

# THE PLAYWRIGHT'S

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AMERICAN DRAMATISTS ON MEMORY, WRITING AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

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David. Lawrence

# **THE PLAYWRIGHT'S VOICE**

**AMERICAN DRAMATISTS ON MEMORY, WRITING  
AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE**

**DAVID SAVRAN**

**Theatre Communications Group**

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**To Lorraine and Jack Savran,  
Who fostered my love for theatre  
And took me to see my first “adults only” movie,  
*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

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WARDEN: You're taking nothing with you but the clothes on your back.

CHAPLAIN: I'm taking much more than that.

WARDEN: Aw. Maybe I'd better have you frisked on the way out.

CHAPLAIN: You could strip me naked and I'd still have these.

WARDEN: These what?

CHAPLAIN: Memories—shadows—ghosts!

—Tennessee Williams,

*Not about Nightingales* (1938)

Like performance, memory operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past.

—Joseph Roach,

*Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996)

## The Haunted Stage

In the final moments of Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, Li'l Bit sits down at the wheel of her car, sees the spirit of her Uncle Peck in her rearview mirror, and smiles. No matter where she goes, the reflection suggests he will follow. For in that moment the play brilliantly—and literally—illuminates a ghostly presence that will always comfort and unsettle her. Yet *How I Learned to Drive* is hardly unique in its habit of raising the dead. As the twentieth century comes to an end, American plays are suddenly full of ghosts, ghosts that are absolutely central both to the plays' themes and to their emotional impact. From the spirit of Uncle Peck to the surprisingly gentle apparition of Ethel Rosenberg in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, from the ghost of a forsaken lover in Philip Kan Gotanda's *Ballad of Yachiyo* to the specter of a black Abraham Lincoln (called The Foundling Father) in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, the American theatre is truly a haunted stage.

Why, I wonder, is it haunted? What is it haunted by? Why have these emanations from a different time and a different place mysteriously taken up residence in America's theatres?

The haunting of American stages is undoubtedly a complicated phenomenon with as many causes as there are ghosts. And there is no

question but that today's theatre is by no means unique in its fascination with things mysterious and unexplained. For the occult has become extremely popular during the nervous nineties. Stephen King remains a synonym for best-seller, *The X-Files* racks up Emmy awards, while the latest incarnations of *Alien* or *Halloween* (along with their barely distinguishable kin) fill the local multiplexes. Trying to understand the renewed popularity of various occult genres, one must bear in mind that they do far more than arouse terror. For the occult is also an ironically comforting experience insofar as it is always about mastering the unknown, controlling the uncontrollable, attaching a shape and an identity to formless and nameless fears. And it is little wonder that the first hour of an occult movie is always far more frightening than the second, and the vague intimations of an alien presence on a spaceship far more unsettling than the slime-dripping monster that belatedly rears its ugly head. For horror cannot be vanquished until it is seen and comprehended. Unseen, it is uncontrollable. The final victory over an occult terror signals therefore not only the hero's but also our own vicarious (and temporary) mastery of terror.

At the same time, however, the occult does more than assuage our own personal fears. It also operates on a broader cultural level, as a way of dealing with certain anxieties that we, as a nation, harbor. And in attempting to understand why the nineties have borne witness to a resurgence of the occult, I am tempted to read our monsters allegorically, as the materialization of new anxieties. In the wake of the Cold War, the geopolitical equilibrium of forty-five years has given way to a more unpredictable world order that has seen a proliferation of limited and local wars, and increasing alarms about the spread of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Confronting these developments, we Americans, in seeing the alien queen or Godzilla killed off, can imagine our triumph, however provisionally, over our own alleged enemies—be they Saddam Hussein, Fidel Castro or the next dictator du jour.

The recent occult revival may also represent the flip side of a new wave of spirituality that is linked to the New Age movement. For the past ten years have seen the burgeoning of a multibillion-dollar industry of services and products that betray what trend spotters call a spiritual renaissance, as manifested by a rekindled interest in Asian philosophies and religions, meditation, alternative medicine, twelve-step programs and various religious fundamentalisms. During a period of doubt and insecurity, when there seems to be such a hunger on the part of so many to believe, the new spirituality confirms the existence of a benevolent higher power, while its complement, the occult, imagines that power to be more terrible than benign. The appearance of ghosts, angels and

monsters in a wide range of cultural productions thus functions ironically to confirm that there is an order to the universe and a meaning to life and death. It suggests there are patterns and moments of clarity in human history. It proves there's someone out there who cares.

