

Challenges and Hopes for American Theatre in the Twenty-first Century

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In this age of rapidly developing high technology and the invasion of corporate culture, American theatre is facing extraordinary challenges. Nevertheless, it seems to be bravely exploring and expanding its territory. This paper examines first the effects shown in actual productions of technological devices and corporate cultural sensibilities in the first and second sections. In the third and fourth sections, it investigates areas of hope for American theatre in the twenty-first century, taking examples from the work of two women playwrights who have courageously created an arena in which the role of drama in American society is reconsidered. Both playwrights deal with current social problems via theatre, in a way no other social institutions at present can do with the same impact. The works discussed here are: Anna Deavere Smith's 1992 play, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, and Paula Vogel's 1998 Pulitzer-Prize winning play, *How I Learned to Drive*.¹

I THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

American Theatre magazine, September 1999, includes a special section: "Theatre of Tomorrow," which covers the various impacts high-technology devices have had on a number of American playwrights. Jennifer Tanaka reports on a "site-specific work in cyberspace" given in New York City in the summer of 1999. "In front of fifty or so New

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Yorkers,” it was performed as a “bi-coastal” event, connecting Los Angeles to the New York stage. Two video screens set up in the theatre space projected New York audience and L. A. audience respectively. The distance between the two cities created an “echo” on the screen, since the spatial distance created a time difference, which gave a special warp to the images and sounds from the other city.

Tanaka comments, “technological innovation is bubbling up in pockets everywhere” (24). She goes on to report on another production in which dancers in two separate locations created “a unified composite performance space on a large screen” (26). A third example is George Coates’s *20/20 Blake*, in which William Blake’s painting was transformed “into an enormous computer-generated image that the actors literally stepped out of” (26). The same artist created in 1999 “a short play in virtual reality,” a three-character play called *You Must Pay the Rent*, using “a three-dimensional navigable environment on the Web” (27).

“In theatre, as is true for the rest of society, technology is defining the next bold frontier,” writes Tanaka (24). What significance does this ‘boldness’ bring to theatre, though? I argue that technology *is* truly defining some part of American theatre but not all of it. We cannot think of a commercial, say Broadway, musical without technology, for sure. But what really counts after all is what is created for the audience in the theatre. Some productions succeed in keeping a subtle balance between experimental technology and more traditional theatrical elements including the actors’ bodies.² However, many others fail to create a balance, resulting in an obstructive and self-wallowing use of technology.

To cite two works in which experiments with technology did not seem to be successful for one reason or another, I’d like to discuss Steve Reich’s opera, *The Cave*, and Robert Wilson’s rendition of Richard Wagner’s opera, *Lohengrin*. In *The Cave*, performed in 1993 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival, the composer ambitiously experimented with creating music by assembling the sounds of dozens of people’s voices. He then projected the images of these people on several huge screens set up on stage. Though it was called an opera, only four singers appeared to sing but not act, and there was no pre-written text except for the Biblical story of Abraham, Sarah and their family as the framework, with the words spoken by the people projected on the monitors. The audience listened to Reich’s music, saw the images of the people on the screen and heard them talking about their feelings towards and experiences of religion, and saw the documentary images

of the place in which the opera was set. However, in the course of the actual process of composing his music, Reich somehow seems to have gone astray, getting too involved in the technical devices of matching images to the rhythm of his music. The projected larger-than-life image of a person talking exuded an individual presence of its own, almost like that of a live actor's body. The composer with his music cut their images off often in a few seconds, and this gave the impression that he denied and even insulted the humanity of the images, of the people on the screen.³

In Robert Wilson's *Lohengrin*, first presented at New York's Metropolitan Opera House in March 1998, Wilson took charge of production, set design and lighting concept. The resulting production was quite provocative and controversial to say the least. The stage was extremely dark and generally bare in most scenes. Lights spotted only the faces of the singers in some scenes. Towards the latter half of the opera, a bright column of yellow, blinding white or blue light extended itself onto the stage downwards, or from right to left. The overall impression the audience received was that of a bare, dark staging, with occasional bright lighting in a few scenes.

