

Disrupting the Social Script:
The Unwelcome Transgressions of Avant-Garde Performance

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Theatre

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all I must thank my advisor, Marcela Oteiza, who has ceaselessly challenged me to transgress my *own* boundaries, both artistically and academically. I also owe a tremendous debt to Claudia Tatinge Nascimento for introducing me to the academic study of theatre and for showing me the value of discipline. I would be lost if not for her mentorship. I extend my deepest gratitude and affection to Charles Lemert for nurturing my theoretical growth through pushing me to think the unthinkable, and for providing me a home away from home. My awe, admiration, and respect belong to David Jaffe and the entire *Big Love* ensemble, whose unbridled faith and trust have shown me the true power of collaboration.

Special thanks to my family for their unconditional love, and especially to my parents for supporting my dreams and expecting my best at all times. Many thanks to my dear friends and collaborators—whose gentle prodding has challenged my creativity and thought—for their companionship during hardships and celebrations. If not for Lily Whitsitt and Jess Chayes I might never have found the joy of experimental theatre, and for that I owe them a great deal. Thanks to Second Stage for fostering a trusting and supportive artistic atmosphere where theory can readily be put into practice. Finally, my deepest respect goes to all artists who use their craft for the betterment of the world.

INTRODUCTION

At its core, theatre is the art form of social relations, a constructed venue to analyze the themes and ideas of the human experience. One might expect theatre to be a continuously evolving medium, responding and adapting to the fluctuations and trends of society. However, theatre evolution has always remained conspicuously slow. Given theatre's connection to the larger social world from which it takes its vocabulary, themes, and ideas, we may apply a sociological lens to identify the mechanisms that resist theatrical change. Indeed, sociological theories of informal interactions will prove a valuable tool for the analysis of formal performance. Theatrical performance allows society to conceptualize and identify the basic emotional and philosophical themes of the human condition. The entirety of its power to move and affect people lies in the persuasiveness of the parallels between formal productions and the performativity of mundane and informal social relations. Spectators in both environments make use of the same cognitive tools—contextualizing language and imagery within their larger understanding of a social vocabulary—to decode the information presented to them. Herein lies the similarity between theatrical productions and the performativity inherent in all social interactions. Although performativity is integral to everyday relations, the theatrical nature of these interactions remains mostly invisible to its participants. I propose that theatre is the art form through which society identifies and externalizes the themes and questions from the world of everyday social relations, making it a particularly fascinating venue for exploring, studying, and experimenting with the human social condition.

Sociologist Erving Goffman first emphasized the link between theatre and everyday life in the mid-twentieth century, arguing for the use of a dramaturgical perspective to understand the everyday world. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he described *performance* in broad terms as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (15). Goffman believed that individuals took a level of care in crafting their appearance in everyday interactions comparable to the efforts that actors take in constructing characters for the stage. He proposed that “the term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself... delineated in terms of approved social attributes” through direct communication with others (*Interaction Ritual* 5-6). Individuals understand one another’s *face* in precisely the same way that they perceive characters in formal performance. He went on to argue that individuals depend predominantly on the opinions of others to inform their self-identity (*Interaction Ritual* 6). In other words, judgments made during informal interactions mirror the audience’s judgments of characters portrayed on stage. Given the high stakes of social encounters, it follows that participants craft their behavior in social encounters based on their expectations of the event, and thus great care goes into constructing accurate “performances.”

Goffman’s theories had a profound impact on the field of sociology, exposing the discipline to a new method for analyzing seemingly inconsequential social relations. However, his groundbreaking dramaturgical perspective remains incomplete. While his model begins to link everyday interactions with those that are more formalized, it overlooks many revealing parallels between the two sets of phenomena. Because his writing only provides examples from everyday life, he

neglects the value of relations that are more easily observed in the controlled environment of formal theatrical production. Sociologists and theatre practitioners can delve further into the comparisons between theatre and social performativity by applying Goffman's dramaturgical lens to formalized theatre; the principles it exposes about the human condition can then be related to other social relations. Indeed, the fundamental truths that theatre reveals about the human social condition can be externalized to all performative and interactive encounters.

In contemporary society, spectators and performers alike often treat theatre as a product for public consumption, looking for productions that will provide the most pleasure. This approach reveals the spectator's expectations and wishes for theatrical performance, seeking entertainment over artistic impact. A careful analysis of twentieth century theatre in the United States reveals sharp differences between the ways in which *mainstream* and *avant-garde* performances impact their spectators. Mainstream theatre traditionally reaffirms their audience's expectations through the performance. Because its ability to please and entertain spectators relies on the stability and predictability of their expectations, the mainstream thus naturally avoids change. The avant-garde, on the other hand, challenges its spectators to reconsider their assumptions and expectations about the world by transgressing social norms. This dichotomy embodies the tension between the forces of stability, as represented by the mainstream, and change, represented by the avant-garde. I will examine the various American avant-garde movements to identify the shared principles that connect them, revealing general truths about the human social condition. Conversely, mainstream society invariably resists change in support of established principles—as has been theorized by numerous social thinkers—though it is not always successful.

The public response to transgressive force ranges from outright rejection to total appropriation, revealing the complex interaction between mainstream and avant-garde performance. These analyses can be readily applied to the world of everyday performativity to gain insight into the nature of social change and the public reception of transgression. I will argue that the resistance to change is related to theatre's unusual position as both artistic discipline and social interaction. Indeed, although theatre's artistic potential lies in its perceived connection to daily life, the heightened stakes and added stressors that accompany that association are what simultaneously limit its ability to influence the society on which it reflects. I will argue that unless transgressive movements foster a strong and supportive artistic community, they cannot withstand the marginalization of mainstream society. The disintegration of the American avant-garde—caused by its eventual distancing from community-oriented values—represents this danger. For approximately two decades, there have been no large-scale avant-garde movements; the resulting absence of any transgressive force has left the theatrical landscape largely unchanged. Unchanging artistic conventions can undermine the entire medium, which must continuously adapt to the changing cultural landscape in order to maintain its artistic relevance. However, given the social conditions that enabled previous avant-garde movements to thrive, present-day political discourse appears conducive to the creation and sustainability of new vanguard movements. Contemporary artists must study and adapt to these conditions in order to restore the avant-garde's transgressive influence on American society.

CHAPTER I

THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE: A LEGACY OF TRANSGRESSION

The history of theatre in the United States reveals a tension between performances that conform to widely accepted and expected norms of presentation, and those which consciously and aggressively challenge those standards. *Avant-garde* movements have emerged in response to various political environments and in rejection of traditional theatrical practices. The term *avant-garde* was originally the French military term used to describe the soldiers on the very front lines of the battle, charting the course for the rest behind them (Aronson 6). This terminology seems especially appropriate to experimental artists, whose efforts reject antiquated tactics in order to address the unique needs and desires of the present. Though the outward appearance of each avant-garde movement varies substantially, each one exists in close relationship with the rest, embodying similar fundamental principles which ultimately distinguish them all from mainstream performance. In order for a movement to be considered avant-garde, it must break with past artistic conventions; transgress its spectators' expectations; and express the latest in contemporary philosophical and sociological thought. The evolution of the American avant-garde can be understood in relation to these characteristics. Because all of these are founded in the notion of rupture and transgression, a theatrical movement may only be considered avant-garde for a limited period of time, for its novelty wears off as soon as it is assimilated into the larger theatrical landscape. Furthermore, the principles behind the theatrical avant-garde have important implications beyond the world of formal theatrical performance. Indeed, these same principles can help to inform the role of transgressive performance in all kinds of social engagements.

American avant-garde period began formally in the 1950s, several decades after its European counterpart; it lasted into the 1980s, when it quietly receded from the social landscape. In his book *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, theorist Arnold Aronson argues that before American society could conceptualize performance that transgressed social norms, it first had to establish a general understanding of what that culture was. Because of the country's relative youth, it took several years to define an identity separate from the one associated with British Colonialism. This search for a cultural identity took many forms, as Aronson explains:

Art, most definitely including theatre, in the nineteenth century became a primary tool for a century-long project to create the image of a nation. In a sense, the culture was not a *reflection* of the society; it *created* the society and continued to do so into the twentieth century (12).

