 2, 2010, p. 80.

any clear distinction between character and performer. In effect, Maxwell's sense of embodied rhythm thoroughly informs his composition and one can hardly distinguish where the function of the writer ends and that of the director begins. On a structural and linguistic level, his texts are very much exercises in deadpan communication, featuring "idiosyncratic pauses and catchphrases, meaningless utterances, and false-starts", together with "hypernaturalist elements, the intrusion of the Real, and a-thetic performativity, to generate minimalist and highly elliptical configurations."[31]

In the context of hyper-naturalistic delivery, where no inflection is present in speech, the acting style often appears devoid of emotional nuance, and the rhythm is purposely one-tone. In *Drummer Wanted* (2003), the domesticity of the strained mother-son relationship is full of TV clichés and soap-opera references. The characters "seem to use gestures, phrases and vocal patterns as quotations, as fixed signs that, since they signify specific emotions, attitudes, etc., endow the characters with those qualities retroactively, but superficially, schematically."[32] The example of the karaoke scene where mother and son air their grievances through the lines of songs, underlines the performative aspect of Maxwell's writing. Moreover, effective pauses and interruptions in the writing allow us to perceive the actor as an entity devoid of the common representational attributes of a "dramatic character." They are part of Maxwell's "real time aesthetic," which adds to the hypernaturalism of his work. Often, as in the case of *Drummer Wanted*, a sensation of interminable duration to the play clashes against the impression of occasional location changes and significant changes in time, as suggested in the dialogue. This adds to the hyper-real aspect of the play. The mastery of the elliptical form, Maxwell's repetitions and silences, orchestrate a rhapsody of violence that functions as a means of predicting, but also of realizing the unraveling of the action. In an interview with Hilton Als, Maxwell elaborated on the process of creating characters through active listening:

> I try to listen to the room as much as possible. In writer terms, I know that can mean what other people think about the writing, but I mean how words are just like sounds and how they bounce around in the air. I also really care that things make sense, from a character point of view. Which doesn't mean I'm always justifying the words psychologically. I like the tonal differences in how people communicate.[33]

31 Markus Wessendorf, "The Postdramatic Theatre of Richard Maxwell", 2006.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Richard Maxwell and Hilton Als, "The Theatre: An Interview with Richard Maxwell", *The New Yorker*, April 21st, 2014.

Active "listening" appears to be a key concept in Maxwell, referencing both the work with the actors and the spectators' quality of engagement. Being a playwright-director, Maxwell stages his plays as he writes them, musicalizing them in the process, sometimes by adding the element of live music as well, as is the case with the play *The Evening* (2014), in which a live band plays rock music, while an actor sits silently on stage. This results in a mixed-media form of theatre, a kind of "concert drama", where aurality takes precedence over any visual considerations. At the same time, the mixture of the dialogic and the diegetic expands the scope of the work. In *Ode to the Man who Kneels* (2007), a play set in the Wild West, the novelistic element features in parts where the dialogue is interrupted by what would normally be placed amid the stage directions. This is the case with the character of The Standing Man, who delivers a confession, but distances himself from the possibility of emotional involvement, speaking about himself in the third person:

> The Standing Man is convinced that is is not a killer ("He cannot lie. He simply cannot. If he was to lie, he would become undone. So he simply does not"). That he never killed. The half-life and the sickness. A constant half-life. The Standing Man wants to be close to you. He does.[34]

In this particular speech, the character's present merges with the performer's critical distance from the action and the author-director's acting notes in parentheses. This fragile co-habitation produces tension in the way the audience perceives the story and could be part of Maxwell's strategy of "[de-naturalizing] performance 'contrivance' and the 'front' that trained actors possess,"[35] a strategy which is central to his work.

CONCLUSIONS

The above examples serve to illustrate, at least partially, the hyper-linguistic, self-reflexive emphasis of speech in contemporary American plays, reflecting on how language abandons its semantic communicative function in favor of its vocation as sound incantation. They highlight the politics of viewing the text as a work of art with autonomous value; a work in which discursive meaning is downplayed and where language is treated more as the body of a text that has become "sonic material, a sound

34 Richard Maxwell, *Ode to the Man Who Kneels*, New York, New York City Players, 2007, p. 9.

35 Sarah Gorman, *The Theatre of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players*, New York, Routledge, 2011, p.42.

without sense, a signifier without a signified."[36] Mee's, Wellman's and Maxwell's drama creates a multisensory experience, with all its musical and literary attributes, rendering interpretation a matter of sensory engagement as opposed to intellectual processing, for speech no longer services its agent. Rather than explain (interpret), the writer's desire is to cite (project / display). The quality of "novelisation" falls into a more general "tendency for dramatic dialogue to be contaminated by narrative features…the *dramatis personae* thus come to include all manners of narrators, reciters, monologists, storytellers, and reporters—all manner of mediators between the fiction and the public."[37] Language is exposed, bare in its (aural) sensorial beauty. Looking into the hydraulics of contemporary writing, Jean-Pierre Ryngaert points out that "the basic question is no longer 'What is the story?,' since the text exists 'for its own sake, for its own qualities, for its literariness perhaps, or even for its 'theatricality', while the story develops on the surface of the language only, in fits and starts, instead of being a deep and essential structure."[38] Contemplating how the incantatory aspect of language resonates with an audience, one can gradually begin to grasp the extreme demands that such texts place on performers and spectators alike, who need not only to absorb story-line and theme, but also to experience the new sensory associations that flow out of the very matter of speech.