In this production of *Lohengrin*, Richard Wagner and Robert Wilson clashed with each other. Wilson's concept of staging and lighting treated singers as if they were merely parts of the space he had created in his mind. James Levine conducted Wagner's music faithfully and earnestly. The members of the audience were consequently torn into two directions. On the opening night, "A barrage of boos greeted Robert Wilson's curtain call."⁴

The use of high technology enables artists in various fields to explore a new area of creation, but it can be a risky experiment at a high cost to the artist. Challenges from high technology thus will demand artistically an integrated concept from artists of the twenty-first century. Without it, the work will fall flat, or will become a mere gimmick for self-satisfied technicians of high-tech devices.

II CORPORATE CULTURE VS. LEGITIMATE THEATRE

What I refer to here as "corporate culture" is the sensibility and way of producing a theatre piece according to that of a commercial enterprise. To be sure, every theatre venture in the United States is destined to be a commercial enterprise that follows the rules of the market. Non-profit

theatre companies try to escape commercialism, and yet, as long as they present works in public in a capitalist society, they cannot escape the effect of commercialism in trying to gain an audience. “Corporate culture” on the other hand bluntly calls theatre pieces “products.” Marketing strategy is brought in to try to “sell” these “products” to an audience of “consumers.”

Legitimate theatre resists this kind of sensibility, as *Newsday* theatre critic Linda Winer says in an interview: “It’s terribly sad to have the theatre turned over to basically a corporate product as opposed to making shows” (*AT*, December 1997, 51). Sylviane Gold, on reporting about “the Disney Difference,” admits: “Of course, it’s hard to believe that an old-fashioned producer would ever refer to a show as ‘product’” (18).

Broadway musicals thrive on capitalism, marketing strategy, and the audience’s wish for entertainment. These three ideas and practices came into the foreground in the field of the performing arts in the early decades of the twentieth century in the United States, and they changed the field wherever the consumer market prevails. As the United States has little government subsidy for the performing arts both on the Federal and State levels, consumerism has naturally been strong and dominant in the performing arts, compared with other advanced countries in the West.

Since the acclaimed first musical, *Show Boat* was created in 1927, this new genre of performing art has been the first in taking in technological devices. In another epoch-making musical, *Oklahoma!* (1943), special effects lighting and staging, together with an imaginative choreography, made it “one of the milestones of American Musical Theatre.”⁵ In the 1990s, the Walt Disney Company “invaded” Broadway with *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*. Both were remakes of movie versions of the stories, and they were meant to be good family entertainment. The amount of money injected into making these two musicals was enormous, and most of it went into technological devices. For example, *Beauty and the Beast*, “the most technologically advanced Broadway show when it opened in 1994, required 48 tractor trailers to transport the finished scenery and lights into” New York City’s Palace Theatre. “There were a total of 1,358 lighting instruments used, with more than 400 cues and 59 vari-lights each housing a Macintosh computer within. . . . Twelve miles of automation cable and three miles of lighting cable snaked through the grid and the basement of the Palace Theatre” (Tanaka, 24–25). The whole cost of the production ran up to about \$15 million.

In 1997, following the success of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney brought *The Lion King* to Broadway. This time, Disney asked a well-known experimental theatre artist Julie Taymore to direct as well as to create masks, costumes and scenery. Taymore did a spectacular job of inventing masks and puppets of various sorts for the actors to wear and in some cases manipulate. She brought in and strengthened African elements in the show, especially with regard to music, characters and costumes. She also used a number of Asian theatre devices in puppetry and choreography. The result was a huge hit musical, with tickets sold out more than a year in advance.