While this renewed popularity of both the occult and the spiritual is useful in explaining a surge in population of theatrical ghosts, spirits function rather differently on stage and on screen. For while there are undeniable similarities between theatre and film, the two occupy very different cultural niches. Tony Kushner and Wes Craven may use the same devices but the different media guarantee that these devices will produce different meanings and effects. It is important therefore to consider the relative cultural positions of theatre, on the one hand, and film and television, on the other.

Perhaps the most obvious distinction between theatre and mass culture is the former's considerably higher admission price. A ticket to Broadway or a regional theatre can cost up to ten times the price of a movie ticket or four times that of a month of cable TV. Surveys, not surprisingly, have shown that most regular theatregoers have far more disposable income than the average moviegoer. Theatre's costliness means that it remains a more specialized art form and its audiences (like those for many independent films) are often well-educated and highly professionalized spectators. They pride themselves on their taste for work that is by and large more aesthetically adventurous, confrontational and politically liberal than Hollywood's product. They go to the theatre, in other words, because it is more likely to tackle serious social issues in serious ways. (The exceptions to this pattern are the megamusicals and dance spectaculars which, delivering a sumptuously wrapped package, appeal to a wider audience than most so-called straight theatre and provide, essentially, a more classy—and live—version of mass culture.)

Popular movies like *Titanic* (as well as more modest efforts like *Forrest Gump*), although relying on tried-and-true formulas and old-fashioned plots, have come in recent years increasingly to depend on special effects. Computer-generated images and sounds allow filmmakers to guarantee that their product will be bigger, shinier—and, most important, newer—than anything that has come before. Theatre, in contrast, remains curiously wedded to the past. Not only is it one of the oldest performing arts, but its legacy seems far grander than its somewhat precarious present state. Most regional theatre companies anchor their seasons on the classics—from Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams, Ibsen to Rodgers and Hammerstein—while Broadway has been deluged over the past decade by so many revivals that the Tony Awards have had to invent new categories for them. At the same time, the

American theatre has not become, as most opera has, merely a museum in which the classics are annually trotted out in fancy dress.

The lifeblood of theatre remains new plays, plays that give relatively knowledgeable audiences an opportunity to see debated, and to debate themselves, important social issues. The vitality of social drama does not mean that Brecht's activist (and revolutionary) theatre is alive and well and living in America. But it does mean that theatre remains a forum for the examination of often difficult and contentious issues. For example, racist institutions, sexual violence, homophobia and even the workings of capitalism are interrogated more openly and vigorously in theatre (and in independent film) than in mass culture.

At least since the 1930s, with the Federal Theatre Project and the Group Theatre, and continuing with the development of Off-Off-Broadway in the 1960s, the stage has been defined as a critical and oppositional force in American culture. And the most honored and well-known playwrights—from Williams, Miller and Albee to Kushner and Vogel—have invariably acquired their renown in part by challenging received opinions. The relatively oppositional positioning of theatre, moreover, together with its status as a public forum, has enabled a number of playwrights to become forceful public advocates and intellectuals, penning opinion columns and op-ed pieces and speaking out against various attempts to curtail civil liberties and freedom of speech. Given this history, it is little wonder that conservatives in Congress have targeted the National Endowment for the Arts for extinction and that theatre artists in particular, especially the so-called NEA Four (Holly Hughes who is interviewed in this volume, Karen Finley, John Fleck and Tim Miller), have been caricatured as the wanton and indecent destroyers of what pass, in some quarters at least, for traditional American values. And while Congress has yet to extinguish adventurous and daring art in this country, the decline in public funding (combined with the clamor of the Christian Coalition and other right-wing activists) has intimidated some theatre companies into designing more conservative seasons.

Given theatre's historically oppositional footing, it is unlikely, it seems to me, that ghosts and the occult function on the stage simply to comfort the spectator and reinforce the status quo. (Even in mass culture, this process of reassurance is complex and uneven insofar as no occult film is ever able to put completely to rest all the demons it has raised.) But before analyzing exactly what ghosts enable a playwright to do, I want to consider theatre as a unique medium, since it is quite literally haunted in a way that film and television can never be.

