

Politics, Polyphony, and Pleasure: The San Francisco Mime Troupe's *Seeing Double*

Stacy Wolf

Three passengers are seated in a row on a plane bound for Tel Aviv in front of a lifesize, cartoonish rendition of the plane's interior and other passengers. Two hold their books in front of their faces—a small, collegiate-type white woman reads *The Birth of Israel*, and a burly, bearded white man reads *Gung Ho*. The third passenger, a young black man in jeans and a sweater, sits relaxed, checking out the stewardess and the woman next to him. After a moment, the stewardess, with coiffed hair, lipstick, plastered smile, and mechanical movements, recites the pre-flight liturgy, emphasizing the words "to," "in," and "and" in an almost incomprehensible rhythm. The passengers ignore her, except for the young man, who continues to eye her. The sound of the plane taking off is provided by the onstage band's instruments, and the three passengers, stewardess, and the backdrop all lean back uncomfortably in an imitation of the angle during a plane take-off. The audience laughs in recognition of the exaggerated representation of the airplane routine.

This scene, from the San Francisco Mime Troupe's production of *Seeing Double*, typifies the Troupe's agile presentation of the "real" in a broad comedic style. The play, which was performed at Madison's Barrymore Theatre on October 13, 1990, looks at the Palestinian/Israeli conflict from "both sides" and proposes a two-state solution.¹ Through a comedy of confused identities and scenes that alternate between the homes of the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Mime Troupe represents the seriousness of the conflict through blatant stereotypes that foreground differences while suggesting that the two sides are not that different.

Responses to the play in Madison varied, although many members of the audience commented that they "had a great time," but were "also very upset by it." The play provoked strong thoughts and feelings for many spectators about Jewishness and politics. Someone asked, "Did you think people were laughing because it was funny or because it was a relief to be able to laugh at Jews?" One woman said, "I loved it. Especially the music. And the chase scene was really

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funny." Another woman, familiar with the Mime Troupe's work, felt that "it was much less political than their other stuff." She added, "And the portrayal of women was terrible." Someone else was surprised to learn that the Troupe "jobbed in" the black lead actor, and wondered, "What happened to their company?" Yet another commented, "They were too easy on the Israelis. It's much worse than that."

These comments indicate the variety and complexity of spectator responses to the production. Spectators' responses form one of the texts of/from/about the production, and, as the quotations suggest, their meanings intersect with, for example, texts of spectatorial pleasure, previous knowledge of the Mime Troupe's work, positionalities of gender, ethnicity, and religion, the political historical moment, both in Madison (following a rash of anti-semitic violence) and in the world, and perceptions of reality. As Bennett and Woollacott point out:

The exchange [between reader and text] is never a pure one between two unsullied entities, existing separately from one another, but is rather 'muddied' by the cultural debris which attach to both texts and readers in the determinate conditions which regulate the specific forms of their encounter.²

To read *Seeing Double*, then, requires an exploration of these various intertexts.

In a recent interview, Joan Holden, the principal playwright for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, describes "what my theatre is":

It has to work on the level of mass myth so that someone with no information can enjoy it. It has to have a degree of art to entice the sophisticated theatregoer. It has to have a level of argument that intellectuals can be challenged by.³

Holden's description of the three audience-types—someone with no information (it's not clear whether this means intellectually, politically, or artistically), the sophisticated theatregoer, the intellectuals—opens several theoretical routes. Her assertion that one theatre piece must operate at once on three levels points to Barthes' notion of an open, writerly text. It also suggests, vis-a-vis Volosinov, that one theatrical sign might be read differently by different spectators. Third, it is a reminder that spectators are both textually and socially constructed and that many of their reading strategies are "already in place," externally-formed.⁴ Although several media theories privilege the social construction of spectatorship, in *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, Bennett and Woollacott want to focus on the extra-textual

determinations of reading, particularly on the situationally determined frameworks of cultural and ideological reference which supply the grids of intelligibility through which different groups of readers read and interpret a given text.⁵