Taymore's achievement in bringing people to theatre and creating a festive atmosphere should not be ignored. However, to an Asian audience accustomed to more subtle and artistic puppetry and the use of various styles of masks, the show looked like a mere parade of imaginative masks and eye-catching puppets. To see traditional techniques of Japanese *bunraku* being used onstage was a joyful event, but a good musical needs to be more than a spectacle: it should have music, story and lyrics. It needs good staging by a good director. Taymore failed unfortunately in these respects.⁶ The *New Yorker* critic John Lahr, in reviewing *The Lion King*, writes: "A theatrical event far more textured and original than the film. The musical is a series of truly *vivants tableaux*—part pageant, part puppet show, part parade, with a touch of Las Vegas revue thrown in." Lahr compliments its "animal magnetism," but concludes, "I call it brilliant Business Art, and the hell with it" (126–29).

Another entertainment producing company, Livent, Inc., has been active on Broadway for a while. In 1993, it produced a hit musical, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a dramatization of South American novelist Manuel Puig's work. In 1994, *Show Boat* was revived on Broadway with Harold Prince as the director and became a hit. It put on stage a great many more African American actors than were given lines to speak, simply to show off their historically silent presence as slaves working on plantations, ship-yards and elsewhere. It was a smart and politically correct idea to do so, as it brought a larger African American audience to the theatre.

In 1998, Livent presented another musical, *Ragtime*, based on E. L. Doctorow's acclaimed novel that was published in 1975. Doctorow's *Ragtime* gave Livent a good vehicle to reach three groups of people: white upper-middle-class suburbanites, Jews, and Blacks, all in one mu-

sical. Unfortunately, however, the concept for the musical was more or less old-fashioned, and there was not much of the excitement and thrill of seeing a new, original musical. The book was prepared by Terrence McNally, one of the hottest playwrights currently, and what he did with Doctorow's novel was laudatory, blending three groups of characters quite smoothly. However, ravishing costumes and smooth staging could not save the show from banality.⁷

Disney and Livent can buy great names and let them make a show. But good musicals can only come from the intense battling and co-operation of various talents: directors, composers, book-writers, lyricists, choreographers, set designers, costume designers, lighting artists, sound effect artists, and actors. A naturally developed work like *A Chorus Line*, which ran for 6,137 performances on Broadway, could do what is required of a good musical.⁸ That musical had a song, "What I Did for Love," a passionate dedication, which is hard to draw out from a group of artists called together by corporate culture with big money. Livent's *Ragtime*, for instance, was reviewed thus: "Utterly resistible. . . . There's just no chemistry. There is much to admire in "Ragtime," . . . but there is finally little to fall in love with."⁹

New York City since 1990 has been intent upon cleaning up the Times Square area and has renamed it "New Times Square," putting signposts and stickers all over the area. The City has been enthusiastic to invite and keep Disney, and a Disney shop was built right next to the drastically renovated Amsterdam theatre that gave *The Lion King* its first New York performance.¹⁰ Across the street from the Disney theatre, Livent created the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, actually remodeling and putting two theatres together, and it was here that *Ragtime* had its first New York City performance. The presence of corporate culture is quite visible in Times Square, the center of Broadway theatre, and critics say it has changed the content as well as the faces of Broadway theatre. The delicate balance between entertainment and art is hard to attain, but one simply hopes that the presence of corporate culture will not destroy theatre as we know and love it now.

III ANNA DEAVERE SMITH: BRIDGING THE MULTICULTURAL GAP

African American dramatist Anna Deavere Smith's play, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, intends to bridge the gap between two aggressively opposed groups of people by way of

a play.¹¹ It is a unique play, actually a collage made from the words of 26 men and women Smith interviewed before and after the tragic killings and succeeding riot that occurred in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn in August 1991.¹²

Fires in the Mirror was performed by Smith herself, without an intermission for 90 minutes, in New York's off-Broadway Public Theatre. On stage, in the course of the show, she changed costume simply by wearing eyeglasses or a cap or a bandana, bringing in a book or a pen, carrying a wash basket, putting on a jacket, giving an African touch, and so on. Thus she performed African Americans, Jews, a Mexican, a Hispanic, and an Australian—all 26 characters in the play. Their occupations were various: Rabbi, Protestant minister, scholar, poet, student, homemaker and so on. An extraordinary aspect of all these characters in the play is that they all actually exist in everyday life. Smith caught each person's idiosyncratic behavior and use of words, made them her own, and acted out the role of each person according to her interpretation of his/her idiosyncrasy.