The institution of Broadway in the late nineteenth century marked the first indication that American culture had defined its relationship with theatrical performance. Indeed, Broadway theatre combined entertainment with the country's capitalist principles—the artistic landscape became informed by the economic rationale of theatre production. As such, Broadway performances specifically catered to the whims and desires of the general public so as to maximize the demand for ticket sales (11). Known as *commercial theatre*, productions created under the Broadway umbrella assumed a range of theatrical forms, though it was, and continues to be, dominated by two styles in particular: musical theatre and psychological realism.

It was precisely the wish to reject the latter style that inspired Julian Beck and Judith Malina to create the Living Theatre. The two met in the early 1940s and

bonded over their disappointment that American theatre had become divorced from politics (Aronson 51). Together they took several steps to distance themselves from Broadway conventions. In an essay titled *Madness and Method: Before Theatricality*, Judith Rodenbeck writes of the Living Theatre's "attempt to create a 'poetic' theater that would subordinate realism to the exploration of language" (65). They committed themselves and their company to rebelling against Realist stage practices that dominated mainstream theatre of the time, actively rejecting the Aristotelian unities as the guiding principle for the dramatic structure. In distancing themselves from Broadway's economically-driven style of theatre production, Beck and Malina challenged the assumption that performances needed to be extravagant in order to be worthwhile (51). They fundamentally rejected illusion as a theatrical device, preferring lofts and apartments over formal theaters. This experimental aesthetic informed their rejection of formal actor-training for its blind adherence to outmoded tactics (Beck *Life* 32).¹ Whenever physical movement was demanded from the piece, the performers would create their own expressive vocabulary. Unlike the majority of its contemporaries, the Living Theatre distanced itself from standard definitions of beauty, and instead reimagined those standards within the context of its performances (Beck *Theandric* 76).

On the "front-lines" of theatrical performance, avant-garde artists must in some way reject aspects of past performance as an effort to lead the form in a new direction. Although every instance of vanguard performance necessitates a rejection of mainstream principles, it may simultaneously reject the principles of other avant-garde artists as well. For instance, Realism—which the Living Theatre found so objectionable—was itself an avant-garde movement in nineteenth century Europe.

Indeed, as I will discuss later in this chapter, postmodern avant-garde performers of the 1970s and 1980s rejected the Living Theatre's community-based tenets, just as the Living Theatre rejected Realism. Of the Living Theatre's numerous accomplishments, perhaps the most important was its bold rejection of the practices and principles of commercial theatre, which set the tone for several decades of experimentation on the American stage. Though several of the Living Theatre's productions challenged conventional theatrical practices, perhaps none was more transgressive than *The Marrying Maiden* by Jackson MacLow. Performed in 1960, the play was inspired by the musical composition of John Cage. The structure of play was based on the notion of chance, which starkly resisted the Aristotelian assumptions of narrative. According to Aronson,

Although the play bore a structural resemblance to a conventional play—there were named characters, dialogue and scene structure—it proved baffling for anyone looking for narrative, theme, or just traditional dramatic coherence.

Rather, it might be termed a concrete poem for the stage (62)

They continued to perform *The Marrying Maiden* despite its poor reception by spectators and critics. The general sense from the ensemble was that they had stumbled onto a fascinating new way to approach theatrical performance and they believed it warranted further exploration (63). The results of these experimentations soon evolved into Happenings, a theatrical movement aimed at fully incorporating the spectator into the performance, which Michael Kirby described as “a purposefully composed form of theatre in which diverse alogical elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in compartmented structure” (21).

Performed in 1959, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* by Allan Kaprow inaugurated this kind of performance (Aronson 64). Kaprow's art embodied many of the Living Theatre's principles, but took some even further. Like Beck and Malina, Kaprow fundamentally objected to deceptive staging and focused instead on manipulating the performer-audience relationship through honest and transparent means, making the event more closely resemble informal interactions. Indeed, although his performances required a great deal of preparation, the actions were largely "generated" in the moment (Rodenbeck 57). This chance-based approach made each performance unique and unrepeatable. Aronson writes that these tactics fundamentally challenged American society's understanding of theatre:

Unlike the absurdist dramas, which remained within the framework of Western drama and thus pushed gradually at its confines, *Happenings*, at one stroke, shattered all rules and expectations. *Happenings* framed the materials of the everyday world and emphasized their 'everydayness.' (68)

18 Happenings in 6 Parts blurred the line between performer and spectator by including the audience as an integral part of the piece's visual and artistic composition (Rodenbeck 57). The experience depended entirely on the participation of the spectators, confounding the distinction between spectator and performer. Furthermore, the visual aesthetic reinforced the unvarnished honesty of the interactions through incorporating found objects, further complicating the boundary between art and reality (Aronson 65). Kaprow's experiments transformed the avant-garde community by inspiring groups like the Living Theatre to reconsider their methods of engaging spectators.

From the time of its foundation, the Living Theatre demonstrated the first fundamental characteristic of avant-garde movements: identifying contemporary theatrical conventions and consciously denying them. The style of the Living Theatre's and Kaprow's performances challenged cultural assumptions not only in its use of new visual vocabulary, but also with its unvarnished acting style. Furthermore, these artists were noteworthy for the ways they actively rethought the artistic creative process, most notably with the use of chance. With such an unfamiliar narrative structure, they forced themselves to find new creative ways to communicate with their audience. The group's schism from Realism and commercial production marked the beginning of a prolonged period of experimentation in United States theatre.

Aside from rejecting theatrical conventions, another decisive avant-garde trait is the ability to create performances that transgress the audience's assumptions of a theatrical event. The example set by the Living Theatre helped foster a supportive atmosphere of experimentation within the American artistic community of the time, as new experimental groups explored and tested the boundaries of performance. Among the numerous performance groups that emerged then, the Open Theatre was particularly notable for its goals of challenging their spectators through the content of their social and political critiques on American culture. Despite enthusiasm within the artistic community for new and challenging performance, it quickly became clear that the spectators of avant-garde performance did not always endorse transgressive works with a corresponding fervor. However, and perhaps more importantly, the Open Theatre focused their efforts on exploring what constitutes the theatrical through the nature of the play's presentation, reconsidering the audience-performer relationship as well as the relationship between performer and character.

An offshoot of the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre was founded by Joseph Chaikin—himself a member of the Living Theatre—in order to explore alternative methods of theatre production and training. Chaikin was primarily concerned that the Living Theatre’s neglect of rigorous actor-training limited the group’s artistic possibilities, so he created his own venue for exploring new methods of acting (Aronson 86). Although primarily a space for artistic exploration, the company also created public performances, though not with the frequency expected of most companies. Largely concerned with establishing a creative community, the Open Theatre devised its performances through improvisation rather than using a script. For the first time in American theatre, the script was not treated as the primary source of material; playwrights entered the process only as editors of what the actors created in rehearsal (89).

Although the Open Theatre was founded primarily to explore actor training, their explorations deeply affected the subject matter, structure, and staging of their performances. Indeed, in *The Serpent*, the company’s most celebrated performance, the playwright’s task was “not so much to ‘write a play’ as to ‘construct a ceremony’ which can be used by the actors to come together with their audience,” a framework that facilitated improvisation while retaining an abstracted structure (van Itallie *Playwright* ix). The inherent variability of the performance was merely one method of distinguishing the performance from traditional expectations. In juxtaposing comic and tragic elements, *The Serpent* transgressed the audience’s expectation for stylistic unity, creation of an unsettling environment where assumptions were challenged (Aronson 90). Furthermore, the play used fragments of common cultural stories in a modified order. In *The Serpent*, they applied non-linear storytelling in their

recreation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy Jr.; however, the performance was successful in affecting its audience in numerous ways:

Clearly it was not simply the thematic content that disturbed audiences; after all, many plays had questioned contemporary mores, social structures, and political systems. Traditional political drama that attacked the status quo through dialogue and rhetoric could be easily applauded without upsetting the complacency of a spectator sitting comfortably in the dark. But in the new productions, audiences were confused over the relationship of the performers to the content—were these actors or were these people on the stage part of some cult, religion, or belief system that, if allowed outside the walls of the theatre, would be a dangerous influence? (96)

Indeed, the performers executed actions impossible to “fake”, such as appearing naked on stage and performing sexual acts, thus actively engaging the physical body of the actor while simultaneously embodying a constructed character (van Itallie *Serpent* 82-3). This confounded the spectators’ perception of the separation between performer and character, the fictional and the real, making them unsure of how to interpret the events portrayed before them. In *The Serpent*, the Open Theatre identified social taboos and consciously exploited their ability to create discomfort as a means of bringing attention to the spectators’ social limitations. This consequently forced them to confront their restrictive assumptions regarding the event.