Their interest in extra-textuality leads to the concept of reading formations. In "Texts in History," Tony Bennett defines a reading formation as

a set of discursive and inter-textual determinations which organise and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another in constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways.⁶

For Bennett, both texts and readers are always-already activated to be read or to read (respectively) in certain ways. Texts "can have no existence independently of such reading formations," and each reading formation can and does alter the text.⁷

I want to use Bennett and Woollacott's notion of reading formations as a model to look at *Seeing Double*, but with modification. First, Bennett and Woollacott distinguish reading formations from empirical audiences. Although they examine the ideological implications of the Bond texts, they avoid stabilizing audience readings, even temporarily. Because I am focusing on a specific production at a specific historical moment in a specific location with a specific audience, I would like to adopt their model to a provisionally stabilized reading.

Second, I want to emphasize the artistic and political complexities of *Seeing Double*. While the Mime Troupe's work follows a tradition of popular theatre, and while their work exemplifies many tendencies of popular culture, they are more often than not associated with high art. Their project is explicitly in reaction to both mainstream art and mainstream politics, but their audience tends toward the disciplined reader, accustomed to closed, readerly texts. In confronting the dialectical, interrogative, Brechtian movement of the Mime Troupe's production, this disciplined reader experiences Barthes' "jouissance"—the "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions," only to have it replaced by the production's political imperative.⁸ Theories of hegemony and the concomitant struggle over meanings can trouble the relationship between *Seeing Double* and its Madison readers.

Although Holden's conception of different audience-types only begins to construct possible reading formations and does not account for overlapping positionalities, it clearly reveals both the performers' perception of a hegemonic audience reaction, and the way in which theatre, unlike cinema or a written text,

is unquestionably altered by audience response. As Susan Bennett notes in *Theatre Audiences*, theatre "is an interactive process, which relies on the presence of spectators to achieve its effects."⁹

For Holden, reception is connected to location. San Francisco's outdoor, park audience, for example, according to Holden, is "a very demanding audience" that tends not to follow the Troupe indoors.¹⁰ She says, "The thousand people that come to our openings in the park are people like us, the graduates of the sixties."¹¹ She adds that "when we play for wealthy people who subscribe to the CalArts series, they aren't very responsive. The intellectual level they reject completely. But they admire the artistry."¹²

Although the Mime Troupe's performance venues range from a women's prison to the Mark Taper Forum (one of the country's most prestigious regional theatres), their productions acknowledge, reflect, and reinforce the ideology of the "new left." Madison's audience, a group that contains inflections of all three "identities"—sensitive to the workings of social myth and mass media, cognizant of art and artistic trends, intellectually and politically active—is probably close to the Mime Troupe's ideal.¹³

The Mime Troupe's publicity functions to attract their various spectator-types and to initiate the construction of the ideal spectator—what Tony Bennett might call the model or preferred reader. By setting up specific theatrical and political expectations, the Mime Troupe can encourage preferred readings of the production. The Troupe's name functions like the author's by classifying, organizing, explaining, and legitimating meanings. As Foucault points out, "The name of an author is a variable that accompanies some texts to the exclusion of others."¹⁴

To foreground the value of the name, the "San Francisco Mime Troupe" as well as their awards were highlighted in the local newspapers' previews. The Friday *Wisconsin State Journal* featured a large blocked article and a color photograph on the first page of the "Look/Weekend Wisconsin" section. The headline read, "A humorous look at the Palestinian/Israeli conflict" above the photograph and "'*Seeing Double*'" in bold Capital letters below it. The caption below the photo (one of the airplane scene I described earlier) read, "Members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe in '*Seeing Double*,' an Obie Award-winning production." As Marvin Carlson points out in *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, the review or preview provides audiences with "strategies for the reading of performances."¹⁵ The photograph tells potential spectators that the production will look bright and cartoonish, while the text defines its genre, tone, and subject.

The *Isthmus* article was short and occupied one-half of their "City Notes: Arts and Entertainment" half-page. There was no photograph; the headline read, "Playing with Fire" in bold and "Mime Troupe explores Middle East conflict."