As Smith performs each of these characters, they become one, all contained in the body of the actor herself. Each of them has his/her own identity marked by race, gender, religion, culture, or class, expressed in his/her words and behavior. However, because the roles are performed by one actor, they become one conglomerate, a fictionalized entity. This in turn provides the audience with a realization of the abstract nature of the individualized basis of identity. Thus, differences in gender, race, religion, culture, or class, for the moment, lose the significance of their reality. The members of the audience are consequently deprived of the legitimacy of their emotional basis for their claims of difference.

As the characters lose the basis of their claims to differences, they in turn acquire the unity, through the voice and body of the actor Smith, of their humanity. The members of the audience now come to see what is common in these characters. They come to realize that these different people can be placed side by side, instead of violently opposing one another, in spite of their differences. In fact, it is a uniquely precious occasion to listen to their different views and feelings all in one evening in the theatre.

Smith has presented, by her voice and body, a common arena in which differences can co-exist and opposing people can listen to one another. By juxtaposing different reactions to the killings of a black boy and an Australian scholar who by chance came to the area where the killing took

place, and also different reactions to the riot that occurred after the incidents, Smith created a dramatic representation of the ideal of multiculturalism. Theatre has thus turned itself into a space for dialogues not only among opposing groups on stage, but also among the audience.

The fact that Smith has created a theatrical space in which dialogue is made possible, and in which the audience can objectively think about opposing views from the same distance, is nothing if not a strong political message. It is hard to imagine having such an arena in everyday life, outside the theatre.

At a preview performance before the official opening, Smith invited the people whom she depicted in her play, and after the performance had a brief session for actual dialogue among these people. Considering how polarized these people are in everyday life, and how politicized every action tends to become in the United States, especially in matters related to race, Smith's invitation and actualization of dialogue should be called a daring, brave act.

Smith in an interview with Thulani Davis talks about the need for having a dialogue in spite of differences: "I'm interested in trying to work through the difficulties of now having a dialogue with people 'cause my experience in race is usually a monologue when it comes to being with white people."¹³ Smith feels responsible as a black person to talk about "our experience" (42R), but she is fully aware that in order to have a dialogue, "we have to have a different way of listening, a different way of thinking of dialogue, and a different way of thinking of the race discussion" (43L). When Smith says, "race is my work" (42L), she intends to do her work by having a dialogue with the audience by writing a play, by her search in "language and its relationship to character" ("Intro.", xxiii).

Concerning her interest in American character, since *Fires in the Mirror* was made as "a part of a series of theater pieces called *On the Road: A Search for American Character*" ("Intro.", xxiii), Smith writes: "Mimicry is not character. Character lives in the obvious gap between the real person and my *attempt* to seem like them" (xxxvii). She goes on: "My sense is that American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences. It lives not in what has been fully articulated, but in what is in the process of being articulated" (xli).

To sum up, Smith is interested "in the gaps between the places" and "in the process of being articulated" when she is closely listening to the

person she interviews and performs later in the play as a character. This interest of Smith's in the "gaps" and "the process" inevitably leads to the creation of a special "quality of listening" as Davis points out in her interview (*BOMB*, 43L).

Nobel Prize novelist Toni Morrison talks about "the wholly racialized society that is the United States" in her discussion of American literature and society in *Playing in the Dark* and also in her introduction to *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*.¹⁴ Smith joins ranks with Morrison in examining American language and society, and revealing how American social reality is constructed in polarized groups. This line of efforts may facilitate bridging gulfs made by misunderstood goals of multiculturalism, and may help bring about the realization of American democratic ideals of liberty and equality.

