

## PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

### Kent Neely

Irony and paradox seem ineffectual descriptors of socio-political events of the past several months. Californians passed Proposition 187 effectively eliminating tax based support, including health care, for illegal aliens residing within the state's borders. Near the same period the United States Government signed on to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which eliminated various trade sanctions between Mexico, the United States and Canada. On the one hand, American citizens expel those (read Mexican Americans) who have gained benefits that they "haven't paid for" and on the other the government recognizes the importance of markets (read Mexico) where cheap labor can continue to supply Americans with goods. Neither irony nor paradox seem adequate to describe what appears so schizophrenic.

Schizophrenic actions and events like these prompt questions related to theatrical productions that appropriate the representation of other cultures (as Peter Brooke's *The Mahabharata* did upon its tour to the United States). It underscores colonial practices affecting the choice and production style of plays (as Mita Choudhury and Rakesh H. Solomon so ably show in the October 1994 edition of *Theatre Journal*). And it parallels instances where culturally specific rituals are so co-opted as to affect their function adversely (as Sharyn R. Udall pointed out in her study of the Hopi Snake Dance in *TDR*, summer 1992).

Our theatre today cannot escape new scrutiny relative to its representational powers. Theatre performance controls the Other for observation and we become increasingly aware, as Udall does, that "We must be careful not to judge the artistic acts of past decades solely by the imperfect standards of our own (p. 39)." Her admonition cannot be limited to historic relationships but must apply to representations generally as a reminder that the theatrical process must excel beyond the stasis of a codified or colonized or coopted vision of the Other. The view of the Other should serve to broaden and heighten our awareness of our individual imperfections and our collective similarities. Ultimately we may reach a point in which the schizophrenic subtext to representation evaporates and new awareness replaces it. As David Napier notes in his work *Foreign Bodies* (University of California Press, 1992):

... there are observable dissociative processes that function as significantly as does self-conscious reflection in the development of the person. These processes are not the negation of self-consciousness,

but the deliberate recreation of the self through the engaging of metaphors that enable us selectively and creatively to imagine (p. 199).

The pieces included with this edition of PRAXIS deal with representations of difference, from racial to ethnic to historic. May Joseph describes Shishir Kurup's one person performance piece *Assimilations*. Kurup's performance representation of his Self is a synthesis of nomadic identities. Jeane Luere's study of Edward Albee's *The Lorca Story: Scenes from a Life* suggests that repressive behavior, like that suffered by Lorca, is active in contemporary America. Mohammad Kowsar's look at a new version of the Don Juan story by Minneapolis based Theatre de la Jeune Lune demonstrates that a re-visioning of an historical source does not necessarily offer insight. As a collection, these three essays add to the discourse regarding theatrical representation and make us ponder whether we are able to gain from the representation or remain tainted by the schizophrenic attitudes of post-modern America.

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Shishir Kurup "powders" himself to "whiteness" in his autobiographical performance piece *Assimilations*.

## Of Hybrids and Postcolonial Debris: Shishir Kurup's *Assimilations*

In what ways does the experience of multiple migrations shape the way one tells one's stories?

This is the question that seems to frame the work of Shishir Kurup, the Los Angeles based performer whose work over the last four years has produced a range of meditations on the subjects of citizenship, arrival, exile, cultural collision, the problems of cultural translation, and the delicate interstices of race, body and politics. Kurup's more recent involvements with the Los Angeles based Cornerstone Theatre group is an extension of the complexities of the cultural politics of contemporary Los Angeles, after Rodney King, after the L.A. Rebellion, into a rare translation of work and creative realization of community and local affiliations.

As part of a very exciting renaissance of Asian-American performers in Los Angeles in the late eighties and nineties, Kurup's work produced a continuing dialogue about the disaffections and imaginings of new immigrants in the United States, by drawing into a visual collage a range of associations and languages reminiscent of East Africa, India, Britain and the United States. Using Malayalam, English, Hindi, Swahili, Gujarati, and "American," Kurup's work raises the broader question of how imaginary homelands reinvent the idea of what home is, as well as what it might mean to imagine it. Both *Assimilations* (1991) and *Exile* (1992) perform the displacements of diasporic belonging: to be a citizen of the United States and a nomadic storyteller embodying many genealogies of arrival; to speak of here, echoing memories and fragments of many migrations; to be produced as an African-Asian-American emerging out of a complex history of being from Africa, which exceeds the available narratives within Asian-American history, these are some of Kurup's thematic preoccupations.