While the mainstream daily newspaper focused on the production's humor, Madison's weekly newspaper, slightly more overtly political than the *State Journal*, pointed out the production's dangerous and political content. *Isthmus's* lack of a photograph also suggests that the name carries more immediate recognition for their readers.

For the most part, though, the previews took similar stances. Not surprisingly, both articles noted the production's critical acclaim and its reception of an Obie, off-Broadway's award for excellence. Both also emphasized the group's reputation for not "pulling punches or shying away from controversy."¹⁶ The *Isthmus* called them "the country's oldest political theatre company," and the *State Journal* described them as the "originator of plays ranging in subject from U.S. intervention in Central America to apartheid."¹⁷ The *Journal* also explained that their work is not pantomime.

Like all previews, these articles reflected the desires and intentions of the Mime Troupe itself. They do not provide a journalist's reading of the production, but rather allow the Mime Troupe to set up specific spectatorial expectations and to instigate specific spectatorial responses. Both articles quoted a spokesperson from the Mime Troupe who was open about previous critical and negative responses to the play. Part of the Mime Troupe's popularity with the Left is their ability to incite discussion and to create explicitly political theatre that often angers right-wing spectators. In their discussion of their work, they begin to order a reading formation.

Another aspect of their appeal stems from their collective organization, so they emphasize the collaboration of the script-writing, which included a team of 10 Arab-American and Jewish writers. The Mime Troupe makes textual those "institutional" negotiations that most theatre, television and film keep hidden.¹⁸ Knowledge of the playwrights' collaboration highlights the need for cooperation and compromise, and serves as a metaphor for the Mime Troupe's point-of-view on the conflict itself. As Mime Troupe player Isa Nidal Totah told *State Journal* reporter Bill Moore, "At times there was a lot of emotion, but generally people understood that there could be great benefits to the play and the playwrights were willing to compromise."¹⁹

The Mime Troupe's articulation of the different playwrights' ethnicities, investments, and perspectives also establishes an interest in reality, truth, and a fair view of both sides that the publicity flier reifies. The flier, which was posted in and around the university and throughout central Madison, featured a line drawing of two identical male faces. The faces, only partially visible, wore ethnic icons—the kippah and the Star of David to represent the Jew, and the kaffiah and the Palestinian flag to signify the Palestinian. The image implied that there are surface differences that overlay fundamental similarities. The name of

the group figured prominently at the top of the page, and "1990 Obie Award Winner" was spread diagonally across it, both offering unity, meaning, and prestige. Below the faces, the title in three languages and "A Middle-Eastern Comedy of Error" appeared.²⁰ As Carlson explains, "Even a single image can have a profound effect upon interpretation."²¹ In general, the local pre-production publicity set up expectations for humor and for a meaning-laden representation of a true political situation.

Seeing Double follows the adventures of two American boys, one Palestinian and the other Jewish, who travel to Israel on the same plane, but whose identities are mistaken during a plane crash. Salim, the Palestinian, carries a document which proves that a piece of land in the West Bank belongs to his family, and David, the Jew, carries a computer print-out of the bible decoded that proves that the West Bank is indeed Jewish land. Salim is taken to a kibbutz and David to a Palestinian village, and the two stories become entangled as one of the kibbutniks is called on army duty to take Salim's family's land away from them. In the meanwhile, a group of Israeli settlers try to kidnap David (but, of course, they take Salim). There is an extended chase scene, as each of the boys, having realized that the other exists, tries to recover his own briefcase, and the other characters fight over a detonator that will destroy Salim's family's house. In the end, the house, indicated by a small model, is blown up, and so are the two boys, who appear together for the first time, as puppets. The last scene of the play shows the two mothers in America, listening to the news report of the violence in Israel. According to the news, one boy has been killed and the other seriously wounded, but they have not yet been identified.²²

Following the play's narrative, the actors turn to the audience and sing, "This is the year of possibility, to take a hand from the other side" in a typically Brechtian, interrogative manner. Arthur Holden's announcement after the show in support of the intifada and the post-show discussion, combined with the pre-performance texts and interviews with the Mime Troupe, consistently underline the Troupe's desire to delineate a specific reading formation. The dialectical narrative positions the spectator with both sides, but the resolution affirms the argument for a two-state solution. Like Brecht, the Mime Troupe wants an active, thinking spectator, but one who agrees with their point-of-view.