After the huge success of *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith created *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* in a similar way. It has 46 characters, all performed by Smith alone, talking about the Los Angeles race riot following the trial of the L. A. policemen charged with the beating of Rodney King in 1992. It took more time, a little over two hours to perform. It was originally produced in Los Angeles in the early summer of 1993, directed by Emily Mann. It then came to New York, first performed at the Public Theatre in March 1994, directed by George C. Wolfe. As it soon became a huge hit, it was transferred to Broadway. Smith's efforts to create an arena for dialogue and bridge "gaps" will be successfully continued in her search for "American character," without much help from high technology or big corporate money.¹⁵

IV RETHINKING AMERICAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY BY WAY OF A PLAY

Paula Vogel's play, *How I Learned to Drive*, is a deceptively short play, performed without intermission in 90 minutes, but it has more material than one can imagine a play can handle in so short a time. The title of the play indicates three levels of reality: the actual "how to" level; the metaphorical level of sexuality implied by American English in the use of words like "drive" and "cars"; and the deeper level of American cultural identity, since the United States is a highly car-oriented society. Exploring all three levels of the play, Vogel has succeeded in creating a truly thoughtful and provocative examination of American culture and society.

Vogel's focus in *How I Learned to Drive* is on a sexual relationship that has developed between a teenage girl and her uncle over the course of eighteen years. Vogel sets up a narrator, Li'l Bit, now a woman thirty-five years old, looking back on the development of the relationship. The audience is taken into her narrated world at the center of which is the period of her life from age eleven to sixteen, when Uncle Peck taught her how to drive a car. The examination of their relationship concerns the sexual awakening of and exploration by a teenage girl, trust and compassion between two "family" members, and gender power politics played out between a middle-aged married man and a sexually inexperienced and adventurous girl, all done from the meditative viewpoint of a mature woman.

The other three characters are called "the Greek Chorus," and they perform in the narrated scenes of the past together with Li'l Bit or comment on her actions. The chorus consists of a man, a woman, and a female teenager. As the play progresses, they take turns, performing the Li'l Bit and Peck's "family" members. They also act as occasional outside people. For instance, the man plays Li'l Bit's grandfather, the waiter of a restaurant where Li'l Bit and Peck meet, and high school boys who come into contact with Li'l Bit. The woman plays Li'l Bit's mother, Peck's wife Aunt Mary, and high school girls. The teenager plays Li'l Bit's grandmother, and the voice of eleven-year-old Li'l Bit.

Although Li'l Bit serves as narrator, another 'Voice' steps in occasionally to turn the action of the play or comment on the scene in very short phrases. Thus, structurally, the play is the memory of Li'l Bit, focusing on the progress of her relationship with Uncle Peck, which is framed by her relationships with "family" members, high school classmates, and various others. However, the story is not narrated in chronological order. Li'l Bit's memories are presented in fragments, with the time of action going back and forth.

The play is set in the 1960s, in a small countryside town in Maryland. It begins with Li'l Bit's memory of a warm summer night, in "a parking lot overlooking Beltsville Agricultural Farms in suburban Maryland" (9). Less than a mile away, "the crumbling concrete of U. S. One wends its way past one room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down" (9). In short, the area is placed between green farms and the modern debris of the oldest American highway, U. S. One, along which sexuality and religion face one another.

Vogel's outstanding accomplishment in this play is her complex treatment of sexuality. For that purpose, she limited the number of characters to the essential two in an overwhelmingly hetero-sexual society: a woman and a man. Vogel carefully constructs the play and its examination of sexuality in American culture and society through the way *Li'l Bit* tells the story of her sexual awakening. It is told in such a way that an innocent girl, now grown up, does not consider herself merely as being taken advantage of by the patient instigation of an allegedly pedophile uncle. A fundamental trust remains between the two throughout the play. Even at the end, when *Li'l Bit* goes away on a long drive, the spirit of Peck is seated in the back seat, and *Li'l Bit* smilingly nods at him before she starts the car. In this sense, the play does not become a simple attack by a woman against a domineering man. The two can both be considered, when the play ends, victims of what Judith Butler calls "compulsory heterosexuality" in a culture and society in which gender is "oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."¹⁶

Another outstanding achievement is Vogel's handling of the central female character. Vogel is almost the first playwright who allows the central female character to survive sexual and other scandals.¹⁷ *Li'l Bit* leads a sexually promiscuous life before and after she tells her uncle on her eighteenth birthday that she is not going to see him any more; but she is never punished in the course of the play. Peck, on the other hand, brokenheartedly turns to alcohol and eventually dies. One day, he falls down the stairway to the basement studio, his sanctuary, without anyone around to help him, and he is found dead a week later. Thus, in the play Peck faces a kind of poetic justice for his unusual sexual relationship, while *Li'l Bit* escapes without any of the punishments sexually active independent women hitherto suffered in American drama.