In *Assimilations*, a one-man show produced by Shishir Kurup and directed by Page Leong at the performing space, Highways, in Los Angeles, 1991, and at the Public Theatre in New York in 1992, Kurup unravels little vignettes of cultural collision entitled "Mythic Fears," "My Father's Name is . . .," "Africa," "Mombasa," "Mzee," and "Siam," among others. Structuring his narratives as faultlines in the tectonic plates of citizenship, Kurup sketches vibrant pictures of the everyperson nomad, caught in postmodernity, where time future and time past collide in time present, in the City of Angeles, trying to capture former life histories and memories. Through an intricate series of gestural movements, he performs the condition of being a part of transit-cultures, cultures sloughed off

before arrival, through multiple disruptions before arrival in the United States. Dispelling any myth of ordinary culture, Kurup explores the tensions between transplanted traditions and re-invented traditions, by narrating a series of incidences from the life of a wandering immigrant. Kurup's autobiographical narrator Shishir, acquires a mythic, archetype dimension as his character unfolds the complexities of his coming into political consciousness as a 'race-d' American. Caught between being produced as a new political subject (to be both Black and Asian, depending on the context) and being a child of the postcolonial world, Shishir the protagonist enchantingly draws his audience into his world of volatile consciousness, made political before he even recognizes the shape of politics, growing up in small town America.

In *Assimilations*, Kurup plays with the unexpected, by drawing the syncretic Los Angeles audience into the sphere of the unfamiliar. *Assimilations* demands the audience's attention in its opening scene as the play opens onto an empty stage, dark with the sound of a poignant, sacred song sung in an unfamiliar language: the sound of a Malayalam prayer (a South Indian language) fills the space as the performer rushes onto the stage with a can of powder in his hand:

(Out of the dark we hear a sweet Malayalam Song)

*Pambegal Ku Malam Induh*

*Paravuhgul Kagashum Induh*

*Manusha Puthren Um Talah Chaikan*

*Manil Idum Illa, Manil Idum Illa (Repeat)*

*Mame* I'm going out to play

Put some powder on *mone*

But I'm just going out to play

Be a good boy now and put some powder on

But I hate powder

Be my golden son now<sup>1</sup>

This opening sequence is striking in its historic implications: the narrative of race gets etched in skin tones, reminding one of Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Nina Simone, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes: light skin, dark skin, how one powders oneself to "whiteness," literally and metaphorically, politically and psychologically. The story of Kurup's emergence out of the dramatic shadows of the stage of the Highways performance space puts under the spotlight the epidermal logics of floating affiliations with the Indian Sub-continent and Africa: now kathakali like, now minstrelsy like, with the bitter twist of history to humor it. The secret of assumed historical origins gets translated in everyday life into

repressed conversations about race and Blackness for a polylingual U.S.-South Asian diaspora.

Kurup's multi-lingual script embodies the debris of migrancy in its irreverent mishmash:

. . . Jambo, Habari, Muzuri. Shiro, puri, jalebi, tala dood paakh.  
 Huyu iko watu wa America. Si, senor mimi iko watu wa America.  
 Me shire toh nehi . . .  
 (Music ends. Lights crossfade)<sup>2</sup>

Mobility inflects language as words are altered, made hybrid. Heteroglossia shapes the viewpoints of Kurup's myriad scenarios. Kiswahili, Pubjabi, Gujurati, Hindi, Spanish and English create the creole culture of this diasporic experience, the East African-Asian-American. Here, the limits of U.S. discourses of citizenship and belonging are drawn into question—where the specificities of ethnicities and their histories collide with contemporary forms of citizenship. In *Assimilations*, this is posed as the dilemma of belonging to the nation. Through Kurup's performance, the language of U.S. Black/White binarisms of race gets dispersed into a more non-U.S. idea of "Blackness," an ideological and political construct that produces different ethnicities and peoples as "Black" in different contexts, at different historic moments, in the United States. To be reduced to a category of 'race' that can neither fit nor accommodate the lived relations of actual hybrid ethnicities, this seems to be part of the condition of the narrator of *Assimilations*.

As Kurup's one man show brilliantly stages the complexities of coming into "the fact of Blackness" as Frantz Fanon puts it. Being called "little Richard" and "my favourite little nigger at school," as Kurup remarks in one vignette demonstrate how categories of ethnicity are always less than and more than the constituted political subject: in this case, an African-Asian-American. As Kurup's highly stylized, narratively fractured renderings of urban American racism unfold, new borders, new psychic maps get drawn—Mombasa, Nairobi, Kerala, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Burger King, class politics, immigration, become the markers, the navigation points for Kurup's political journey of cultural citizenship.