Typically, the cultural necessity for vanguard performance comes from the perception that contemporary tactics are inadequate for connecting with an audience. Accordingly, embodying cutting-edge social philosophies is the third and final characteristic common to all avant-garde movements. New movements emerge in

response to the mainstream's inefficiency to adequately reflect the perpetually changing cultural landscape. Maintaining avant-garde status depends on continual transgression, which in a rapidly evolving society is a difficult role to maintain. Whenever possible, movements adapt themselves in order to successfully reflect social changes. If the ideals of a movement no longer reflect contemporary social thought, then it can no longer be considered avant-garde. These values must represent a rupture with mainstream thought, which mirrors the specific transgressions against the individual spectator, but in a larger social setting. The ruptures against the mainstream therefore become abstracted and enter the social dialogue as a battle between social values. Every noteworthy avant-garde movement was successful in embodying its ideological principles beyond the content of the performance. The rise of "environmental theatre" in the late 1960s is particularly remarkable for the way that its philosophical principles informed its artistic ones. The emphasis on community was reflected not only in the relationships between the performers, but also helped define new ways of conceiving of the theatrical space and the performer-audience relationship therein. The heightened awareness of ideology serves as a necessary demonstration that it is a feasible alternative to the status quo.

In 1967, scholar and practitioner Richard Schechner led an acting workshop to explore the actor-trainings of the Open Theatre and Grotowski, which prompted him soon thereafter to found a performance ensemble called the Performance Group. Together, the group created what became known as "environmental theatre," a style of performance that implicates the audience within the performance space. The group operated primarily as an ensemble with a strong emphasis on community and egalitarian creation. With the help of Schechner's strong foundation in performance

theory, the group explored the ways that they could bring their philosophical principles to all levels of the ensemble's creative work, in its interpersonal interactions, its creative process, and its final artistic products. Rather than maintain the traditional division between performers and spectators, the Performance Group sought maximize the spectator's physical and psychological involvement. In their primary performance space—a converted New York commercial space called the Performance Garage—the Performance Group's scenic designer, Jerry Rojo, obliterated the division between performance-space and audience-space by creating a single space for all of the participants (Aronson 98-9). The different playing areas were designed specifically to facilitate audience participation and interaction with the performers and the spectators were given the freedom to move wherever they wished within the Performance Garage.

The company's community-driven initiative informed numerous other aspects of their theatrical events. Spectators were treated as collaborators, which heightened their degree of artistic importance in realizing the aesthetic product. In a 1976 interview in *Conversations on Art and Performance*, Rojo explains how the group's emphasis on straightforward staging influenced the physical environment:

If you're in traditional theatre you have to create the illusion that space is endless whereas environmental theatre is a theatre of immediacy. You accept the space for what it is, with its special limitations. You don't try to distort the space. You try to exploit the reality of that space. (qtd. in Marranca and Dasgupta 386)

The Performance Group's production of *Dionysus in 69* was a first attempt at reenvisioning the theatrical environment. Spectators had a remarkable amount of

active involvement in the performance. Because of their inexperience in such social environments, there were no established social norms to dictate their behavior.

Despite the occasional unproductive response, overall the performances successfully guided spectators to reconsider their participation in the theatrical event, with implications for the larger social world. Without necessarily embodying any sort of polemic social message, the Performance Group understood their work as political because to encourage direct participation from the general public “is to demand changes in the social order” (Schechner 82). In this sense, the theatrical space became a metaphor for all social negotiations.

With the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s, the social landscape shifted its emphasis on community to one of isolation and individualism. Given the connection between performance and philosophy, this had important implications for the nature of the art that was produced. Artists whose work reflected this cultural shift discarded the sociopolitical values of the 1960s, creating what is popularly known as the formalist strain of the American avant-garde. The rise of “identity politics” reflected the growing perception that communitarian principles created an atmosphere of hegemony. As Aronson argues,

The civil rights and feminist movements, for instance, once supported by a broad coalition, now gave way to more militant approaches to change and to a growing emphasis on separatism; exclusionary tactics replaced inclusionism as the respective movements sought to establish their particular identities.

(144)

Postmodern theatre does not seek to portray a single truth, marking an ideological shift that impacted the avant-garde in two important ways: first, it removed the

importance of ensemble-created performance, and second it led to the divorce of art from politics. Solo-performance took the place of tight-knit collectives. In accordance with postmodern values, these productions avoided making general statements on the broader society, focusing instead on what was unique to the individual performer (107).

As early as 1968, Richard Foreman's work is evidence of such cultural shift in the United States. However, the foundations of postmodernism were laid several years earlier by the performance artist and filmmaker Jack Smith. Indeed, no single artist was more influential during those years than Smith, whose 1962 film, *Flaming Creatures*, challenged artists and spectators all over the world to reconsider their artistic expectations. Smith's film incorporated explicit sexual imagery, prompting many cities to ban the film on the grounds of public indecency, even prompting a congressional hearing on censorship in the arts (Aronson 117). In addition to its explicit sexual content, *Flaming Creatures* completely rejected the notion of narrative composition, instead using an eclectic collage of images and sound fragments to tell a narrative through emotional associations rather than through character development (117-8). The principles explored in Smith's films—"rupture, discontinuity, disjuncture"—served as a foundation for American post-modernism, and heavily influenced the art of decades to follow (121). Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, theatrical productions continued to reflect the American public's disinterest in broad social issues. Formalist artists—Richard Foreman among them—explored the human condition as a solitary and fractured experience. In *Presence of Mind*, Bonnie Marranca writes that through the presentation of intensely personal and autobiographical stories, Foreman limited the spectator's ability to find broader social

truths in his art (15). She argues that Foreman was especially noteworthy for his emphasis on “perception as the subject of art and to audience emotion in the theatrical experience, and [his] subsequent attempt to break down into the smallest elements aspects of art and experience” (15). Indeed, Foreman was at the forefront of the artistic movement to politicize personal experience, which led to the ultimate devolution of the avant-garde community.

Finally, in 1981, Schechner famously declared the end of the American avant-garde. Given the power of commercial theatre, the avant-garde had been ill-equipped to survive without a strong supportive environment of artists and spectators. Many scholars—Aronson among them—believe that the decline of the avant-garde is related to the erosion of collective creation and the rise of “identity politics” (144). The avant-garde’s decline illustrates its fragility in contemporary society. Lacking a cohesive group to reinforce the transgressive behavior, the avant-garde was unable to maintain its cultural visibility in rejection of the status quo. Although a handful of once transgressive performance groups such as the Living Theatre continue to perform today, their impact on society has largely deteriorated. Because transgression is so closely linked to a sociopolitical context, the impact of any given avant-garde movement can only remain applicable for so long. Artistic movements can lose their influence for a variety of reasons: through its assimilation into the mainstream and subsequent loss of its transgressive novelty, or through dramatic shifts in the political landscape leading to the movement’s inability to continue to reflect its social environment.

Despite the decline of a strong American avant-garde in recent decades, a few significant artistic works have aggressively challenged the hegemony of mainstream

performance. Two prominent examples include the writer and performer Reza Abdoh and playwright Charles L. Mee. Both artists began their careers during the 1980s and their works fit the principles of a “theatre of fragmentation.” Despite fundamental differences in their approaches towards transgressing mainstream values, their performances share remarkable similarities. Indeed, they both appropriated initially-unrelated texts and images directly from popular culture and recombined them into a fragmented commentary American society. Abdoh’s art responded directly to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which prompted the artistic community—whose HIV rates were significantly above the national average—to reconsider the divorce between art and politics. Though he himself was HIV-positive, his work did not take the postmodern tone of the formalist avant-garde; rather, he was able to find an audience because of an observable cultural dissatisfaction with postmodern politics, which by itself could not accommodate the desire for community. Abdoh and his company, Dar a Luz, did not follow in Foreman’s steps of focusing solely on individual perspective. Instead, they aggressively confronted their audience through forcing them to discuss socially taboo matters that are naturally avoided. Born in Iran and raised in England, Abdoh assumed the position of a cultural outsider reflecting the horrors of American culture back to its inhabitants. His most famous performance, *The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, violates the comfort of its audience through its vivid presentations of grotesque behavior. For instance, within the first five minutes of the play, a character urinates into a metal bucket in front of the audience (Abdoh 51). Soon thereafter, the silence is broken with the voice of a woman off stage, repeatedly begging, “Fuck me now” until “*Orgasmic noises*” are heard (Abdoh 52-3). Abdoh aggressively confronts his audience with unpleasant images. In addition to the play’s

violent content, the structure consists of a series of short vignettes, juxtaposed and contrasted with one another. As Abdoh explained: “there are characters and there’s a narrative, but it’s continuously being disrupted and you’re continuously questioning who is who, who is what, where.... That’s really another way to throw into question the whole notion of character and plot” (qtd. in Féral 19). The abrupt transitions between the play’s transgressive moments limit the continuity of the plot in reflection of general social patterns, rather than relate specifically to the individual characters.