Peck says at one point in the play that some people have "fire in the belly," some "fire in the head," while he has "fire in the heart" and becomes depressed (46). The relationship with *Li'l Bit* begins when she offers him some private moments regularly as long as he stops drinking. So it begins as an act of compassion and later, as she becomes a sexually mature woman in a child's body, it changes into a series of sexual lessons to her. Thus, she has "learned" to be sexual, to practice sexual acts, and to play at gender power politics, while at the same time learning from him how to drive a car.

Peck's "fire in the heart" is not understood by his wife. She senses that

something is going on inside him while he is depressed, but she avoids confronting him about it, just as Linda avoided confronting and discussing the situation with Willy Loman, her husband, in Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The couples in these two plays live similar lives of separation inside the same house, even though one house is set in New York surrounded by a huge conglomeration of high-rise apartments, and the other in agricultural Maryland. Both couples lead lives of non-understanding between husband and wife; and both husbands are depicted so as to gain the audience's sympathy for their private sufferings.

The main reason Peck begins giving driving lessons to Li'l Bit is explained in the scene in which he gives her the first lesson. He says that he has no sons, and "the nearest to a son I'll have" (34) is Li'l Bit, to whom he wants to give "something that really matters to me." It is, he says, "A power." "I feel more myself in my car than anywhere else" (34), he says, and tries to teach Li'l Bit a sense of "control." "When you are driving, your life is in your own two hands. Understand?" Peck tries to make sure (33). Thus Peck is dead serious about teaching Li'l Bit how to drive a car. She responds quite seriously to his instruction, finally gaining a sensation "of flight in the body" (57) when driving. Although she has stopped living in her body and "retreated above the neck" since the day she was given a glimpse of a dark side of Peck's character at age eleven, when placed on his lap in the car (56), she did master his lessons on "power" and "control" and enjoys having them in her hands.

A leading Marxist-feminist critic, Jill Dolan, in her review of Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, says that the play is "only 'about' incest after the scene of Li'l Bit's first molestation scene" at age eleven. And she writes, "the moment is startling, because . . . the play has been about more than incest" (128L). She concludes her review with the following remark: "Vogel's play is about forgiveness and family, about the instability of sexuality, about the unpredictable ways in which we learn who we are, how we desire, and how our growth is built on loss" (128R). Dolan is correct in hesitating to say that the play is "about" incest and in feeling startled by the moment. I believe, however, that she misses the point because the play is not about incest at all.

We need to remember that there is indeed a "molestation scene" as Dolan writes in her review. However, as I said earlier, Vogel has carefully constructed the play through the way in which Li'l Bit narrates the story. What Dolan calls the "scene" comes towards the end of the play,

and it is actually followed immediately by the commentary of the thirty-five year old Li'l Bit: "That day was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I've lived inside the 'fire' in my head ever since. And now that seems like a long, long time ago. When we were both very young. . . . And I find myself believing in things that a younger self vowed never to believe in. Things like family and forgiveness" (56–57). Li'l Bit continues: "The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving" (57). Then she follows the exact directions Peck has given her in his driving lessons. The play ends when she finishes listing his directions, and by this time the spirit of Peck is seated in her car, nodding at her. The stage direction says: "They are happy to be going for a long drive together" (58).

What Dolan calls the "molestation scene" is thus carefully placed at the end of the play so that the audience will not simply label it as such. The act was done "when we were both very young," and it is not only forgiven by the woman, but she is faithfully and happily following his driving lessons and reliving joyously the scenes that happened "a long, long time ago" but that are still alive in her. As the scene stands in the play, the relationship between Li'l Bit and her uncle should not be considered simply as that between a victim and an aggressor.