What Shishir Kurup's performance *Assimilations* achieves, is to tangibly perform the elisions within the Asian-American discourses about who can occupy the category Asian-American, (as more conventional histories of "Asian" in the United States elide the changing demographics of Asian/America) and the more informal ways in which other histories, other memories of the changing kaleidoscope of Asian descent peoples in the U.S. continuously erode, forge and

bring into new horizons the conversation about identity, immigration, belonging and citizenship. As Lisa Lowe suggests, the 90's can afford cultural specificities within Asian-American dialogue now that for strategic political purposes, the alliances of various Asian-American ethnicities have come to be recognized as a valid constituency. Kurup inflects that dialogue by raising the question of how Blackness and Asian-Americanness get constituted simultaneously and at different moments for certain communities of people in the U.S. Kurup's *Assimilations* demands a more complicated rendering of how the differing histories of Black peoples around the world of Afro-Asian descent link, intersect, are artificially separated by sociologically erroneous categories of race, and shape the new face of places like New York, Los Angeles, Kingston, London, Dares-Salaam, Port-au-Prince, Nairobi and Rio-de-Janeiro. Kurup's performance raises the question of how diasporas are formed at the invisible crossroads of interlinking histories of migration, indentured servitude, slavery, sugar plantations, cotton plantations, internments and incarcerations, colonial and postcolonial histories in the United States.

*Assimilations* dispels the notion of unilinear narratives of race as it raises questions of identity in terms of citizenship and the histories of ethnicities before they arrive in the United States. Kurup raises the question of how the politics of Blackness and the rhetoric of Asian-American identity may be negotiated for peoples of South Asian descent who hail from Africa, Britain, the Caribbean or Latin America, and have a different relationship to the history of Blackness of peoples in the United States. He performs the blurring boundaries of everyday race relations in the United States, where it is not a question of either/or but rather a question of sometimes this and sometimes that and sometimes in between this and that.

In the section on the practices of naming for multiply migrated peoples titled "My Father's Name Is . . ." Kurup shows how names are distorted, mutated and take on new shapes and sounds as peoples arrive to new shores to take on new identities, such as Miami, New York, Los Angeles. Kurup performs the transformation of his parents' names from Kerala, India to Africa to the U.S., from the changing of his father's name, from Karipottu Thaivalipill Ravindran Kurup to Ravindran Karipottu, to eventually, on arrival in the U.S., to Ray Karapot. His mother's name mutates from Leela Bhavani Nair, to Bhavani Ravindran, to finally Bonnie Ravindran. This brilliant critique of how culture is both lost and syncretically renewed is staged with great wit and pathos. We laugh at our own mutations, our own transformed "Americanizing" cultures, in their cacophonous polyphonic mutations in the barrios, in the streets, in the dhabas, in the little Tokyos and the little Hong Kongs, something sloughed off, something formed anew, from block to block, despite the myths of

homogenization, the promise of monopolized spaces of pleasure. Kurup performs the tensions of name changing for racinated Americans. What does it mean to change one's name for "America" meaning, dominant America. To be not white, not quite, as one's name is racinated:

Shishir Ravindran Kurup became Shishir Kurup or (pulling out yearbook) Shish, C.C., SeSe, Shishir, Shishink, Shirsha, Hosh Hosh, Sheer Energy, Shiser Krup, C.C. Corruption, Little Richard, Tutti Frutti, My favourite little nigger, and last but not least . . . Shitsmear Karap.  
(Blackout)<sup>3</sup>

Kurup's observation makes the point that while the immigrant whether Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan in diasporic affiliations, may change their name by whitening it, dominant culture resists their whitening by racializing them within the available discourse of race in the United States.

*Assimilations* remains one of the sharpest postcolonial critiques of American hegemony in the international waters of global migrations as Kurup performs his particular 'mythic fears' of "coming to America":

Mythic fear number one: Americans love to go streaking.

Mythic fear number two: Americans spoke English so slanged, we would have a very difficult time understanding them. They loved double negatives . . . "I didn't do nothin."

Mythic fear number three: Like the British they didn't wash their ass, just wiped it with toilet paper. This frightened us. This frightened my mother, this frightened my father and this terrified me.<sup>4</sup>

Kurup's scatological critique of the west's reproduction of itself in the non-west and the return of its repressions through the arrival of immigrants, embodies the language of waste and excess, of desire and terror. As Kurup stages the debris of American hegemony in its global backdrops of invisible spaces such as Africa, India, Latin America through the proliferation of icons such as Bruce Lee, Clint Eastwood, Carlos Santana, Elvis Presley, Charles Bronson, loaded with ideological venom, he brings back into our perceptual imaginary the 'mythic fears' of being "in America," of having arrived, but nowhere in particular, politically or otherwise. To have travelled from immigrant to citizen, inverting the mythic fear of arrival to one of perpetual nostalgia, a retrospective meditation

on loss, invention and the creating of new stories from the peripheries of contemporary urban American life, such as Malayalee Los Angelenos forging alliances with their other nomadic, more than thrice migrated legal and not so legal Los Angelenos, from Vietnam, the West Bank, Iran, China, Africa, Tijuana, Haiti, Thailand: the map extends into the disappearing horizons of Kurup's truly pan-national conception of demystifying the secret fears of "coming to America."<sup>5</sup>