The work of Charles Mee also marks a similar return to community-based values of performance. The success of his work depends on the spectators’ renewed interest in theatre with a political purpose, however Mee was not closely linked to the AIDS movement which helped prompt the cultural shift. Instead, the content of his work is far more refined than that of Abdoh. The images and themes of his plays are often violent, but they are rarely, if ever, grotesque. Nonetheless, his plays rupture violently with traditional expectations of structure, creating jarring contrasts from scene to scene. In one of his most celebrated plays, *Big Love*—a modern-day reimagination of *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus—Mee adapts the characters of the classical Greek play to represent completely fragmented perspectives on the concept of love, each one with equal value.² In removing the protagonist, he creates an environment where the disparate positions contribute to a larger community representative of the fractured social world—a place where the intense individualism of the postmodern world and the emphasis on community come together. Songs, dance, and movement sequences are interspersed with the action as equal to the experience of the play, creating jarring contrasts from scene to scene. The opening stage directions read:

and—to set the scene for what kind of play this is, that it is not a text with brief dances and other physical activities added to it, but rather a piece in which the physical activities and the text are equally important to the experience—
(C. Mee)

The play calls for each moment of the play to be performed with complete commitment to the unique and fragmented vocabulary that defines it. Accordingly, each scene establishes norms and expectations that are transgressed in the very next moment, forcing an atmosphere of perpetual discomfort onto the spectators. Mee's transgressions are directed primarily towards challenging conventions of play structure, whereas Abdoh focuses his critique towards his spectators. Because the topics of the performances are less viscerally challenging than those of Abdoh, Mee's performances are more tolerable to the average spectator. Despite the similarities between the two artists, they have received startlingly different receptions by mainstream and artistic communities around the world, which I will examine in Chapter III.

The theatrical avant-garde plays an integral role in society, compelling the spectator to reexamine her surroundings and her understanding of self. Through rejecting past conventions, exploring philosophical principles, and forcing spectators to acknowledge their assumptions of what makes uncomfortable, transgressive performance is a powerful force for social change. Aronson identifies the parallels between the specific manifestation of vanguard performance and its larger social context:

[From] the very beginning—from the instant that the military term became descriptive of artists seeking new paths in the cultural landscape—it carried with it a sense of missionary zeal as well as political and sociological implications. Because of the self-referential and formalistic tendencies of much of the avant-garde throughout its history, it is often forgotten that initially the avant-garde was meant to transform society, that it was seen initially as a utopian program for creating an idealistic world for the future. (6)

There is a fundamental connection between theatrical performance and the social world at large. In practical terms, theatre can serve as a controlled venue to explore, experiment, and identify the characteristics that dictate everyday social behavior. Indeed, the three defining principles of the avant-garde can be identified in the world of informal social relations as powerful forces for social change. Given the intensity of avant-garde's transgressive components, one would think that it would have an entirely transformative affect on society. However, both everyday exchanges and avant-garde performances that embody these principles are received by the majority of spectators with discomfort, hesitancy, and sometimes, even violent rejection. Nonetheless, it is certain that the avant-garde provides the fundamental pressure for change, and the theatrical and social landscapes could never evolve without it.

CHAPTER II

THE BARRIERS TO THEATRICAL CHANGE

Despite the avant-garde's challenges of the validity of social norms, its overall impact on society is rather modest. Indeed, traditional conventions of theatrical performance remain surprisingly stable in the face of these confrontations. Mainstream performance can be understood largely in opposition to the avant-garde, reinforcing expectations to create a pleasurable and comforting experience for its spectators. Performers and spectators typically use economic terms to frame mainstream performance—epitomized by Broadway—as a consumable product, which in turn creates an expectation of performance as pleasurable. A number of social theorists—most notably Erving Goffman and Emile Durkheim—have speculated about the existence of a general human fear of unpredictable social encounters, which may help explain the public's aversion to theatrical change. A theoretical analysis of the history of theatre in the United States exposes a number of motivations that compel American spectators and performers alike to engage one another through traditional means, thereby maintaining the theatrical encounter as safe and predictable as possible. In examining the barriers to change, we learn that unpredictability can lead to extreme discomfort. The natural fear of instability makes spectators insulate themselves from social ridicule. Drawing on social thinkers to explain the desire for stability in all social relations, I will argue that performances must demonstrate a certain amount of comforting behaviors in order to please its spectators, further illuminating the complex interplay between transgressive and supportive performance in defining theatre's role in society.

Economic considerations influence artists to create performance for the purpose of public consumption. In an essay titled “The Possibility of a Different Kind of Theatre”, theatre theorist Eric Bentley outlines Broadway’s careful and calculated relationship with change. The article—calling for a different kind of artistic environment where economic considerations do not determine theatre production—laments:

It will not be easy, for the whole weight of the entertainment industry goes into the effort to repeat former successes rather than create new ones. To duplicate, not originate, is the aim and method. (Bentley vii)

In Bentley’s opinion the most profitable theatrical enterprises in the United States do not focus on creation, but rather on recreation in an effort to piece together a money-making formula for producing hits. The result is a generally uniform field, battling for who can best embody these time-honored production principles (vii). As a result, productions are often chosen based on their appeal to mainstream values. Nowhere is this more apparent than on Broadway, where there has been a recent trend of adapting widely exalted works from other media into musical performances. Indeed, Disney has successfully adapted several of its best-selling movies such as *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* into multi-million dollar Broadway franchises. Because of this mentality, financial security has become the defining factor in selecting and creating mainstream performance.

Mainstream performance can often be best described as entertainment, providing a distraction from the discomforts of the social world. According to Broadway’s principles, Bentley proposed that “A production has merit in the degree of its violence—the violence of its attack on the nervous system.” (Bentley vii-viii)

Indeed, in reviewing productions, members of the press frequently use words like “stunning, electric, over-powering, staggering, high voltage, ‘knocks you out of your seat.’ ... and the merits of a softer piece can be measured in buckets-full of tears” (viii). Those are the standards by which mainstream productions are measured, and by which outliers are mainly excluded. However, the nature of this violence is completely disconnected from any political implications. Instead, it serves as ventilation for emotions while removing any potentially uncomfortable political associations. Underlying this struggle for who can best recreate the successful components of performance in commercial theatre is the indelible effect of capitalism on production process. The very institution that allowed for the proliferation and establishment of theatre into American culture is simultaneously what limits its growth.

However, Bentley does not construe mainstream theatre as completely static, as production techniques often transform over time. According to Bentley, the nature of voluntary change in mainstream performance never challenges traditional values and thus requires no readjustment on the part of the audience. Here in the United States, where there is an enormous cultural emphasis on technological advance, the nature of the evolution tends to coincide with technological developments. Once the rules of mainstream performance are established, artists can compete over who can best realize them. The changes that occur are connected to the artist’s ability to modernize the audience’s expectations. As society changes, mainstream theatre must readjust and modernize its methods for presenting the same expectations in order to maintain the perception that it is still a suitable form of entertainment. Spectators are far more willing to attend performances that entertain rather than ones that challenge

them; thus, the majority of theatre becomes resistant to change in order to reinforce the status quo. Accordingly, mainstream performers use theatre primarily as a distraction from the social world, pacifying the audience's anxieties in a protected environment. In the instances that change does occur voluntarily on the part of mainstream practitioners, it is done under the premise of updating techniques to reflect better the existing values of its spectators. These forces contribute to an environment that violently avoids and denounces transgression in order to please and comfort its audience.