The Mime Troupe's agitprop format, *comedia del'arte* style, and use of Brechtian devices subvert classic realism's reactionary narrative and indentificatory tendencies. Blatant stereotypes provide excessive signification that estranges the "real" from the "constructed." The production's explicitly political form and content attempt to construct a spectator who gets pleasure from a preferred reading of a subversive piece.

While the Brechtian aesthetic which *Seeing Double* employs posits an interrogative reading formation, it functions more to denaturalize classic realism than to deny closure. Susan Bennett explains that "it is in post-Brechtian oppositional theatre that the audience has taken an increasingly productive role."²³ This productivity is not to encourage each spectator to make his or her own meanings but, as Jameson puts it,

to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable.²⁴

The concepts of distanciation and denaturalization, fundamental to the Mime Troupe's praxis, tend toward far more rigid and textually-defined readings than that of a reading formation.

The set of *Seeing Double*, visible upon entering the theatre, exemplifies Brechtian theatricality. Within the Barrymore's large proscenium arch sits a small platform with a fake, painted, castle-like backdrop-arch with "Mime Troupe" scrawled in large, awkward letters, which forms a smaller proscenium for the production. The double prosceniums function both to foreground the constructed theatrical moment and to frame the real-seeming events that take place within them. The backdrops, one of San Francisco, one of Israel, are also cartoonish and painted in bold lines and bright colors. The same San Francisco backdrop is used for both families' opening scenes—as if each family could be the same and in the same place—, then the Israel backdrop is divided in half, one side showing cement apartment buildings, the other showing Arab buildings with domes, hills, and trees, textualizing the differences and division there. The buildings' silhouettes reproduce the flier's emblem, and the sceneography emphasizes two sides, adjoined but distinct.

Casting choices foreclose the possibility of any actor/character conflation. All of the actors play numerous roles across ethnicities. The actor who plays Salim's father also plays a kibbutnik; the same actor plays the pro-Palestinian Jewish American Berkeley student (on the plane), the ultra-religious Jewish settler's daughter, and a rock-throwing Palestinian adolescent. By casting a black man as the David/Salim character, the Troupe not only de-authorizes realism—they is visually clear that this actor is probably not Jewish or Palestinian—they also suggest the similarities between the Palestinians and Jews.

Seeing Double comments continuously on its artistry. During the first scene change, an actor holds a sign that reads, "BLACKOUT," and later, "Artless Transition." A live band with guitar, drums, and horns occupies half the stage. *Seeing Double* features a number of songs that comment on the action—another

Brechtian device. The band also provides campy sound effects for violent actions, and its players frequently interact with the performers and the audience. Stylistically, the music is pop musical theatre with catchy tunes, repetitive choruses, and clear, simple, message-loaded lyrics.

All of the costumes have their seams showing—the seams are painted on the costumes in a darker hue of the same color—, literalizing the Mime Troupe's rejection of realism's seamlessness. Each character wears bright colors, and all of the characters' costumes are monochromatic and punctuated with hats, wigs, and beards to make character differentiation clear. The play's blocking is extremely simple. Most of the action is played front, gestures large, towards the audience.