May Joseph

## Notes

1. Opening sequence, *Assimilation*, Shishir Kurup, 1991 (Unpublished).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Art Spiral*, Vol. 8, Winter, 1994.

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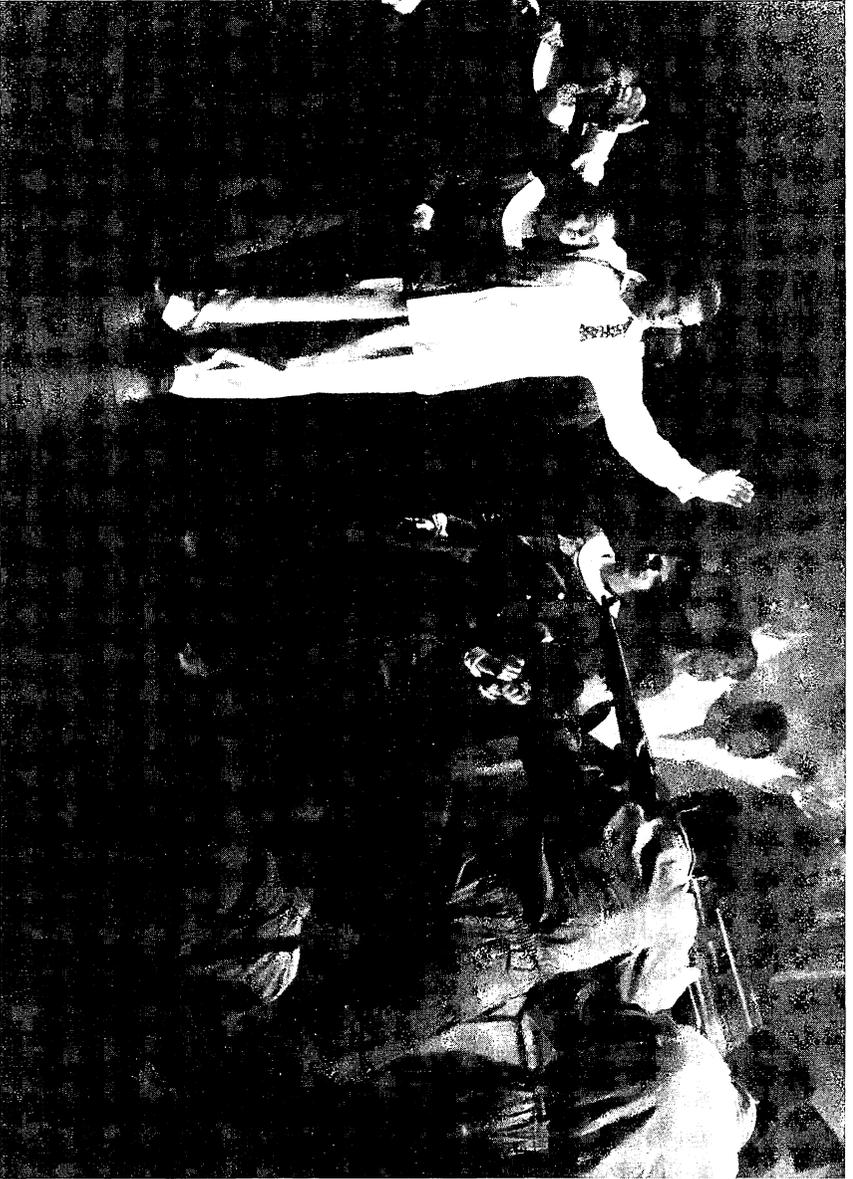
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A scene from the 1992 Houston International Festival production of Edward Albee's *The Lorca Story* featuring Wade Myllus in the title role. Photo by Houston Chronicle.

## An Elegy for Thwarted Vision: Edward Albee's *The Lorca Story: Scenes from a Life*

For over three decades, Edward Albee's controversial drama has kept him in the critical and public consciousness. With self-assurance, Albee has disregarded commercial pressure, experimented with dramatic form, and thrust innovative theater at his audiences.<sup>1</sup> How natural, now, to find Albee evolving a play on artistic freedom. His present venture, *The Lorca Story: Scenes from a Life*, is more than a political or social tract; it is an elegy for an artist's thwarted vision.