The desire for stability is not limited to formal theatrical performance, but instead pervades our attitudes towards all social encounters. The emotional risks of engaging in social encounters were of prime importance to Erving Goffman, who believed that the individual's self-identity is comprised of the opinions formed by others during these encounters (*Interaction Ritual* 6). The constitution and understanding of one's self therefore depends entirely on the views of others, providing a strong incentive to strategically manage exchanges. Since it is difficult to control the behavior of other participants, individuals tailor their own behavior in hopes that others will view them positively. In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman writes that "Social life is an uncluttered, orderly thing because the person voluntarily stays away from the places and topics and times where he is not wanted and where he might be disparaged for going" (43). Indeed, the pressure for social encounters to reflect positively on their face leads people to look for situations where they can be assured that their current understanding of themselves will be supported. That is, there is a general aversion to placing oneself in unpredictable situations which may unintentionally depict the participant in a negative face. Being in an unfamiliar

situation can be a painful and paralyzing experience because it forces the individual to redefine him in light of potentially new and ego-dystonic information.

In light of this, the individual's predictions and expectations of social encounters play an influential role in deciding which encounters he chooses to engage in and which ones he avoids. I define *expectations* as the anticipated scripts of a given social encounter. Individuals exert a significant amount of mental energy to predicting these expectations in order to minimize the potential for discomfort. Goffman writes that an individual's feelings about an exchange depends entirely on whether his expectations were fulfilled:

If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to "feel good"; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will "feel bad" or "feel hurt." (*Interaction Ritual 5*)

Expectations help individual determine which social exchanges they will engage in and what behavior will be appropriate. When people find themselves in situations where the rules of interaction are not well-defined, they face a greater risk of people misinterpreting their actions. Participants become more guarded during unexpected encounters, treating them with great care and anxiety because of their inability to successfully prepare for them. The individual will deem an interaction too risky when not enough information is known, and thus will avoid participation whenever possible.

Emile Durkheim relates to the comfort inherent in the status quo to the pain of redefining personal identity. He believed that regardless of personal lifestyle, most people experience similar levels of happiness. In *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, he proposes that "A genuine regimen exists, therefore, although not always legally

formulated, which fixes with relative precision the maximum degree of ease of living to which each social class may legitimately aspire” (249-50). In his opinion, pleasure is not directly dependent on financial or material means, but on the ability to fulfill the arbitrary expectations and desires one learns from society. The difficulty of social change lies in its requirements that people readjust their social status and, in turn, their desires. During this period of adjustment it is difficult for people to experience pleasure because, although their desires are changing, they can not fulfill their old desires and have not yet adjusted to their new ones. Therefore, social change is continuously avoided by the general public in the interest of self-preservation and maintaining a consistent level of pleasure.

According to the principles I have identified from the writings of Goffman and Durkheim, theatre audiences seek out encounters that will leave their sense of self unchallenged. Given Goffman’s assertion that other participants influence the individual’s self-identity, attending public performance that fulfills expectations strengthens the individual’s commitment to those values with the implicit support of the other participants who endorse the theatrical event with their presence. Given its foundation in reinforcing status quo principles, the institution of mainstream theatre is a tangible manifestation of this abstract desire for stability. Therefore, performances can only transform their audience through breaching their expectations of the dramatic event, forcing them to renegotiate their perception of the social situation and how they relate to it.

Static social relations allow individuals to more accurately anticipate the outcomes of interactions, and maintaining the status quo requires frequent reaffirmation of their expectations. As a constructed social encounter, theatrical

performance impacts its audience by establishing connections to the performers on stage. The emotions it can evoke are as wide-ranging as in informal encounters—including pleasure, anger, arousal, sadness, etc.—and each genre frames these emotions differently. Comedy's association with the notions of shame and ridicule makes it particularly pertinent in discussing the barriers to social change. A great deal of effort goes into maintaining the status quo in order to sustain the applicability of well-developed expectations. When an individual miscalculates what is appropriate in a social engagement, he faces a high-risk environment where he is directly exposed to social criticism. Comedy formally embodies the fear of public ridicule that is present in everyday social interactions. Unlike ordinary social relations in which participants face potentially threatening interpersonal encounters, comedy eliminates a great deal of risk for the spectator by maintaining an environment where criticism is directed towards others. When spectators join in as accomplices with the comedians in the diminishment of others, they usually remain safe from ridicule. Comic performance identifies preexisting, commonly-held values in reaffirmation of the participants' identity through the ridicule of those who do not conform.

Historically, comedies have emerged as a means of reinforcing society's dominant values. Various forms of comedy such as slapstick, screwball comedy, parody, and comedy of manners, create a division between the audience and the "misfits" portrayed on the stage in an attempt to capitalize on the misfortune of others. These are just a sampling of the numerous forms that comedy can take; what unifies them is that they all, in some sense or other, defy the general expectation regarding how individuals will behave in specific social encounters. All forms of

comedy portray the failings of an individual or group to uphold the standards of the spectators. Perhaps the most straightforward example is screwball comedy, in which actors engage in unusual and surprising behavior. The humor lies simply in the random defiance of the typical social script. Other examples are more concrete in the way they transgress the expectations of the audience. Slapstick comedy accomplishes this goal by depicting individuals on the receiving end of physical pain. These participants tend to be male, which directly contradicts the expected depiction of men as strong and invulnerable. Accordingly men are more likely than women to find humor in these scenarios; given their similarities to the subjects of ridicule, men might feel an increased pressure to clearly distance themselves from that depiction. Furthermore, people find parody humorous for the way that comedians identify and hyperbolize the ways in which the subjects of ridicule are “out of face”. In comedy of manners, characters are mocked for their ignorance of the rules of etiquette. Even romantic comedy is geared towards identifying embarrassing blunders that people commit when consumed by love.

Using Goffman’s theory of social identity, the comic moment can be understood as one where the legitimacy of an individual’s face is challenged. In these situations, the subject of the joke need not necessarily agree that he is “out of face”; rather, the judgment is passed solely on the part of the spectators, who use the social attributes that constitute their self-identity as the a standard against which to measure. In each comic moment, humor is defined in relation to the participants’ common social attributes, which become the standard with which judgments are made. Laughing in response to the failure of others to uphold these standards thus reaffirms each participant’s identity. Although comedy usually targets a specific individual or

social sect, there are exceptions. For instance, individuals in informal relations often laugh at their own wrongdoings, which generally signals either that the severity of the blunder is not too grave, or that the subject of ridicule feels confident that the bond with the other participants can withstand the embarrassment. Occasionally, the subject of ridicule chooses to laugh at a situation in an effort to “save face”; she uses laughter to align herself with those who are judging her, a retroactive demonstration that, despite her transgression, she shares their values.

Indeed, the institutional aversion to change would be less successful if there were no perceived costs to appearing “out of face” in front of others. The fear of ridicule encourages individuals to maintain order and avoid transgression. At its core, the institution of comic performance epitomizes this fear. Most individuals do not question the benefits of comedy in their daily lives; it is a source of pleasure and detachment, an escape from the challenges that continually confront them. However, the implications of laughter are often overlooked. The general fear of ridicule propels individuals to tailor their social interactions with precision on every level of public life. Comedic performance—an institution based entirely on identifying and mocking the idiosyncrasies of others—illustrates the potential for all social beings to be the victims of public ridicule and the tactics of self-preservation that are used to avoid it.

Without denying the impact of other psychological forces (e.g., love) to create pleasure, laughter in the social arena comes predominantly from *schadenfreude*, the German term for joy at the misfortune of others. Imagine a hypothetical situation where a man finds himself witnessing a staged comic “sketch” of a woman displaying emotion at a seemingly banal situation. If he believes that women are overly prone to emotional outbursts, then this dramatization will give him pleasure that other

people hold the same opinion. For the spectator, laughing is a public expression of approval for the type of criticism being levied in the comedic moment. When the spectator is alone, watching a performance at a distance—on the television, perhaps—the resulting laughter comes honestly based on the individual's approval of the material. However, there is an added layer of complication when an event takes place in a public venue, in the presence of other spectators. In such instances, the spectator experiences additional pressures to laugh at the material if others are laughing. If he does not publicly express his approval of the criticism—and in turn his claim to the positive social values it reinforces—he faces the possibility of ridicule in the same manner as the subject of the joke. The same pressures are at work when the spectator is alone watching a program on television filmed in front of a live audience, or even with added laughter. These situations provide social cues for understanding when to laugh.

