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(An Analysis of Postmodern Theatre Practices In *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical*, *The Laramie Project*, and *After*)

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The postmodern world, saturated with continually-conflicting ideas and stances, is a place where people can act more as a conduit to their interests and relational rituals. Like a slab of clay remolded every second, in conflict at what it is or should be, postmodern art reflects this approach to life; of a multiphrenic (a term coined by Kenneth Gergen referring to the postmodern trend of “splitting of [something] into a multiplicity of self-investments” (1991, 74)) form at odds with not just past eras, but also, at times, itself. In essence, one thing invests itself into many identities in order to define itself. A book may split itself into many genres, cuisine may draw from many cultural backgrounds in order to create a fresh dish. In this fashion, new plays are birthed with a delightful array of genre, voice, and theme within themselves: a musical can challenge form, a play can challenge the notion of truth and authorship, and a more experimental piece can challenge experience in a theatre itself. Through an analysis of Kyle Jarrow’s *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical*, Moises Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project*, and Andrew Schneider’s *After*, I will explore postmodern approaches in, and aesthetics of, creating (and presenting) theatre in the postmodern world.

When looking at what defines a postmodern theatre piece, it is important to look at what defines the postmodern era. In the romantic and modernist eras, art held an underlying wisdom, or central rationality, revolving around the author’s perspective. Art belonged to one set of

characteristics: elements were selected to be included in the piece, and rarely were they mixed (a few examples of breaks in these forms are tragicomedies, musicals, electric instruments). Yet with the saturation of perspectives and democratization of voices in the postmodern world, the finite power of interpretation has shifted into the hands of the reader such that “each reader incorporates the author into his or her own perspective [of interpretation]” (Gergen 1991, 105). Art becomes like a “blank slate” for a vast array of interpretation, all equally valid in determining the “true meaning” of the artwork: a collapse of objective reality, of which Roland Barthes wrote as “the death of the author.” He states that, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin [the author] but in its destination [the reader]... [The reader] is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (1967). Through this, the postmodern era is defined by an overthrow of objective form and authority, for favor of a democratization of truth, in which all voices hold equal weight in the evaluation of facts. Thus, the first part of understanding the postmodern theatre piece is looking not at what the piece means, but more of how it can be interpreted and what individual perspectives are present within the piece for the audience to interpret, as every audience member will take away something different from the performance.

It follows that to create postmodern theatre, the author must be able to incorporate a variety of vernaculars into their work. If the “author” is “dead,” then the authors become more translators of various ideas and forms, and “no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (Baudrillard 1988, 25). The identity of postmodern art changes several times within its presentation, and pluralism reigns. Instead of choosing from a singular set of characteristics, postmodern art blurs the lines and collects from a variety of different sets, further merging elements into one superset without boundaries. A building may include classical

columns, with an art-deco shape, and gothic roof; traditional boundaries of cuisine erode, allowing for fusion between cultures and methods; and theatre is no longer restricted to just drama, but can alter its identity a number of times before curtain call. The postmodern theatre piece is a hybrid of voices on a stage, presented for audience interpretation.

To start with a more commercial product as illustration, *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* is a prime example of a postmodern approach to creating musical theatre, specifically in how it constructs its musical style. Most musicals can be defined by their soundtrack genre, which is usually classified as simply “musical,” and then followed by a more specific genre (ie. *Bright Star* has been commonly categorized as Bluegrass). Artists such as Stephen Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Stephen Schwartz have conspired recently to create what is identifiably Broadway-pop. A few deviances here and there have striven to change what a musical is, and can be, with works such as John Cameron Mitchell, Lin Manuel Miranda, and Dave Malloy. While important in the postmodern movement, these musicals are more steps towards an ultimate postmodern musical, as they fall under a genre, albeit a very specifically-defined genre. Mitchell’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a rock-opera, Miranda’s work classifies as hip-hop/rap, and Dave Malloy’s *Great Comet* is a Russian electro-pop opera. These works are musically-multiplicitous in nature, meaning they are present in more than just one genre of music, or can only be described with multiple genres in order to have a valid set of criteria for evaluation. However, while important in the evolution of postmodern musicals, the defining genre of such examples ultimately fall into one specific genre, no matter how hybrid. *SpongeBob* challenges this singular identity by stepping further, redefining its musical genre seemingly with each new number.