The play is, to me, 'about' (if one can say a play is 'about' anything at all) one side of American culture and society, which drives people to label delicately complex human feelings, actions, and interactions. Consequently, people with the labels attached to them have no alternative but to become the very things they are called. Peck thus becomes an "alcoholic," a "pedophile," or an "incestuous" man. Li'l Bit thus becomes a "promiscuous" or "sexually insensitive" woman or a "lesbian." However, the play depicts these two people fully, so that one can avoid attaching these labels to them. The audience thus can come away from the performance, feeling how vicious the act of labeling other people is, how important it is to respect and understand differences they may not be able to understand or accept at the moment.

To sum up, there is a clear political message in this seemingly short, simple play. Paula Vogel is strongly upholding and embracing multiculturalism, respecting differences and taking a person as he/she really is, in a society which forces heterosexuality onto people. In *How I Learned to Drive*, she has created a survivor, who with her vision of the American democracy's ideals of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness reveals a culture and society in which gender polarizes men and

women and places them under its hierarchical power structure. The same culture and society also destroy people who do not fit into its prescribed types and groupings. This survivor is a victim, if one wishes to see her in this manner, of pedophilia, but she is much more than a mere victim, thanks to the 'wisdom' she acquired through much suffering and thinking, and to the complexity of human relationships Vogel presents in the play.

In the preceding four sections I have discussed some of the major challenges American theatre will face in the twenty-first century. There is the danger of self-indulgent use of high technology. There are the corporate cultural sensibility and practices American theatre needs to cope with. But there are also some positive efforts being made by playwrights like Anna Deavere Smith who try to bridge the gulfs caused by multicultural battles. Others, like Paula Vogel, look into the core of American culture and society in order to reconsider the system and the power structure as well as human relationships and interactions that cannot avoid being placed beneath it, using sexuality as the focus of their investigation.

Another significant aspect of the playwrights I discussed above reminds us of the role of theatre, leading us to reconsider the function theatre can serve in society. They created, in their plays, an open space in which human contact and human communication are re-examined and dialogue can occur between currently polarized groups. Although the future of American theatre may be full of political and financial hazards, American theatre of the twenty-first century, I believe, will overcome such problems and acquire deeper and broader dimensions as it has been doing in the present century. We can depend upon these playwrights as signs of hope for American theatre in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ Part of this paper is based on my presentation, "American Theatre: Three Problems for the Twenty-first Century," at the symposium (in Japanese): "Will There be Another American Century?" at The Japanese Association for American Studies' 32nd Annual Convention held in June 1998 at Chiba University. Part of my discussion for Section 3 of this paper was published in a somewhat different form in Japanese in the March 1998 issue of *Rikkyo American Studies*, vol.20. Part of my discussion for Section 4 of this paper was presented orally in Japanese in a somewhat different form at The American Literature Society of Japan's 38th Annual Convention held in October 1999 at Kita-Kyushu University.

² For example, the Wooster Group, a leading off-off Broadway theatre company, has long been successfully experimenting with technological devices, creating a uniquely

complex form of art in which these devices are used to help human actors on stage to present a multi-dimensional work of art. Their recent rendition of Eugene O'Neill's 1922 play *Hairy Ape*, and Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*—the title of which was changed to *House/Lights*—were successful post-modern interpretations of what each playwright tried to present when the plays were first performed in the early decades of the twentieth century.

³ The *New York Times*' music reviewer, Edward Rothstein, wrote as follows: "Each act in the two-and-a-quarter-hour work is meant to be a portrait of a group as well as an illumination of the subject. The result is, of course, also a portrait of the authors [Steve Reich and Beryl Korot who took charge of images], whose hands are everywhere in this project. . . . The result is sometimes fascinating, often tedious, sometimes tendentious and occasionally (in the third act of American speakers, where the authors are both at home) exhilarating. . . . But there is something almost pedantic about the long, often predictable exposition of the first two acts," *NYT*, 15 October 1993, C3.