In addition to its descriptive implications, participating in public laughter also has prescriptive consequences for one's behavior and identity. Group laughter reinforces the identity of those who share the same social values through providing reassurance; reinforcing confidence in the characteristics that unify them; and most importantly, establishing a sense of community. Spectators thus seek public comedies for their ability to please spectators and strengthen social bonds. This creates a significant capital incentive for artists to produce comic performances; however, the motivations for doing so extend beyond monetary gain. In addition to providing social benefits to the spectators, comedic performance has the ability to reinforce a the comedian's identity. When an audience laughs, they do so in communal rejection of the person being ridiculed, and express solidarity with the

social values that constitutes the comedian's face. Even comedians who become the joke by *performing* the negative characteristics in question can derive tremendous pleasure from entertaining the audience, a skill that usually draws social praise.

As I have revealed through my analysis of comedy, theatre is one process through which society solidifies its stated values and mainstream theatre embraces these principles most of all. Theatre is an art form where an artificial social event is presented to an audience in order to contextualize the values that society expects them to exhibit in their everyday interactions. With the rise of capitalism, theatrical production has become increasingly influenced by the economics of consumption, and today the two are so intertwined that it is difficult to imagine them as separate. In the current system, spectators choose which shows, if any, they want to attend, a seemingly natural shift that has drastic consequences on the discipline. As a result, both the content and the form of performances are driven by the desires and anxieties of the public, pacifying their insecurities instead of questioning conventional thought. Artists wishing to achieve social change must not only challenge their audience in the content of their work, but also challenge the very understanding of theatre's function in society.

CHAPTER III

REACTIONS TO TRANSGRESSION

The question of whether avant-garde or mainstream performance is more successful in driving artistic creation remains largely unsettled. In order to affect meaningful social change, transgressive performances must compete with the comforts of the mainstream. In part, this is due to the fact that avant-garde performance invariably has conflicting demands on its audience. As a form aimed at transforming society, the avant-garde can only accomplish its goals through creating discomfort in the very people who must reconsider their assumptions towards performance in order to realize change in the larger social world. Each transgressive scenario asks the same fundamental question: how do spectators respond to social interactions that violate their expectations? Responses to transgressive performance vary greatly depending on the sector of the population, the nature of the transgression, and the period of observation. The material for analyzing such situations has been informed not only by scholarly theatrical studies, but also by important social theorists who have written about transgression in everyday social life. Of these theorists, Harold Garfinkel is renowned for conducting groundbreaking social experiments during the 1960s. Analyzing avant-garde performance alongside social theory will help us understand the mechanisms for coping with transgressive behavior. These responses can be categorized based on their proximity to the theatrical event into one of three main categories: the immediate, the period immediately following the event, and the long-term. Together, the reception of works by Charles Mee and Reza Abdoh demonstrate these types of reactions. Given the resemblances between their theatrical styles, the public reacted similarly to both

Abdoh and Mee during the theatrical event and in the period shortly thereafter. However, the careers of these two artists took radically divergent paths. A comparative analysis of their work illuminates the capacity of the mainstream to heal itself in the face of transgression; despite its outspoken resistance to change, it is in a state of constant evolution. Through this analysis I will identify the spectator's comfort as the definitive characteristic dictating the public's response to change.

In all social relations, participants remain largely unaware of their expectations unless they are unfulfilled. Interactions that follow traditional scripts are rarely scrutinized and reexamined, and thus remain largely invisible to the participant. Garfinkel's experiments examined the aspects of everyday life that are "seen but unnoticed," testing the assumption that the majority of social expectations remain undetectable to the individual as long as they are fulfilled (36). In *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, he writes:

Procedurally it is my preference to start with the familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation and to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained. (38)

Focusing on the instances when social norms are violated, Garfinkel's discussions and experimentations in *breaching*—the act of intentionally transgressing the

expected script for a social encounter—help to identify expectations by calling the participant’s attention to their absence.

Garfinkel’s work dealt primarily with the fine line between theatre and everyday performativity, carefully crafting the behavior of the experimenters in order to analyze the response of the other participants. With this approach, Garfinkel confounded the subjects’ ability to discern formal performance from social interaction. During the 1960s, a performance group called the Diggers famously explored these same principles, blurring the line between art and daily life through performing spectacles in public spaces. In *The Theater Is in the Street*, Bradford D. Martin writes that these San Francisco artists were primarily concerned with “emphasizing the collapsing of boundaries between art and everyday life, between performer and spectator that typified this aesthetic” (86). The Diggers sought to promote the values of the city’s counterculture movement through the creation of an alternative social order. Their performances served to demonstrate flaws in the social order while embodying the values of utopian society. One of their most notable performance exercises, the *intersection game*, “tied up traffic at a busy intersection to dramatize the pedestrians’ right to cross the streets” (87). The performances demanded that spectators weigh the demands of their daily lives against the general convention of respecting performers. In calling forth incompatible social scripts, the Diggers forced their spectators to experience the discomfort and uncertainty of acting without any means of gauging the appropriateness of their behavior in the eyes of the other spectators.

Given the powerful barriers to social change discussed in Chapter II, the conventional values of mainstream culture inevitably remain the norm unless

explicitly challenged during a performative exchange. In breaching traditional expectations, avant-garde performance forces spectators to identify their assumptions of the theatrical event. This opens the possibility for them to reexamine the validity of those claims alongside new information presented during the encounter. Given society's aversion to social change, the presence of conflicting social scripts creates discomfort through breaching spectators' assumptions, thereby reinforcing the desire to preserve stability and predictability. In constructing his performances, Reza Abdoh used transgression as a transformative tool in both the form and content. As Aronson explains, "Dar a Luz, the company Abdoh founded in 1991, implicated [its audience], making them physically and psychologically complicit in the action and thus forcing them to rethink a wide range of social attitudes" (196). Artists can only control the precise moment of transgression, which marks the beginning of the potential for social change—after that, the power rests entirely in the hands of the spectators.

Once the breaching has occurred, society can respond in a number of ways. In the moment of performing transgressive behavior, the spectator will inevitably feel a certain level of discomfort. Plays by Abdoh and Mee are especially notable for their ability to disturb its audience. Abdoh's plays "often created profound mental discomfort as repulsive ideas and actions—racism, homophobia, rape, murder, etc.—were presented in the context of rich, sensuous, highly theatricalized imagery and action" (Aronson 196). Typically the unease is not strong enough to make him remove himself entirely from the encounter, largely because it would represent a breach of conventions that might make others look unfavorably towards him. The spectator must weigh his discomforts against the social ramifications of leaving the

performance space. Additionally, the discomfort of the transgression can sometimes get overpowered by the fulfillment of other expectations. In *Big Love*, for instance, Charles Mee couples disturbing imagery of self-flagellation with the pleasurable sounds of classical music, to force discomfort onto its audience in a controlled and restrained manner. In one scene, the stage directions describe a character performing repeated self-flagellation:

she is throwing herself to the ground over and over,
 letting her loose limbs hit the ground with the rattle of a skeleton's bones,
 her head lolling over and hitting the ground with a thwack,
 rolling over, bones banging to the ground,
 back to her feet,
 and throwing herself to the ground again in the same way over and over
 music kicks in over this—
 maybe J.S. Bach's "Sleeper's Awake!" from Cantata No. 140

Three women perform this violence while aggressively reciting text in character. For the spectator witnessing a performer harming herself, the separation between performer and character is temporarily erased. In a book titled *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, Erica Fischer-Lichte describes a 1903 production of Sophocles' *Electra* which incorporated physical violence in a similar manner as *Big Love*. The performance reportedly left the audience without a frame to interpret the action, and "spellbound them in a way that they were seemingly incapable of distancing themselves from its immediate impact, which whipped up their nerves and, at the same time, completely wore them out... caught in a kind of hypnotic state" (6-7). In analyzing the first-hand accounts of the spectators, Fischer-Lichte deduces that the activation of the

performer's physical body transformed her portrayal in the eyes of the audience; "the stage events were not experienced as an illusion of a fictional world", nor did they belong to the world of reality, but existed somewhere in between (6). The reality of the physical pain immediately heightens the legitimacy of the performers' words. Mee's use of music, on the other hand, helps mitigate the transgressive force of the event, decreasing the likelihood that spectators will become overwhelmed by the action. The inclusion of a pleasurable element grounds the spectator, providing partial validation of his preexisting analytical frame. Although Abdoh's and Mee's plays intentionally disturb its audiences, individual spectators naturally protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed.