For theatre is distinguished from mass culture by more than its pen-

chant for social criticism. It is also the most literary of the performing arts and plays have long (and somewhat misleadingly) been considered a branch of literature. Despite the high profiles of certain directors and designers, playwrights and their plays are usually taken to be the generative forces behind most all theatrical productions. Performances may be evanescent, but the playwright's written word is imagined as a kind of time capsule, a tomb in which are interred both his or her own ideas, predilections and emotions and the remains of a vanished time and culture. (It is little wonder that the citizens of the fictional Grover's Corners include a copy of *Our Town* in the cornerstone of their new bank.)

If the playtext is indeed a kind of memorial, then theatrical performance must be akin to awakening the dead. For both performing and reading are ways of remembering; they jog the memory and help restore what has been lost. But if performance is an act of remembering, it must also remember what in effect was never there. For in bringing a written text to life, performance always reveals that the text is incomplete, that it is composed of what are, in effect, dead words. Yet as a form of resuscitation, it must revivify this incompletely realized artifact in relation to the desires, fantasies and beliefs of the playwright—which can be endlessly hypothesized but never fully known—and to those of the living actors, designers and director.

Performance based on a written text thus always (and uneasily) occupies two historical moments: the moments in which it was written and in which it is performed. Negotiating between past and present, theatre is always about not the coincidence but the gap between written text and performance, writer and director, character and actor. Theatre, in short, is always about the impossibility of representing what was never fully there in the first place. For performance is always in thrall to a written text that is not quite alive, yet not quite dead. Film may be haunted by the absent actor whose luminous reincarnation fills the screen, but theatre is haunted by the absent playwright whose text functions as a kind of ghost, mediating between death and life.

Given the status of the dramatic text as a memorial, an incomplete project, a ghost, it is little wonder that the theatre, from Greek and Renaissance tragedy to Japanese Nō, has long been linked to the occult and populated by ghosts. Actors are alive on the stage before us, but they are of necessity only standing in for those imaginary beings who, like the ghost of King Hamlet, vanish before we can touch them. As Mac Wellman's *Crowbar* so powerfully suggests, every performance, like every theatre building, is haunted by what has come before, by the ghosts of characters and actors who have trod the boards. Entering a suburban multiplex, we are swept into the future, dazzled by technology,

computer animation or, at the least, the play of light on a brilliantly blank screen. But entering a theatre, either a Broadway house or a repertory theatre whose walls are invariably dotted with photographs and posters from previous productions, we walk into a past that is haunted by the spirits of dedicated, hardworking and sometimes inspired artists. And despite recent advances in sound and lighting technologies, theatre remains curiously antitechnological, a place for those who do and those who act—in the broadest sense—a site for remaking and reimagining the self. For if film is about technology and plotting, then theatre is about character, about the richness of a human subject about whom one fact is indisputable: he or she at some point is going to die. And in commemorating this mortality, each theatrical performance also silently acknowledges its own evanescence, the fact that it is a unique and fleeting occasion that can never be repeated. Like Hamlet, it always dies at the end of the last act.

At the close of the twentieth century, as the American theatre has tried to carve out a space for itself distinct from film and television, it has become the place where we meet both our own past and that of our culture. For it is my contention that ghosts are so important on our stages because they are a point of intersection between memory and history. Memory, on the one hand, is usually understood to be spontaneous, a part of lived experience. Connecting us with the past, it fills us out. It gives us identity. It is alive, immediate and concrete. It is communicated through the body, through gesture, words and rituals. Memory is in our blood, in our genes. History, on the other hand, is assumed to come to us from outside. It is constructed through cultural narratives we read or watch or listen to. Even our own memories become history only when, in effect, they are no longer ours, when we meet them again in someone else's stories. For no matter how vibrant or how densely populated by the sweating, teeming masses, history always has something vaguely abstract about it.

The theatrical ghost is a figure uniquely positioned in relation to both memory and history. As a token of memory, the ghost is intensely personalized, emanating from and materializing characters' fears and desires (and playing off of our own as well). For like Uncle Peck or Yachiyo, the ghost returns almost ritualistically to tell characters (and audiences) what they know but would rather forget. It is thus a concrete manifestation of fears and desires that, because they have never been resolved, literally haunt a character. For the ghost traditionally is a tortured soul who has not yet found peace but who walks the earth seeking satisfaction. The ghost, in short, is unfulfilled and only appears to those figures who are themselves unfulfilled. For the ghost is always the token

of an intensely personal loss, a loss so great or so painful that one is loath to acknowledge it. And coming to peace with the ghost means coming to terms with this loss in such a way that it is transformed, as if by sorcery, into a kind of profit. Thus, *How I Learned to Drive* is about learning that what has been lost can never be struck from one's memory, that L'il Bit must live always with the unexpectedly comforting reflection of Uncle Peck in her rearview mirror. It demonstrates that Peck, like all ghosts, is also her own reflection, a figure who has taken root inside her and yet stands apart, watching her from a distance.