⁴ Leighton Kerner begins his review of *Lohengrin* as quoted, but he ultimately praises Wilson's production as an "austerely beautiful show." (*Village Voice*, 31 March 1998, 123.) Brooks Adams in *Art in America*, September 1998, also begins his review with: "Alternately bravoed and booted at its premiere in March," and goes on to praise it as "an intensely meditative reading of the opera, especially its darker overtones. . . . It should also be understood as a self-conscious meditation on his own career."

⁵ Gerald Bordman writes that "the show changed fashions in musicals for two decades" (534L).

⁶ Taymore received the 1998 Best Director of Musical Tony Award. However, the Tony Awards are given primarily by Broadway producers and theatre owners all over the United States, with theatre politics and financial considerations behind them.

⁷ Reports on both Disney's *Lion King* and Livent's *Ragtime* are featured as "The Morphing of Broadway" in *American Theatre*, December 1997, 14–23; 50–55. *Newsweek*, 15 June 1998, reported: "The arrival of Disney and Livent has galvanized Broadway, but what's more significant is that Broadway has leaped the Hudson River and fanned out all over the United States (and the world). There have always been road shows, but a burgeoning appetite for Broadway Productions (helped by Rosie O'Donnell's regularly plugging Broadway on national TV) has expanded the quantity" (58).

⁸ Michael Bennett's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning musical, *A Chorus Line*, first began as a workshop piece. It opened off Broadway in April 1975, moved to Broadway in July 1975, and closed in April 1990.

⁹ Ben Brantley, "'Ragtime': A Diorama With Nostalgia Rampant," *New York Times*, 19 January 1998.

¹⁰ It is reported: "Anyone who hasn't visited Times Square in the past year can have no notion of how much it has changed." (Sylviane Gold, "The Disney Difference," *American Theatre*, December 1997, 14.) As far as "Disney difference" is concerned, reports were around since 1994 when *Beauty and the Beast* was put on Broadway. *New York* magazine has a feature story on it: "Broadway's New Beast: The Inside Story of How Disney Turned a Smash Hit Movie Into a Smash Hit Musical (It Hopes)." (Michael Goldstein, *New York*, 14 March 1994, 40–45.)

¹¹ Cornel West calls *Fires in the Mirror* "the most significant artistic exploration of Black Jewish relations in our time." ("Foreword," *Fires in the Mirror*, xvii–xviii.)

¹² A brief chronology of what happened in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in August 1991 is as follows: On the evening of 19 August 1991, a car driven by a Hasidic Jew, Yosef Lifsh, bearing Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe, careened into two Guyanese American chil-

dren at an intersection of Brooklyn streets. Seven-year-old Gavin Cato was killed, and his cousin Angela suffered a broken leg. An angry crowd gathered. Three hours later and five blocks from the car accident, Yankel Rosenbaum, a visiting Hasidic history professor from Australia was stabbed, and he died at a hospital two and a half hours later. On August twentieth, rioting began on the streets, as Blacks and Lubavitchers set fires, threw stones and bottles, and unleashed insults at each other and at the police. (Abridged from *Fires in the Mirror*, xlvii-liv.)

¹³ Thulani Davis, "Anna Deavere Smith," *BOMB*, Fall 1992, 42R.

¹⁴ The quote is from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, Preface, xii. Similar expressions appear in *Playing in the Dark*, 12–13, and also in her "Introduction" to *Race-ing Justice*, xvii. In the latter book, Morrison writes: "one needs perspective, not attitudes; context, not anecdotes; analyses, not postures" (xi).

¹⁵ In March and April of 2000, Smith brought to New York's Public Theatre another show, *House Arrest*, composed in a similar way, but this time on the theme of American Presidency and its realities.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 151, Note 6. A similar explication can be found in her "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 4.

¹⁷ For example, Martha in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934), Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Negro-Sarah in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), or even Jessie in Marsha Norman's *night, Mother* (1982), is driven to madness or suicide because of her sexual promiscuity or her search for identity, sexuality and self-control.

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