At first, the Mime Troupe's work reveals a dialectical approach which deploys theories of ideology. Brecht's belief that "for art to be 'unpolitical' means only to ally itself with the 'ruling' group," and his programmatic description of revolutionary art demonstrates his reliance on Althusser's theory of "'dominant ideology'—with its suggestion either of conspiratorial imposition or unconscious interpellation."²⁵ Although politically progressive, the Troupe's work, because of its dependence on a somewhat monolithic (however complex) notion of power and its relationship to representation, seems to ignore the shifting terrain of power as well as the complex interplay of other texts. By opening the text with frequent looks, asides, and responses to the audience, however, the Mime Troupe allows the operation of a hegemonic reaction. As Gledhill explains, "'Hegemony' describes the ever-shifting, ever negotiating play of ideological, social and political forces through which power is maintained and contested."²⁶ Hegemonic audience reaction is quite clear in such a performance context.²⁷

By provoking audience response, the Mime Troupe does not unproblematically force meaning upon its spectators, but rather creates inter-textuality between *Seeing Double*, the various spectators' social positionalities, and the specific production context. During the production, one moment in particular foregrounded the play's location in place and time. The audience hissed at the ultra-religious-Jewish-settler-with-a-limp who was strategizing to blow up the Palestinians' home. The actor, still "in character," looked directly at the audience and said, "Hey, I'm crippled," as if his disability excused him from moral behavior. The audience hissed again, echoing their previous "anger." He mumbled, "Anti-semites" in an accusatory tone. Much of the audience responded with an amused, self-righteous, eye-brow-raised "Wooo," getting the joke, but a significant part of the audience remained pained and silent.²⁸ The accusation came too close to home in Madison during that week.

Because of *Seeing Double's* Brechtian techniques which address the audience directly and its comedia style which advocates vocal audience response, the spectators' effects on the performance are immediately, if briefly, visible. The post-show discussion then enabled spectators to express their reactions "in words" directly to the actors.²⁹ In *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett comments:

Where audiences are consulted and involved in the structuring of the theatrical event, and are encouraged (at least in the immediate post-production period) to translate their reading of that event into action, then their role no longer maintains the fixity that dominant cultural practice assumes.³⁰

Although *Seeing Double's* audience did not affect Madison's production itself, the post-show discussion provided a tertiary level text that influenced both the spectators and the company.³¹

The conversation after the show included about 75 spectators and three of the actors. Unlike the general audience response, which was wildly enthusiastic throughout the performance and included a standing ovation, the group that remained tended to criticize the production, and at some points seemed even hostile. Individual responses were often positive, but the overall tone was critical. Susan Bennett explains that "in areas where there is little available theatre, the event may . . . be seen as a comfortable ritual."³² In this way, the Mime Troupe was positioned as having come from "outside," and the discussion served "to act as a social [and I would add, political] affirmation of a particular group."³³ At the same time, the intersecting, overlapping, and shifting reading formations were apparent throughout the discussion.

The members of the Mime Troupe who spoke with the audience seemed not to expect resistant readings of the production. Despite their experiences with varied performance sites and times, they perceived U.S. response to be fairly homogeneous. According to Bennett and Woollacott:

Texts in their diverse conditions of consumption are not simply the sum of the ideological projects of their producers if only because . . . audiences read texts from quite different inter-textual positions.³⁴

The struggle over meanings generally fell into three areas of negotiation and revealed not only "differently gendered reading formations" but differences in ethnicities and genre expectations.³⁵

Seeing Double constructs a multiplicity of stereotypes, many different points of view for both Palestinians and Jews, and a "heteroglossic" text.³⁶ It shows the extreme as well as the moderate factions on both sides, the religious and the solely political, fostering multiple identificatory positions. Ethnic/religious positionalities greatly informed response. Even the most left-wing, pro-peace Jews seemed angered by the production's Jewish stereotypes, and the Mime Troupe was repeatedly attacked for not clarifying the difference between anti-Zionism and anti-semitism—a particularly volatile topic at this historical moment in Madison. In an article in *American Theatre*, Alisa Solomon points out that both Jews and Palestinians have seen the representations in *Seeing Double* as unfair, and various spectators expressed similar opinions at the discussion. The Mime Troupe responded, both in the article and during the discussion, that they showed both sides fairly, with equal criticism and with equal humor.