Indeed, participants cope with discomfort by looking for ways to channel their discomfort—into boredom, anger, frustration, etc.—thereby invalidating its transgressive effect. Spectators commonly use laughter to channel their discomfort, which often takes the form of awkward laughter. For instance, on March 8, 2008, I attended a production of Charles Mee's *Paradise Park* at the Signature Theater in New York. During the performance, one of the actors left the stage to directly interact with the spectators. As the performer squeezed his way through the audience, the spectators in his path manifested their discomfort by giggling as he passed by them. Additionally, audience laughter indicates the ability of transgressive performance to induce discomfort on a large scale. As an example, television actor Sacha Baron Cohen has received acclaim for his commitment to violating social norms under the guise of a naïve foreign traveling reporter, Borat. His performances rely on the audience's ability to find humor in the unusual and sometimes disturbing behaviors of his interview subjects. However, in certain instances the breaching

behavior illuminates aspects of the unsuspecting participant that are so troubling for the spectator that they become incapable of transforming their discomfort into laughter. Discomfort can only become comic when there is sufficient confidence and solidarity within the group of spectators to comfortably reject the behavior depicted on stage, which implicitly necessitates a recognition or assumption on the part of individual spectators that the rest of the onlookers share their discomfort.

Once the performance concludes and the spectators reintegrate into society, they must recontextualize their experience in relation to the everyday behaviors. In recounting the performance to others, spectators typically disregard the potential benefits of theatrical discomfort, instead limiting its relevance by categorizing it as unique. Considering Durkheim's belief that pleasure is rooted in the successful fulfillment of one's desires, a spectator's opinion that the experience was disagreeable is sufficient to deter other potential participants from attending. In denouncing the transgressive event, the spectators apply standards of mainstream entertainment as the primary lens for interpreting the experience, which inevitably reflects negatively on it. However, individual opinions of the event play only a relatively small role in assessing the merit of a transgressive work. Rather, theatre reviews serve as the primary social mechanism responsible for determining cultural sentiment towards performance. Reviewers traditionally utilize mainstream standards for judging the quality of performance. Indeed, the commercial success of reviewers depends on their ability to internalize the artistic values of their audience, and thus are often the bearers of status quo standards. In the critical reception of Mee and Abdoh, reviewers privilege the mainstream over the avant-garde, validating and fortifying the public's anxiety towards change.

In the *New York Times*' review of *Quotations From a Ruined City*, a play written and directed by Reza Abdoh, Ben Brantley's analysis implements traditional principles to an untraditional performance. Predictably, he commends the performance for the characteristics it shares with mainstream theatre. The review commends the performers for being "highly disciplined" and "admirably energetic" and states that the piece demonstrates Abdoh's capacity for "great visual eloquence" (Bentley). On the other hand, his review of the performance itself was a forceful rejection of the piece and its theatrical goals. Brantley concludes by saying:

For all its studiedly cryptic lyricism and splenetic energy, "Ruined City" is essentially a weary checklist of atrocities couched in a fragmented treatise on enduring inhumanity. It is perhaps best perceived as an animated Bosch-like painting, dense with vivid, grotesque detail. Whether it bears 90 minutes of scrutiny is debatable.

Interestingly, the majority of Brantley's review denounces the two most transgressive elements of *Ruined City*: its fragmented structure and its abrasive content. According to Garfinkel's theory that breaching helps uncover what constitutes the mainstream, Brantley's response and denunciations reveal his theatrical preferences. Furthermore, through manipulating language, Brantley appropriates neutral terms such as "fragmentation" that Abdoh might use to describe his own work, but imbues them with a negative connotation. As a result, Brantley effectively devalues the form of the performance in categorical terms, simultaneously endorsing mainstream practices.

In order to receive favorable reviews, performances must usually exemplify tried-and-true principles of mainstream production and content. *August: Osage*

County by Tracy Letts provides a counterpoint to the reviews of Mee and Abdoh. In December 2007, *New York Times* reviewer Charles Isherwood wrote:

A fraught, densely plotted saga of an Oklahoma clan in a state of near-apocalyptic meltdown, “August” is probably the most exciting new American play Broadway has seen in years. Oh, forget probably: It is, flat-out, no asterisks and without qualifications, the most the most exciting new play Broadway has seen in years. Fiercely funny and biting sad, this turbo-charged tragicomedy—which spans three acts and more than three blissful hours—doesn’t just jumpstart the fall theater season, recently stalled when the stagehands went on strike. “August” throws it instantaneously into high gear.

Not only did *August* clearly align with Isherwood’s values of mainstream performance, but he was also pleased that it resembled a past form. It was the first successful family drama written in the style of Sam Shepard and Eugene O’Neill in several years, a form that seemed to have declined recently. Accordingly, Isherwood’s excitation goes beyond merely reinforcing status quo principles; his enthusiasm for the revival of a genre in decline can even be seen as a step backwards in the growth of American drama.

The true measure of the impact of transgressive performance on society is how it fares over the long-term. The extensive similarities between the theatre of Abdoh and Mee ensured that both artists initially experienced similar receptions from the mainstream. Because both artists use fragmentation, collage, transgressive content, and sensory stimulation, the nature of their cultural rejection is quite similar. In each case, the pieces create an uncomfortable environment for their audience, and consequently make them susceptible to criticism and rejection based on their

differences from the mainstream. The two artists affect their audiences differently; whereas Mee's critique identifies the problem of abstract social norms, Abdoh directs his transgressions directly at the spectators, making it harder for them to accept join his cause, which exists in opposition to most individuals. However, the artists differ tremendously in the ways that they were perceived in the long-term. Even as audiences continue to find his work to be transgressive, Mee has enjoyed significantly more public recognition and esteem than Abdoh. This might be related to the fact that Abdoh's work emerged as a reaction to the specific time period of the 1980s, and thus is less pertinent today. Abdoh's premature death from HIV at the age of 32 may also have contributed to this disparity; however, the differences between their transgressive styles would have likely been enough to differentiate them, even if Abdoh had not passed away.

Abdoh's theatrical transgressions were far more aggressive towards the individual than Mee's, which may have contributed to the disparity in their public reception. In regards to cultural response to transgression, Abdoh's career demonstrates the power of the mainstream to suppress transgression by labeling it illegitimate. Additionally, the subject matters of Mee's plays were widely accepted social topics that can be discussed in all social situations, including love, war, seasonal change, and a number of Greek adaptations. Conversely, rather than discuss larger topics, Abdoh specifically centered his plays on various socially taboo topics such as "racism, homophobia, rape, murder, etc." (Aronson 196). The fact that Abdoh was the only person to direct his work—whereas Mee's work has been widely produced by many directors—may also have limited his public visibility. Additionally, when working with Mee's plays, directors play a large role in

determining the nature and degree of the transgression of each staging. In an article published in *The Drama Review*, Mee's daughter Erin—an acclaimed director in her own right—elaborates:

In fact, in *The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem*, my father gives up his authority. *The Imperialists* calls for two performance pieces to be inserted between the three scenes he has written. He leaves it to the director to decide who will “write” 40 percent of the play... all his plays are collages in that he takes text from all over the place and inserts them into his plays; then he extends the idea of collage to include not just appropriated text, but songs, dance, performance art, and images from painting. (E. Mee 85)

This format is easily editable and thus can be personalized with relative ease.

Abdoh's work, on the other hand, is intensely personal to him and thus cannot as easily be adapted by other groups. Although Abdoh's ideas and practices were groundbreaking and transformative for those who saw his performances—landmarks in the history of experimental theatre—the violence of his transgressive style will likely impact his memory. Finally, it is possible that although Mee's plays are transgressive in their own right, when contrasted with those of Abdoh they appeared far more socially palatable than if he had emerged as the sole artist in that vein.