Some words of caution might be in order here. In determining the relationship between literature and drama, Keir Elam articulates the possibility that "certain written texts attempt to foreground *themselves* as composed or quasi-literary artifacts."[39] He draws attention to the constraints that the written text imposes upon the performance to the effect that "the primary signified of every performance will be the connoted 'writtenness' of the play", and argues that this performance's success is subject to "the compliance of the performers."[40] This stimulating "writtenness" nonetheless requires of the playwright to consider the multiple functions of dramatic form both sensitively and sensibly. The hyperbolic, "purist" understanding of language as text, of drama as devoid of thematic reference, can potentially lead to reductionist experiments in stylization and thus incur the same risks induced by the suffocating *aestheticism* of an excessively conceptualized *mise-en-scène*.

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36 Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scene*, trans. Joel Anderson, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 303.

37 Jean Pierre Ryngaert, "Paroles en lambeaux et écritures d'entreparleurs", in Dona Mounsef and Josette Feral, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Keir Elam, "Language in the Theatre", *SubStance,* vol. 6/7, no. 18/19, 1977-8, p.159.

40 *Ibid.*

Performance structures can be tenacious, often contemptuous of literary principles. Recourse to wordiness and long-winded verbal equivocations bears the kind of narcissism that may condemn post-dramatic performance to sheer mannerism. This said, the challenges inherent in fine-tuning the particularities of drama, poetry, and fiction can produce exciting tensions that will expand theatre's literary and performative scope. Many of the principal hallmarks of experimental post-1980s dramaturgy—including the fragmentation of character, fracturing and distortion of narrative, and mistrust for conventional representation, but more importantly, the sensory emphasis on music, rhythm, and the playfulness of speech—suggest an inevitable evolution that promises an organic integration of performance within the dramatic form, drawing the multisensory aspect into the realm of the literary.

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Notice

Avra Sidiropoulou is Associate Professor at the M.A. in Theatre Studies Programme at the Open University of Cyprus and Artistic Director of Athens-based Persona Theatre Company. She is the author of: *Directions for Directing. Theatre and Method* (Routledge 2018) and *Authoring Performance: The Director in Contemporary Theatre* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011). She has co-edited *Adapting Greek Tragedy. New Contexts for Ancient Texts* (Cambridge UP, 2021) and is currently editing the international collection *Staging xxist Century Crisis. Theatre, Politics and Global Crisis* (Routledge, forthcoming). Avra was nominated for the League of Professional Theatre Women Gilder / Goigney International Award 2020.

Abstract

Referencing Gertrude Stein's *landscape* aesthetic—a way of rendering alive human consciousness by means of physicalizing it through language—several American playwrights have been infusing performative (spatial and incantatory) forms into the very tissue of their writing, from the latter part of the 20th century to date. Present as sound poetry or principles of fiction, formal elements that undermine traditional structures of dramatic writing have generated a tradition of experimental voices as distinct as those of Charles Mee, Mac Wellman and Richard Maxwell, among others. In these playwrights' works, characters are often created and developed linguistically, their physical selves subordinated to their speech, while texts are frequently as elliptical and "oral" as poems and other times as narrational and cerebral as novels, breathing within liminal spaces that defy easy categorization, but also resonating with performative potential.

Key words

21st-century playwriting; American drama; contemporary dramaturgy; experimental theatre; Charles Mee; Mac Wellman; Richard Maxwell

Résumé

En se référant à « l'esthétique du paysage » de Gertrude Stein – façon de rendre la conscience humaine vivante en la matérialisant à travers le langage – plusieurs auteurs américains ont injecté des formes performatives (spatiales et incantatoires) dans le tissu même de leur écriture, de la fin du XX^e siècle à nos jours. Qu'ils soient poésie sonore ou principes de fiction, les éléments formels qui minent les structures traditionnelles de l'écriture dramatique ont généré une tradition de voix expérimentales aussi distinctes que celles de Charles Mee, de Mac Wellman ou de Richard Maxwell, entre autres. Dans les œuvres de ces dramaturges, les personnages naissent et se développent par le langage, leur physicalité étant subordonnée à leur discours, tandis que les textes, tantôt elliptiques et « oraux » comme des poèmes, tantôt narratifs et cérébraux comme des romans, investissent des espaces liminaux défiant toute catégorisation facile, et vibrent de potentiel performatif.

Mots-clés

Écriture du XXI^e siècle ; théâtre américain ; dramaturgie contemporaine ; théâtre expérimental ; Charles Mee ; Mac Wellman ; Richard Maxwell

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