The play's protagonist, Federico Garcia Lorca (c. 1900-1936), was the Spanish poet-playwright executed during the Fascist reign of General Francisco Franco. With two acts, ten scenes, and pageant-like structure, Albee takes us inside the soul of a casualty. Still in progress, the play dramatizes Albee's views on the thwarting of Lorca's literary vision by state and church throughout Franco's forty-year reign. Lorca had written his "unorthodox" poetry and plays when censorship momentarily lessened with the birth of the short-lived Second Republic (proclaimed in 1931).<sup>2</sup> Without being an agit-prop piece, the drama is in part a polemic on the plight of artists in a culture that restricts and censors their work. Albee gives Lorca an appeal to us to feel the pain of curbed creativity: "Do you know what it's like to be me."<sup>3</sup>

Like Albee's *Three Tall Women*, whose script was written in 1991 but kept "in progress" until 1994, his *Lorca Play* will proceed to commercial venues when Albee deems it ready. The play was commissioned in 1992 by the Houston International Festival Committee for its "Centennial Celebration of Spain and the New World"; the project also entailed a trip to Spain for Albee's research on Lorca's life. Audiences applauded the Festival production for its freshness and relevance to our own culture's problems with censorship and diversity. The critics' reaction was mixed, some finding the play "timely and apt," "stirring and evocative," others hoping to view it again when Albee completes his "fleshing-out of characters and relationships."<sup>4</sup>

Rather than belabor us with didactic monologues on repression, Albee uses parody to approach the parallels between Lorca's culture and our own.<sup>5</sup> With Franco on stage in military uniform and the Cardinal in formal vestment, Albee's script quips, "Don't lose sight of *them* . . . it's people like that who run the world—people who define our faith, who give us our identity."<sup>6</sup> Albee's lines alert us that "they" could be anywhere: "Sometimes they don't wear those uniforms; sometimes a suit and tie does them just fine; sometimes a suit and tie does them even better."<sup>7</sup> Houston critics picked up on the parallels: one wrote

that Franco's denunciation of Lorca's work "could have been lifted from a stump speech damning the N.E.A.'s funding of obscene and outside-the-mainstream art";<sup>8</sup> another critic echoed him, recalling "America's current art wars" in which writers had to "fend off attacks on their artistic content."<sup>9</sup> Albee's action shows both Franco and the Catholic Cardinal harassing Lorca: Franco loathes his writing for its jabs at totalitarian rule, and the Cardinal threatens to excommunicate him for non-standard religious concepts.<sup>10</sup>

Albee's play spans Lorca's life from childhood to sudden death. To stage the writer's hapless altercations with the church and state, a three-level set is used: the stage floor for the play's action, a mid-level with small platforms reached by stairs at either side of the stage, and, above continuing stairs, a catwalk extending across the stage. Albee places characters on levels appropriate to their relevance in the play's gruesome central conflict. General Franco and his Aide-de-Camp sit or stand on the top level Stage Left, and on the right, the Catholic Cardinal and his priest, where all sit in judgment on the thoughts, activities, and writings of the poet-playwright on the stage below. Our concentration shifts when spots go up or down on the catwalk or lower levels where Lorca, his family, and the play's ensemble actors mingle.

To give the audience a full acquaintance with his protagonist, Albee wants us "to see *all* of Lorca, not just the statue," to perceive him as "sad, funny, and even just plain silly," and to follow him from his youth to his death at thirty-six.<sup>11</sup> For this purpose, Albee's script abandons Joseph Wood Krutch's concept of "an identifiable and continuous self" for the role of Lorca.<sup>12</sup> Albee had first envisioned three actors to depict the protagonist at different ages. Even before rehearsals, the playwright's careful objectivity led him to simplify the concept to two rather than three characters—Young Lorca and Lorca-as-adult—who often must appear on stage simultaneously. At times, they appear with their family, friends and figures from Spanish culture; in other scenes, while Young Lorca remains on stage, Adult Lorca must appear to cross the world, watch the Wall Street crash, dance with Cubans, then reappear abruptly in his home environment. The dialogue Albee has written for the two Lorcas reveals the love of the earth that lies in Lorca's poems and plays. Phrases like "the taste of blood and soil in my mouth," "a rip in the skin of the earth," show Lorca's immersion in nature, his blending of "poetic imagery with primitive passions"; many lines come from the pages of *Blood Wedding* (1933) and *Yerma* (1934), dramas considered "the finest Spanish works since the Golden Age."<sup>13</sup>