Mee's widespread success can be understood in terms of generational change, which occurs when a particular avant-garde style becomes emblematic for the young generation of spectators and performers. The new form grows with that generation and become an inextricable part of their cultural identity. It is precisely this mechanism that established *RENT*, a musical by Jonathan Larson from the 1990s about the devastating impact of HIV, as the quintessential Broadway musical for an

entire generation. However, there has been no single play that has vaulted Mee into mainstream popularity. His claim to generational change is more subtle and diffuse. Although his works are produced by major avant-garde groups such as the SITI Company, the true potential of his legacy lies in his connection to the youth of the theatre culture. Through affecting a generation of college students, his notoriety will likely grow as those students rise to mainstream and avant-garde prominence. Indeed, generational change is enacted as the young generation transforms the mainstream through slowly assimilating into it and eventually controlling it. Those of the older generations must choose between conforming to the new standards or being pushed aside for their outmoded taste. It is precisely the same mechanism that the mainstream uses to exclude avant-garde performance, but with new standards and a new population dictating the terms of conformity. As older generations pass away, any history of resistance is immediately forgotten and what was once considered avant-garde becomes mainstream to all future spectators. At the same time, as even older transgressive movements are forgotten, their tactics become novel to new generations, who can reconceive those practices in a contemporary framework.

Although social transformation often pits populations against one another, theatrical change needs not always to come about antagonistically, nor must the process be overtly painful for the spectator. Indeed, social change can also be understood in terms of what I will call *trait elevation*. Only certain types of movements—those that embody mainstream principles and fulfill the corresponding expectations in every way except for the isolated transgressive component—are eligible. The avant-garde element can become associated with the traditional and cherished principles in the eyes of the spectator. The ultimate effect is one that

elevates the transgressive elements into the mainstream. In order for trait elevation to succeed, the audience must first feel exceedingly comfortable that their expectations for the theatrical event are being fulfilled. Ordinarily, the performance must do an above-average job at accomplishing the mainstream challenges, thereby assuaging the spectators of their anxieties towards the unexpected elements.

There are numerous examples of trait elevation, though few fit the mold quite as well as *In the Heights*, a Broadway musical that opened in March of 2008. Conceived by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also performs the role of the narrator and wrote the production's music and lyrics, *In the Heights* tells the story of a Latino community in upper-Manhattan undergoing gentrification. The performance transgresses primarily with its music style. The show underwent numerous incarnations, from workshops to Off Broadway; but despite its grassroots development the play mirrors Broadway conventions in nearly every aspect. For the *New York Times*, Isherwood writes:

First seen Off Broadway last year, "In the Heights" moves uptown with its considerable assets in place: a tuneful score enlivened by the dancing rhythms of salsa and Latin pop, zesty choreography by Andy Blackenbuehler that seems to put invisible wings on the young cast's neon-colored sneakers; and a stage amply stocked with appealing actors who season their performances with generous doses of sugar and spice.

Aside from those specific transgressive elements, *In the Heights* incorporates nearly every convention expected of Broadway performances, including meticulously choreographed musical numbers, extravagant technical requirements, traditional narrative and plot structure, generally recognizable character types, and a message

that can be appreciated by all individuals regardless of racial identity. Because its mainstream appeal relies on a predominantly non-threatening appearance, it is unlikely that the show would have gained such popularity if it attempted a more serious political tone. Therefore, as an exemplar of trait elevation, *In the Heights* represents a relatively painless readjustment of mainstream expectations. Trait elevation integrates the transgressive components into the spectator's larger assemblage of what can be safely expected during the theatrical encounter.

The divergent paths of Reza Abdoh and Charles Mee demonstrate the capacity for the mainstream to suppress the avant-garde, and the rare ability of transgression to surmount those forces and create change in society. Trying to identify which branch of theater has a greater impact on American society is a largely fruitless endeavor. Both are necessary functions of the social order and can only exist in relation to the other. According to Durkheim, "human passions stop only before a moral power they respect" (3). That statement rings true in ways that transcend Durkheim's original intentions, particularly in regards to the subtle mechanisms of change that comprise trait elevation. If participants feel confident enough in the validity of their frame for understanding an interaction, they can restrain their defensive impulses. Indeed, the comfort of the spectator plays a defining role in determining the reach of transgression. As a result, human beings have the ability to experience trait elevation in all forms of social relations. Abdoh's public reception demonstrates that the stronger the social bonds between the participants, the more willing they will be to withstand the discomfort of transgression. Social change necessitates a codependence between the forces for change that comprise the avant-garde and the reassurance provided by stability in social relations—one side looking past its audience into the

future, and the other addressing them in the present. The result is a constantly evolving mainstream, one that facilitates change, but only insofar as it maintains the integrity and stability of the social order.

CONCLUSION

The recent decline of the American avant-garde has made theatre largely incapable of readjusting its values to reflect contemporary thought, thereby eliminating its transformative power. Unlike the informal social world, which is characterized largely by chaotic and complex interpersonal exchanges, theatrical performances are a distilled embodiment of culture where specific social values are abstracted and presented to an audience. As Harold Garfinkel notes, the majority of our everyday interactions go “seen but unnoticed” (36). Theatre has the ability to highlight the hidden cultural transcripts that are so ingrained in the individual’s expectations that they often remain invisible to the conscious mind. Dramatizing these encounters allows spectators to externalize and observe characteristics of their own face in an environment with fewer perceived risks than if they were confronted directly. Through expanding Goffman’s theories, sociologists can apply the findings of theatrical experiments to help understand the prescriptive influence of other social movements.

The public reception of avant-garde performance is indicative of a general truth about the human social condition: that change rarely happens willingly. As I have shown, there is a fundamental difference between mainstream performances that provide entertainment through distraction from the social world, and avant-garde performances that use the medium as an artistic commentary on social relations, thus provoking new thought and providing perspective. Just as in theatre, there exists a “mainstream” in the everyday performativity of social relations. It is comprised of the social norms and expectations, the interactions that go as planned and do not give individuals cause for reexamination. Although comforting interactions can be

pleasurable for spectators, they preclude any possibility of transformation by reaffirming the values they already possess. In this process, mainstream spectators remain cognitively and emotionally unaware of the powerful influence of the status quo. Accordingly, mainstream theatre is primarily a venue for consolation rather than exploration, a way to pacify the public rather than inspire reflection. Conversely, the avant-garde of everyday social relations is comprised of the purposeful transgressions of social norms: protest marches, sit-ins, public indecency, public art, and any other intentional acts aimed at provoking the onlookers to question the status quo.

Although most observers often resist avant-garde performance, it is truly the lynchpin of social change that allows a reluctant society to progress. Transgressive events have always been at the heart of social change. In forcing people to reconsider their expectations, transgression inspires individuals to reexamine their value systems. Without these acts, the public would remain dormant and complacent to cultural mores, never challenging their merits or envisioning a better order. For transgressive performances to have a sociological impact, the content of their discussions must be externalized and applied to other social situations. In the long-term, postmodernism's emphasis on the individual over the collective effectively disintegrated the avant-garde by isolating its participants from finding solidarity against mainstream forces.

In order to restore its transgressive impact on American society, the twenty-first century avant-garde must return to the idea of community. The avant-garde requires the backing of a supportive artistic community in order to withstand repressive mainstream forces. Recent shifts in contemporary social discourse appear promising for the return of collaborative thought. Charles Mee has already begun this

work by adapting the fragmented postmodern perspective into a collaborative environment, emphasizing the importance of difference in discussion of common themes. In order to transform society, transgressive performance groups must demonstrate these principles in the form and content of the work, and in every manifestation of their interpersonal negotiations. Conventional production practices in which designs are developed in isolation from the rehearsal process are inconsistent with these principles. Just as Mee's theatre rediscovered community through expanding the social frame to represent a larger, fragmented population, performers must similarly expand the scope of their production process by incorporating designers into the creative ensemble. Maintaining each individual's function while increasing group interaction will allow for imagery and action to develop alongside one another.

Working in tandem will give added weight to the content of performance, particularly in relation to social challenges where solutions require each spectator to adjust differently. For instance, as American society addresses the problem of global climate change, respecting individuality in pursuit of common goals will increase the likelihood of change. The avant-garde is now uniquely positioned to transform public discourse in demonstration of collaborative values, through the form, content, and process of their work. When successful, transgressive movements challenge society to reconsider the value of conventions, enabling enormous possibilities for social growth. In reestablishing the lost sense of community and collaboration, the avant-garde can find a contemporary voice and begin to replant its roots in American culture.

NOTES

¹ Beck lists no page numbers in this book; the text is comprised of 123 short chapters. Accordingly, the numbers in the in-text citations reference the chapters, not the pages.

² *Big Love* is only available on the Internet, and thus it is difficult to cite.

For the full text, visit

http://charlesmee.org/html/big_love.html

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