Their use and explanation of stereotypes implies a notion of the signs' univocalities. But, as Volonsinov states, "Differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign."³⁷ While the stereotypical materialistic Jewish family may be seen as excessive and parodic, and comment on the bourgeois success of Jews in the United States, it may also be read as accurate and reinforce negative stereotypes that encourage anti-semitic violence. Similarly, while the image of the right-wing settler may be read as ridiculous (especially when he does the "Right Wing Rap"), he may also be seen as frighteningly similar to Kahane. And while the Palestinian immigrant grandmother who makes mashe in three minutes in a cuisinart may be read as a humorous comment on the advantages of American conveniences, she might also be seen as a backwards foreigner who refuses to comply with American eating styles.

Most Jewish spectators to whom I spoke agreed that the Jewish stereotypes were offensive. When asked about the Palestinian stereotypes, they often responded, "I don't see what was wrong with them." I spoke to some non-Jews who felt that both sides were made fun of, but added that Jewish stereotypes have a wider circulation in mainstream culture. Someone said, "We've seen these Jews before. But the Palestinians were new." Someone else explained, "My point of reference for the Palestinians was general images of first generation immigrants and their loyalty to their country. The Jews were more like Americans." These comments indicate the instability of the sign/s and the struggle over meanings. They also suggest that whatever the circulation of an image, for some it will read as commentary and for others it will read as truth. A widely circulated image both opens up multiple meanings and repeatedly insists on its own truthfulness. An infrequently seen image imposes more weight upon the image itself, but can also be read as an aberration. As Stuart Hall states,

"Significations enter into controversial and conflicting social issues as a real and positive social force, affecting their outcomes."³⁸

Seeing Double presumes that American audiences' thoughts on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can affect U.S. intervention in the Middle East. During one reference to U.S. money supporting Israel's violence against the Palestinians, the actor pointed directly at the audience in an accusatory gesture of complicity. While awareness and guilt may suffice to win the audience's support, so may sympathy. In *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response*, Daphna Ben Chaim asserts:

Those qualities that make the object seem like ourselves (humanization) pull the object toward us; those aspects which distinguish the object from ourselves and our real world (an awareness of fictionality) push the object away from us.³⁹

Although both David and Salim embody familiar stereotypes, I would suggest that Salim is "more like us."

Salim is a typical American kid. Passionately dedicated to his music (he knows everything about the music industry, since he's been at it for two whole years), he wants to hang out with his girlfriend, eat hamburgers (which his mother insists are Jewish), and cruise with his friends. He thinks his parents are silly, and the only thing he can say in Arabic is, "Give me ten dollars." Salim's role is indicated by his carrying drumsticks as a prop. His body is loose, his movement bouncy and energetic, and his voice that breathless Valley kid twang. David, in contrast, is a computer nerd. Wearing huge red glasses and keeping his body tight and close, David is seriously and obsessively dedicated to his computer project. Although both characters represent boyhood rites of passage, I believe that at this historical moment, Salim is read with more tolerance, more sympathy, and even admiration for his spunk.

Furthermore, through the linear quest narrative Salim becomes politicized, and since his political identity aligns "correctly" with his ethnicity, he simultaneously appears to mature, "find himself," and become self-actualized. David undergoes a transformation, realizes that he has been misguided, and attempts to defend the Palestinians. He, too, appears to mature and see the light. Because Michael Sullivan plays both David and Salim, and because he is the only actor who does not play more than two roles, his identity as an actor is most clearly circumscribed. His characters' coherence encourages spectator identification, an awareness that both boys eventually support the Palestinians, and thus, a pro-Palestinian point-of-view. As Bennett and Woollacott, discussing James Bond, point out:

It is through the superimposition of this ideological position onto a textual position that the reader (may) come to be implicated in the narrative in the sense of having a subjective stake in the success of Bond's mission.⁴⁰

The same can be said of David and Salim.⁴¹

Unlike the stereotypes of race/ethnicity, which the production clearly and overtly pointed to as constructions through casting and acting techniques, images of gender and of the heterosexual nuclear family were naturalized.⁴² The women resolutely occupied roles of wife, mother, and seductress, and few roles were cross-gender cast. The discussion suggested that a play which deals with such a complex political issue cannot contain a critique of gender roles as well.