To acquaint us with the culture that shaped Lorca as person and artist, Albee's scenes reach toward the land and people of Spain, "the country which birthed him . . . and the country which killed him."<sup>14</sup> In action on the set's floor level, we see Young Lorca following the plow in Granada's country side; we

watch as Adult Lorca's spirited thoughts and antics upset distinguished friends and mentors like Salvadore Dali and Manuel DeFalla; and we learn for ourselves that famous writers are human. Lorca meets and loses lovers, succeeds and fails with poems and plays. In the action, we also view comic and tragic scenes from Lorca's plays with actresses portraying Lola Membrives and Margarita Zirgu, famous Lorca thespians of the 1930s. Albee's dramatic choices disclose his protagonist's love of surrealism, symbolism, naturalism and his active involvement in theater and folklore.

To lift us over spans of time and space in the play's action, Albee has chosen an omniscient Narrator to stand at the set's mid-level platform and see all. With the heads of church and state high above the stage, he can get them out of our way by calling up, "You four go into limbo now," at which their space darkens until the playwright wants them back into action at an earlier (or later) chronological period.<sup>15</sup> Then the Narrator will call, "You can come back now," and we move on undismayed through the years in which Franco and the Cardinal had inveighed against Lorca's artistic freedom, taken away his life, and for decades thereafter, hidden his literary legacy.<sup>16</sup> At one point the Narrator may lean from his platform to point toward the boy on the first level, and reassure viewers that "The young Lorca stays with us of course . . . doesn't our young self always stay with us—lurk around the edges of our consciousness?"<sup>17</sup> Albee's research in Spain confirmed the author's child-like nature; a Lorca letter reads, "In the depths of my being is a powerful desire to be a little child, very humble and very retiring."<sup>18</sup>

Albee also uses his Narrator in droll scenes to mock the bogus ethics of the self-righteous clergy. When Act II begins, with Cardinal and Priest missing from their places near Franco and his Aide, the Narrator looks off, stage-right, and barks, "Would you two get out here, please?";<sup>19</sup> and his Aide suggests, "I think it's what they might have *been* doing."<sup>20</sup> When the upbraided two slip in and begin to mount the stairs, we see the Cardinal "buttoning the front of *his* gown, followed by the Priest, pulling down the back of *his* gown," and we hear the Cardinal mutter, "All right! For heaven's sake."<sup>21</sup> Although Albee tastefully keeps all other scenes between Cardinal and Priest (and between Lorca and his acknowledged intimates) tightly restrained rather than emotionally flamboyant, here he lets us smile very mildly at the hypocrisy of the church's ban on diversity.

To deride the states' brutal drive for conformity, Albee gives Franco and his Aide street-and-gutter-level language. When Franco offers asinine excuses for eliminating dissenters, Albee lets him brag coarsely that after he "saved the country from itself," there were "some people [who] just didn't make the cut, if you catch my drift . . . weren't worth talking about anymore. . . ." <sup>22</sup> When the

Narrator objects, "Oh, I see . . . so Lorca's name vanished, eh? . . . his poems taken out of print," Franco replies, "Yeah, like that. He wasn't worth the trouble . . . Who cares? Commie faggot!"<sup>23</sup>

It was Lorca's theater work that deviated most pointedly from the state's main-line precepts. Albee's script sets up inescapable parallels, albeit unlabeled by Albee, with his own plight in the 1960s when a Pulitzer committee rejected *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for supposedly offensive language and content. The criticism and publicity that Albee received at the time, though similarly unfair and damaging, proved less irrevocable, eventually, than the censorship Lorca faced for his unique dramas. In *The Lorca Story*, Albee has an actor refer to a news report that charged Lorca with "perverting the peasants" through staged displays "of shameful promiscuity . . . of free love," and with "obedience to the dictates of Jewish Marxism, free love, and communism."<sup>24</sup> Albee's Franco explicitly names the actors "atheists" and "homosexuals."<sup>25</sup> Historically, Lorca had become active in the group to revive the "rancid and stagnant" Spanish theater from its "dead reproductions of the classics and escapist junk"; he preferred "theater for the *people*, *about* them."<sup>26</sup> His insistence that theater "should immerse itself in the problems assailing humanity"<sup>27</sup> resembles Albee's own drive for fresh and useful theater in the early 1960s.<sup>28</sup> From start to finish, Albee's through-line for *The Lorca Play* is that Lorca's haunting, idealistic vision for theater was political poison for him in a Fascist country that subordinated the individual—creative artist or not—to the combined will of church and state.