If history is understood as a chronicle of struggles among nations, peoples and classes, then the theatrical ghost is also a historical figure. For it is the product not only of personal memory, but also of an interplay of social, political and economic forces. The ghost may not be that of a celebrated public figure, but it nonetheless serves as a representative and reminder of the skirmishes that constitute history, skirmishes, for example, between parents and their rebellious offspring or between Hasidic Jews and Afro-Caribbeans in Crown Heights.

Insofar as each skirmish has a winner and a loser, then the ghost must be seen as a casualty of history. For it is usually numbered among the losers. It may not imagine itself a victim but its refusal to die, to disappear, leads one to suspect that it has in some way been wronged or oppressed. Thus, for example, the spectral figures of Yachiyo and The Foundling Father are the spirits whom the victors would rather forget. *Ballad of Yachiyo* resurrects a young woman who has committed suicide to illustrate the tragic effects of the sexual double standard in a small Japanese-American community. And *The America Play* calls up a black Abraham Lincoln stranded in The Great Hole of History to represent the legacy of slavery that continues to haunt American society. Both these oppressed spirits roam the earth because they cannot be consigned neatly to the past. Rather, they are the sign of the interpenetration of the present by the past, of the fact that we still live with the demons, spirits and ghosts of those persons and oppressive social institutions we thought we had put behind us.

Located on the threshold between two worlds, the ghost is a token of the fact that society lives in all of us and that we are both its reflections and its makers. It thereby ends up, perhaps surprisingly, breaking down the distinction between memory and history. Or more precisely, it represents the occasion for the transformation of memory into history, the individual into the collective and the particular into the universal. It demonstrates that what is memory for some is history for others. For as we watch other people remembering, the struggles in which they participate and the society in which they are forced to play their parts are



illuminated and clarified. We see their defeats reimagined, if not exactly as victories, then at least as spurs to rethink and reclaim their losses. We see memory itself become a kind of phantom, the illusion produced by individual consciousness in thrall to History.

Living as we do in a uniquely forgetful culture that regards last month's headlines as dusty chronicles, the theatre provides a way of *re-mem-bering*, of literally piecing together what has been lost. For the American theatre is haunted in so many ways: by its own glorious past, by the culture of which it is a part, by the written texts of vanished playwrights and by characters who are in turn stricken with memory. It is haunted by the fact that it is no longer a central feature of American culture. As so many plays by the playwrights in this volume suggest, the theatre at the end of the twentieth century is also haunted by the idea of America, by the ideal of a nation founded on the glorious principles of freedom and equality. It is haunted by the sixties, the last truly progressive and utopian era—one through which most of the playwrights lived and whose dreams continue to inspire them. Yet a mere glance at the recent history of this nation reveals that these utopian promises have consistently and brutally been betrayed. For America itself is haunted quite specifically by the disillusionment and the losses of the past twenty-five years: by the growing disparity between rich and poor, black and white; by the backlash against feminism and affirmative action; by the increasing power of social and fiscal conservatives; and by the gradual whittling away of possibilities for and incitements to change. Taking up these betrayals, theatre (as *Angels in America* so vividly demonstrates) analyzes them even as it works to keep alive the utopian dream. It is, in a sense, haunted by an America that has yet to be born.

Despite their utopian character, the ghosts that drift across our stages are in the end only ghosts, that is, a sign of the increasing inaccessibility of a living past. As history has in recent years been displaced more and more by nostalgia—a whiff of the past from which social struggles have been conveniently excised—we can now imagine and experience history only as an intervention or invasion from without, as a ghost which suddenly materializes to confront a frightened and amnesiac population. As if to acknowledge and treat this amnesia, the theatre has for some become a space in which to remember what we have forgotten, and most important, to remember together. For theatre is a communal art form. It transforms an “I” into a “we,” individual spectators into a group that assembles almost ritualistically to commune, to share fears and desires and to work out its anxieties. Unlike the movies, which for most people represent an intensely privatized and individualized experience, the theatre creates, as if by magic, a temporary com-