While one production may not supply pleasure in terms of content, it may do so in its form. As Keir Elam asserts in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, "Every performance of interest will involve a complex dialectic of code-observing, code-making and code-breaking."⁴³ And, according to Jameson, "Texts always come into being at the intersection of several genres and emerge from the tensions in the latter's multiple force fields."⁴⁴ The text of *Seeing Double*, then, emerges from tensions between and among musical comedy, comedia, soap opera, classic realism, and the news. Since "reading practices are, in part, organised by the systems of genre expectations brought to bear on specific texts," the blurring of genres in *Seeing Double* opens up even more potential reading formations.⁴⁵ Movement between "modalities" causes some spectators to read the images against their perception of "truth" as seen in television and newspaper news texts, while others use their own experiences in Israel as a yardstick.⁴⁶ Some spectators look at the stereotypes in relation to other stereotypes, and some see them in light of images of ethnicity in realist texts.

The oscillation between a melodramatic parodic mode and a kind of real-seemingness also generates a movement between spectator behaviors typical of high art and popular culture locales. As Bourdieu explains, in popular entertainments, audience participation "is constant, and manifest . . . sometimes direct," while in bourgeois entertainment, it is "intermittent, distant, highly ritualized."⁴⁷ During *Seeing Double* in Madison, a primarily bourgeois audience participated in a production that was both popular and bourgeois.

As Herbert Blau notes, "An audience without a history is not an audience."⁴⁸ In this historical moment in Madison, the left wing, status quo, pro-Palestinian position was not unproblematic. In mid-October 1990, the intifada (the Palestinian uprising) was almost three-years-old. The *New York Times* ran frequent but not daily articles about Israel on its international page, while headlines were dominated with the more recent and certainly more pressing event

for America—Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Conversations about "the crisis in the Middle East" referred to oil and war in the Persian Gulf, not curfews and car bombs on the West Bank. When the San Francisco Mime Troupe came to town, Iraq overshadowed Israel, and the hostages in Kuwait were more visible than Palestinian freedom fighters throwing stones.

For this Madison audience, though, seeing a play about Hussein and about American intervention in Kuwait probably would have resulted in a fairly hegemonic articulable position: Madison's left liberals oppose United States' military intervention. The issue of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, however, enunciates complex and contradictory positions even in this predominantly white, middle-class, highly educated audience. The production took place almost three years after the start of the intifada, and unlike the timeliness (and pressing possibility of United States' participation in a war) of Hussein's invasion, the intifada has a rather commonplace presence, not unlike knowledge and awareness of apartheid in South Africa. But again, unlike South Africa, the audience's political stance denies consensus. Furthermore, the recent series of anti-semitic incidents in Madison created a heightened sense of local anti-semitism, and for many spectators, an acute awareness of their Jewishness.

"Spectators come with an existing subjectivity and a range of 'reading competencies,'" state Bennett and Woollacott.⁴⁹ The possible reading formations analyzed here only begin to probe those various subjectivities and competencies that work in conjunction with extra-textual sources, times, sites, and modes of reading to construct meanings. The social situation and physical presence of theatre, and the radical politics and playful theatricality of the San Francisco Mime Troupe seem a productive location for such explorations.

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Notes

1. Alisa Solomon, "Both Sides Now," *American Theatre* 6.10 (Jan. 90): 16.
2. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 56.
3. David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1988) 110.
4. Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 15.