To mock the inescapable outcome of church and state collusion, Albee gives amusing scenes with the Cardinal toadying to the overbearing egoism of Franco. Albee's dialogue lets Franco boast to the Cardinal, "My mother was a saint!", to which the Cardinal mumbles only, "She was?"<sup>29</sup> But Franco quickly insists, "You don't think my mother was a saint?" The fawning Cardinal replies, "I do, I do . . . if you say she was a saint, she was a saint!"<sup>30</sup> At another spot, Albee ridicules the church's subservience to the state by forcing Franco to overhear the Narrator's jest, "There's talk of making Isabella a Saint . . . shows you what a few good works can do!"<sup>31</sup> (In Spain's early years, Isabella is said to have ordered her country's gypsies, Jews, and Arabs, "Convert or be killed!")<sup>32</sup>

To end this requiem on the thwarting of Lorca's vision by political pressures, Albee chooses as his backdrop a full-sized canvas facsimile of Goya's "Executions of the Third of May." His choice broadens the relevance of Lorca's execution. Goya's canvas displays a group of Madrilenos facing a firing squad, with one young man flinging up his arms in opposition to the soldiers.<sup>33</sup> Conceivably, the man could have cried out "This isn't fair!" By creating on stage a mirror of the Goya masterpiece, Albee dramatizes Spain's tragic loss: a lifetime of productivity from a literary giant. This finale confirms Albee's grasp

of art and history, and heaps philosophical weight onto artists' protests against the narrowness of political and social repression—"This isn't fair."

Jeane Luere, Professor Emeritus  
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## Notes

1. Matthew Roudané comments on America's "theatrical renaissance" in *Modern Critical Views: Edward Albee* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) 163.
2. Oscar Brockett, *A History of the Theater*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982) 612.
3. Edward Albee, *The Lorca Play: Scenes from a Life* (Working script, copyright 4-10-92)
- Act I, sc. v, p. 4.
4. Everett Evans, rev. of *The Lorca Play*, *Houston Chronicle* (25 April 1992) 3D.
5. Evans 3D.
6. Albee, Act I, sc. i, p. 5.
7. Act I, sc. i, p. 5.
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22. Act II, sc. i, p. 7.
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25. Act II, sc. ii, p. 1.
26. Act II, sc. ii, p. 1.
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Actor/Director Dominique Serrand as *Don Juan* and Steven Epp as *Scanzarelle* in Theatre de la Jeune Lune's *Don Giovanni*.

**Theatre de la Jeune Lune: *Don Juan Giovanni*, Directed by Dominique Serrand, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, September 3, 1994.**

The members of the Jeune Lune company of Minneapolis opened the Fall 1994 season of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre with their inventive and risky production of *Don Juan Giovanni*, a part prose, part opera hybrid based on Moliere and Mozart. The performance text, created by the ensemble, entertains the objective of exploding the prolific legend of the seducer. (Occasional volleys are also sent in the direction of the likes of Tirso de Molina, Byron, and Shaw). Although *Don Juan Giovanni* remains faithful to its composite title from the Mozart opera, it is neither a prose play nor an opera. It is a company invented genre that supports vigorous traffic between music, lyrics, and prose dialogue. The blending of music and prose intends, throughout, to promote critical cross-textual commentaries, while scrupulously avoiding displays of seamless navigation between styles of performance. Difference between high intention and real achievement remains, in this production, at the level of the varying skills that the Jeune Lune performers bring to the partition of words and music.

The Jeune Lune company disarms purist expectations from the very beginning by flaunting its own penchant for the eclectic. Rejecting any form of historical accuracy, *Don Juan Giovanni* introduces jarring chronotopes from the very first instance Don Juan and Sganarelle arrive in a customized Chevrolet convertible (replete with red upholstery, chrome plates, and a shiny-blue exterior). This is a vehicular stage-prop that transforms the subsequent scenes into something like a theatrical "road movie," one that, given the natural limitations of the open Berkeley Rep Stage, suggests a circular journey. Here the infernal drama of moving and going nowhere becomes increasingly clear as successions of characters enter and exit, the stage traffic itself conducted according to the strategic placements of the automobile. Change of setting is also shown by a mobile iron bridge arching over support towers that is sometimes connected to a third stage element, a constantly shifting metal platform. Finally, a multi-purpose stage siparium completes the items integral to a visual scheme reminiscent of such disparate locales as a drive-in cinema, an opera presented alfresco, the makeshift stage of an itinerant theatre company, or the raucous atmosphere of a circus run by lunatics.

