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More Metadrama than Antidrama: Thoughts and Counter Thoughts on Bernd Engler's "Arthur Kopit's *The Hero* in Context"*

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Although Bernd Engler's claim that Arthur Kopit has been subjected to "unanimous critical neglect" is something of an overstatement (admittedly, articles by Gautam Dasgupta, Steven Gale, Don Shewey, and myself may have been unavailable to him at the time),[1] assuredly it remains true, as Engler says, that this playwright's substantial contribution to contemporary American theatre "has not gained the critical attention it deserves" (279). So Engler is to be thanked for adding to the discourse in a thought-provoking manner.

As Engler hints in sketching out the historical context for Kopit's appearance as a kind of *enfant terrible*, the year 1959—with first plays by Jack Gelber and Jack Richardson and Lorraine Hansberry and, of course, Edward Albee—was almost as much an *annus mirabilis* for a rebirth of a liberated—and liberating—American drama (indeed, there had been an earlier rebirth a half-century before with the Provincetown group) as it was for cinema in France with the New Wave directors Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, and François Truffaut. Two of the points in Engler's rapid overview need qualification, however. First, his generalization that "an aesthetics of escapism . . . had been propagated by the Broadway system" (288) is certainly, as he must recognize, overly broad when one remembers such classic American dramas as those he cites in note 2 (289) of his article. Second, Tennessee Williams had hardly "retreat[ed] from the literary arena . . . in the late 1950s" (280); he actually kept writing and saw into production new work, often

*Reference: Bernd Engler, "Antidrama—Metadrama—Artistic Program? Arthur Kopit's The Hero in Context," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 279-90.

experimental in nature though, granted, frequently rejected by popular audiences and critics, almost right up to his death in 1983, including *Outcry* (1973), *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980). But 1959 itself did witness a significant work in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, one of Williams's two or three most metatheatrical plays; and in 1961 came a truly major work, *The Night of the Iguana*, a beautifully written summation of much that had come before.

That being said, Engler presents a refreshingly provocative reading of Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1960), by proposing that it comments on the predicament of the emerging dramatist who suffers an anxiety of influence in the face of "pre-existing texts" or "pre-texts," "try[ing] to overcome the stifling heritage of his predecessors and . . . still in search of his own voice. . . . condemned to endlessly 're-present' the tradition, either by slavishly imitating it or by rebellion against it" (283). According to that interpretation, Albee himself might, in fact, be seen to have written a parallel text to *Oh Dad* in his "Fam and Yam: An Imaginary Interview" (1960).[2] During this slight little sketch, the Famous American Playwright of the post-World War II generation—probably William Inge, one of the "over-psychologizing" dramatists of the 1950s that Engler sees Kopit reacting against—comes face to face with the Young American Playwright of the nascent avant-garde off-Broadway movement, almost certainly a stand-in for Albee himself. The playlet stood as his clarion call for a new American theatre as opposed to the ailing and sickly old one that Albee would take to task in his now-famous essay, "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" (1962).

Indeed, the stated artistic agendas of Kopit and Albee are quite similar. In "The Vital Matter of Environment" (1961), which addresses the interplay between tradition and innovation in drama, Kopit sees as endemic to American theatre both "its inability to assimilate traditions" and "its persistent efforts not to invent." Bearing "little more than superficial resemblance to the society and culture surrounding it" has meant that the commercial theatre here, unlike that of most European countries, "lacked *necessity*" and did not matter.[3] Albee's own stylistically innovative works such as *Counting the Ways and Listening* (1977) and, most recently, *Three Tall Women* (1991) with its postmodernist

second act help belie Engler's assertion that "In the course of the 1970s all the major experimental attempts to create an utterly new theatre had exhausted their creative potential and ended in a return to realistic conventions" (280). Albee states his aesthetic objectives most fully in the introduction to his most daringly anarchic play, *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse Tung* (1968), where he speaks about the dual obligation facing the serious dramatist: "first, to make some statement about the condition of 'man' . . . and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working. In both instances, he must attempt change."[4]

It is precisely on this question of form, specifically on the nature of "antidrama" and Engler's too-easy conflation of it with "metadrama," that I wish to offer some counter notes to Engler and, finally, a counter reading of Kopit's *The Hero*. Drawing upon the definition of "anti-theatre" from Eugene Ionesco's 1958 essay "The Tragedy of Language," Engler considers as "antidrama" any play that parodies or subverts a particular theatrical tradition, in the case of *Oh Dad*, "the entire repertoire of the American drama in the 1940s and 50s" (282). On the other hand, I would consider "antidrama" *not* a parody of any special genre or subgenre of dramatic texts, but rather a subversion of the nature of drama itself as it has been traditionally understood. And in this, I, too, would turn to Ionesco for support, understanding his "anti-play, that is to say a real parody of a play"[5] to mean not a parody of a specific play or type of play but of *any* play generically speaking, or of the elements of drama itself. Then Ionesco's later description of *The Bald Soprano* as an anti-play makes better sense: "the play had movement; actions, although without action; rhythm and development, though plotless; and progression of an abstract kind" (183-84). According to those terms, however, Kopit's *The Hero* would not seem to be antidrama. I would, nevertheless, agree that it is an example of metadrama, although, once again, I find Engler's specific definition of that concept too narrow when he applies it to Kopit's work in terms of "a subversive attack on the preconceptions and ideologies on which most plays written in the vein of the Theatre of the Absurd are based" (285).[6]