5. Bennett and Woollacott 60.
6. Tony Bennett, "Texts in History," *Post Structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 70.
7. T. Bennett 70.
8. Quoted in Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 64.
9. S. Bennett 72. While Bennett and Woollacott must construct a complex argument to prove the interactivity of readers and the written and filmic texts of James Bond, the notion that a theatrical text does not exist without an audience almost goes without saying. Theatre theory, though, has lagged behind film, television, and literature in its exploration of audience activity.
10. Savran 106.
11. 109.
12. 110.
13. The production took place at the Barrymore, an east side theatre that often produces "political" theatre, including, for example, the yearly lesbian variety show, a Spike Lee film festival, and a benefit performance for and about the homeless. The theatre space is a large, older auditorium with "stars" on the ceiling. The place is worn and comfortable; the crowd casually dressed. That night, the performance was sold-out, and people got there early, since the Barrymore doesn't assign seats. The audience was noisy and excited. Another paper might explore the semiotics of these details. See Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).
14. Quoted in Bennett and Woollacott 47.
15. Carlson 22.
16. Tom Laskin, "Playing With Fire: Mime Troupe Explores Middle East Conflict," *Isthmus* (12 Oct. 1990): 30.
17. Bill Moore, "A Humorous Look at Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: 'Seeing Double,' *Wisconsin State Journal* (12 Oct. 1990): 1D.
18. Christine Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*. Ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988) 68.
19. Moore 1D.
20. It took me several re-readings of this paper to realize that the flier did not read "A Middle-Eastern Comedy of Terror." Surely the metonymy encourages such a Freudian slip.
21. Carlson 19.
22. In *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), his study of 19th-century dime novels, Michael Denning points out that "in many of the novels of 'realism' and 'sentimentalism,' the happy ending was a sign that all was right in the world, that everything worked out in the end." He cites Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the bourgeois happy ending, a view of "mass culture as ruled by illusory promises of fulfillment and facile reconciliations." But, Denning also says, Horkheimer and Adorno knew that "the aesthetics of tragedy can too easily become mystifying ideologies of the 'tragic sense of life'" (212). *Seeing Double's* ending is nothing if not tragic. What, if anything, is being (de?)mystified? Politics? Motherhood? American isolationist complacency?
23. S. Bennett 21.
24. Quoted in S. Bennett 29-30.
25. John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 196; Gledhill 68.
26. Gledhill 68.
27. S. Bennett also discusses the concept of audience tendencies. She says, "Anne Ubersfeld notes how an individual is unlikely to swim against the current of his/her neighbors' reception," and

"as Elam describes, there is a tendency towards integration, the surrendering of the individual to the group for the duration of the performance" (76).

28. I was sitting next to a woman in a wheelchair who did not find the scene at all amusing.

29. It is interesting to note which kinds of texts are privileged or seem more true, valid, weighty, etc. Any effect that a spectator might have on the production in its moment of reception carries less weight than a verbally articulated post-show comment.

30. S. Bennett 180.

31. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987) 111. What I mean by the company's being influenced is that 1) they were clearly shocked and distraught by the spectators' vehement disappointment in certain aspects of the production; 2) an acquaintance with whom they stayed in Madison said the same; 3) she later reported that they had made some changes, especially in the images of gender.

32. S. Bennett 110.

33. 110.

34. Bennett and Woollacott 202.

35. 204.

36. Bakhtin, quoted in Fiske 1987, 96.

37. Quoted in Denning 82.

38. Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed" in *Media Studies, Culture, Society and the Media*, eds. M. Gurevitch, et al. (London: Methuen, 1982) 70. The question remains, here unexplored, How politically efficacious are stereotypes and to what degree can spectators perceive excess in images that apply or do not apply to their own positionalities?

39. Quoted in S. Bennett 17.

40. Bennett and Woollacott 127.

41. The farcical style of the play indicates that these images are to be read typologically, not realistically, although that doesn't simplify the issue. As Michael Denning explains:

To read allegorically or typologically, I suggest, the fictional world is less a representation of the real world than a microcosm. Thus the households and families . . . that would be interpreted as typical households if read novelistically are interpreted as microcosms of the social world when read allegorically; individual characters are less individuals than figures for social groups. (72)

42. And, according to Mime Troupe members, unself-consciously so.

43. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1980) 55.

44. Quoted in Denning 75.

45. T. Bennett 72.

46. Fiske 1987, 76.

47. Quoted in John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 138.

48. Quoted in S. Bennett 149.

49. Bennett and Woollacott 220.



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