We are initially introduced to Juan who is engaged in a backseat tryst with Donna Anna (renamed Diva in this production). Lovemaking ends with a calculated act of cruelty on Juan's part when he pushes his sexual partner from the car and throws a bouquet of withered floweres at her for good measure. He

then harangues his servant Sganarelle with boorish manifestoes extolling libertine and priapic conduct. The opening scenes continue the introduction of seduction strategies with the vehicle serving as ambulatory boudoir. Typically the masters (Juan and Giovanni) indulge in amorous adventures, while their frustrated servants drive. It is not uncommon for Juan to find occasion to disappear under a pretty skirt, while Giovanni underscores the lecherous conduct of his counterpart with a sublime rendition of an aria. Scene after scene is conceived in such a way to thwart traditional plot considerations. For instance, the young peasant lovers of Moliere, Charlotte and Pierrot (Zerlina and Masetto in Mozart) appear soon enough, but any chance of their finding roots in our consciousness is relinquished in face of the anecdotal and deliberately sketchy approach to characterization exhibited by this production. For Charlotte, to encounter Juan is to abandon the long suffering Pierrot for an invitation to step into the car. Left soaking under a great burst of rainfall (expertly handled on the stage), Pierrot will plead with aimlessly roaming Elvire (the deserted wife in Moliere) to crush him under the wheels of her bicycle. The subsequent singing of "*si, si, si, notte e di vogliam passar*" / "yes, yes, yes, we'll spend our days and nights" is no longer the peasant girl's call for reconciliation, but the humiliated rustic's expression of grief, a painful cry threatening suicide. It is not long before the entire repertory of female protagonists (including Zerlina and Donna Elvira), join as a unified chorus, the actors and singers expertly mingling Italian lyrics and English prose to declare their communal expression of defiance.

Leporello, servant to Giovanni, is eager at this midpoint in the production to apologize for his master, while, Sganarelle, a man at the end of his tethers, urges the women to avoid any further contact with the arch-seducer. This Sganarelle (played with manic energy by Steven Epp) entertains nightmarish visions wherein his master appears disguised in a straight-jacket while he himself plays the reluctant nurse who must curb him from committing disgraceful acts. Waking hours, for Sganarelle, are no less distressing: conundrums surprise him in great waves of delirious and random inquiries: Who to believe, the Warren Commission or Oliver Stone? Did Reagan have a clue? How is it possible for Juan to stomp over everyone?

The professionalism that impresses most in the Jeune Lune company comes mostly from the singers. Gary Briggles's Giovanni meets the challenge of coupling antiheroic behavior with brashness. When director Serrand (who also doubles as Juan) conceives of pushing Mozart's music beyond the comic to the point of "buffa," Briggles is more than game. Decked in anachronistic period costumes, or wearing outrageous wigs (an orange Mohawk at one point), he paces the aisles of the Berkeley Rep auditorium, giving nods and knowing glances to select members of the female audience, while the careworn Leporello (Bradley

Greenwald bringing a sad clown aspect to his part) cautions "*voi sapete quel che fa*" / "you know what he does" from the famous "catalogue" song (in which New Jersey has been added to the several sites of amorous conquests). If stylistic parody, then, exemplifies the function of the musical performers, it is important to convey that there is nothing of the anecdotal about the capabilities of the other singers either: Kathleen Humphrey (Zerlina), Cynthia Lohman (Donna Elvira), and Mary Rempalski (The Diva) bring craft and spirit to the musical sequences, expertly wielding the textual changes, the studied carelessness of the translations, the modernized idioms, and all the pinched and pilfered snatches of other operas that transform Da Ponte's original text into something like a contemporary "ballad opera."

Singing skill in this production, amply supported by a small orchestra (Kathleen Dillon, violin; Katrina Wrede, viola; Eric Stein, cello; Steve Parker, woodwinds; Luis Guterrez, percussion) persuades, and even when Mozart is betrayed, the Mozartian spirit remains vibrant and intact. The same felicity of accomplishment does not grace the work of the prose actors. Moliere's text is jettisoned with greater impunity and replaced by the group created text that relies heavily on the "improvisational" style. At this juncture, the actors find themselves without resource, for the visual jokes and silly puns wear thin soon enough, and one is left with the boor who is Don Juan, a figure whose cruelty and machismo withstand the farcical strategies calculated to demystify his legendary reputation. Director Serrand's anticlimactic finale does not help matters either. The famous Statue (Juan/Giovanni's nemesis) fails to appear; instead a miniature car is shown speeding across the scaffolding presumably with the protagonist in tow. The sudden explosion of the toy vehicle in flames represents Juan/Giovanni's demise. The hoary ending of an automobile accident (or suicide) reveals, of course, how much the virtues of sound plot construction have been overlooked by the Jeune Lune Company, and how much we too conspired to look the other way when we were so busy enjoying the crazy antics of these performers.

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