Instead, I would consider Kopit's 1964 mime as metadrama because it celebrates the notion of theatre itself as well as the act of going to the

theatre. Engler's observations about the character of The Man, the artist who "creat[es] the illusion of an alternative world . . . . [that] is not at all a representation of a pre-existing reality" (286); about The Woman, "the spectator [who] . . . accept[s] the mere 'As-If' as the real reality . . . . acknowledg[ing] the illusion as the illusion it actually is" (287); and about the nature of "The illusion art can offer . . . as a means of compensation for what cannot be obtained in real life" (287) prove insightful and on-target. Engler's analysis, however, somewhat "silences" The Woman spectator—if I can use that word about a play already, like several of Beckett's, a pantomime. Yet a fuller reading of the play, this time not as about the limitations of art's "illusions [as] counterproductive" to "tak[ing] adequate action . . . in . . . an allegedly hopeless situation" (288) but as about a temporary retreat into art as restorative *before* taking action, largely depends upon her actions.

Kopit's non-representational play begins and ends with a sunrise and sunset that deliberately announce themselves as artificial because the audience witnesses the stage machinery involved: *"The sun is a bright, orange disk which is hoisted by a wire, up the cyclorama"* / *"The orange disk of the sun sets slowly against the cyclorama."*[7] When The Woman enters, she is at first startled by the illusion of reality (the palm tree, the water, the mountain, the lunch spread out on a blanket) created by the hero/artist out of *"nothing"* (82-83). But soon she willingly enters into the play, becoming a full participant in the creative process. Her act of *"smiling"* and offering him half the sandwich, which he stares at *"amazed,"* proves the decisive moment, for afterwards she *"touches . . . and sighs, with pleasure . . .* [and] *laughs warmly . . .* [and then] *They snuggle up to each other"* (84). It is an image of mutuality, of communion, in the face of the void or nothingness beyond the illusion on the painted backdrop. And in that sense, perhaps it is not unlike what Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) are proffered. In fact, their very nicknames, Didi and Gogo—containing as they do nearly all the letters needed to spell "Godot"—could be interpreted as suggesting that Godot will not come, need not come, because he is already here, and he is The Other.

Unlike what Engler claims, the smiles on the Man's and Woman's faces do not become "vaguer and vaguer" (288) as the sun sets. True, *"The*

vague smiles on their faces never leave. Indeed, they almost seem frozen there" as *"Darkness"* descends (84). But isn't that because they now exist in the world of art, which is eternally fixed? Whereas the audience knows, if they are not to atrophy in disuse, that they themselves must leave the theatre, the house of illusions, and go back out into the fluid world of reality and responsibility, rested and illuminated by their temporary sojourn in the restorative realm of art. The great analogue in dramatic literature for our experience of going to the theatre in order to find renewal for more of daily life—which to me signifies and encapsulates what Kopit's *The Hero* is all about—will always be the journey that the characters in Shakespeare's romantic comedies take into "the green world," which, too, afforded a space for renewal in the midst of a strife-torn world.

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NOTES

[1]Gautam Dasgupta, "Arthur Kopit," *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey*, vol. 1, eds. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981); Steven H. Gale, "Arthur Kopit," *Critical Survey of Drama* (English Language Series), vol. 3, ed. Frank N. Magill (Englewood Cliffs: Salem Press, 1985); Don Shewey, "Arthur Kopit: A Life on Broadway," *The New York Times Magazine* (29 April 1984); and Thomas P. Adler, "Public Faces, Private Graces: Apocalypse Postponed in Arthur Kopit's *End of World*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 21.2 (1988): 107-18.

[2]Edward Albee, "Fam and Yam: An Imaginary Interview," *The Sandbox* and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (New York: Signet, 1960) 81-96.

[3]Arthur Kopit, "The Vital Matter of Environment," *Theatre Arts* 45.4 (1961): 13.

[4]Edward Albee, "Introduction," *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse Tung* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970) 9.

[5]Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964) 179. Interestingly enough, in his 1961 essay, "Have I Written Anti-Theatre?" Ionesco echoes both Kopit and Albee: "Every movement, every fresh generation introduces a new style or tries to do so, because the artists are clearly or dimly aware that a particular way of saying things is worn out and that a new way must be sought; or that the old exhausted idiom, the old forms must be exploded, because they have grown incapable of containing the new things that have to be said" (247).

[6]Lorraine Hansberry, in fact, penned a short parodic send-up of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* entitled "The Arrival of a Mr. Todog." For a discussion of that unpublished text, cf. Steven R. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment and Complexity* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991) 155-58.

[7]Arthur Kopit, *The Hero: A Pantomime*, in *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis and Other Plays* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965) 88, 84. Further references to this edition appear in the text.