From the traditional Broadway-pop song, to gospel, to rap, to a tap interlude, the multitude of songwriters commissioned to write songs for *SpongeBob* allows for a wide variety of genres to co-exist in the same musical. Each song is tailored specifically to a character or situation, and an artist specializing in that style, tagged to write the music. For example, “No Control” embodies Plankton’s more-hip solution to the Bikini Bottom apocalypse as a rap by T.I.. Just as a postmodern person’s identity changes several times in a day based on who they’re interacting with, as they “can be anything at any time so long as the roles, costumes, and settings have been commodiously arranged... [and] No single act of deviance is ‘telling of one’s personality,” (Gergen 1991, 184-185), so does the *SpongeBob* musical in its music. The story calls upon a revolving set of genres depending on who’s singing, the information being sung, and the circumstances in which the song takes place. Patrick Star’s “Super Sea Star Savior” gospel tribute is indicative of the sardine cult’s nature of viewing Patrick as a messiah, and their willingness to blindly follow an ideology (as evidenced by the line “He said we should close our eyes, which made us realize, that Patrick is the one who will save us from our demise” (Adams 2018). It also draws on Patrick’s desire to be important, and for people to listen to what he’s been saying. Yet this is completely different from “I’m Not A Loser,” which is an uplifting alternative rock (with a tap dance interlude) piece written for Squidward, and his desire to shine and perform on the stage. Due to this multiplicitous nature in conflicting genres, no song is telling of *SpongeBob*’s “personality,” or overall genre. It belongs to all genres of music included in the soundtrack, and at the same time, none of them, allowing for a true hub where conduits of musical categories merge.

This postmodern approach of channeling an amalgamation of voices on stage allows a something-for-everyone consideration in audience enjoyment. For example: an audience member

might dislike “When the Going Gets Tough” because they don’t like rap music, however they love “Poor Pirates” because they like drinking tunes with an easy chorus to sing along to. With the saturation of musical voices in the show, it would appear everyone would be able to find some aspect, no matter how small, to dislike or enjoy. Thus, *SpongeBob* can only be defined as a musical (a Broadway musical at that) which renders the form as a true blank slate for any combination of styles and genres, challenging the established form of a “traditional” Broadway musical.

Whilst the multitude of musical talent sourced is an example of a postmodern approach to creating an aspect of a show, another example of gathering voices is Moises Kaufman’s approach in directing *The Laramie Project*, a documentary play about the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard. The main theme of the postmodern world is deconstructing “known” facts and looking at who is writing what the public comes to know as “the truth.” Gergen states that, “Objectivity [is] achieved through a coalition of subjectivities... [And] as the range and variability of reactions to any condition are increased, so does ‘the truth of the matter’ become increasingly cloudy” (1991, 84-85). Just as a scientist with a new theory must test that theory, and his results supported by fellow scientists in journals, so is our understanding of events and facts. In Western Romantic and Modernist works, the narrative truth of a piece is generally supported by only one main narrator, or one main character (for example, *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder offers a mosaic look at a town’s life cycle, narrated by one narrator, and written by one author). There are exceptions to this, of course: Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is one. The postmodern story focuses on a wide array of characters and narratives, all of which are important in crafting the truth of the story in its entirety, and is more a collaboration than a singular voice. Through the Tectonic Theatre Company’s method of gathering, and organization of interviews

from Laramie's citizens (including interview responses, or journals, from members of the theatre company itself) conflicts in opinion are revealed as an underlying truth/theme of the play's narrative is constructed.

Consider the varied responses to the media throughout the piece. At the start of the play, when the murder has just happened, the interviews detailed a dependence on the news in order to find out more information. Matt Galloway, a bartender, speaks that he “[drove] to the nearest newsstand, [bought] a *Laramie Boomerang* ‘cause [he wanted] more details,” and similarly Romaine Patterson, a Laramie resident, “watched the ten o’clock news that night, where they started speaking about the nature and the seriousness of it” (Kaufman 2001, 48). Yet later, the mood towards reporters and the media shifts towards unease and mistrust. Doc O’Connor outlines his mistrust in his interviews with reporters, saying “I taped them at the exact same time. I have every word I ever said on tape, so if they ever do anything funny they better watch their fuckin’ ass” (Kaufman 2001, 52). And yet others such as Bill McKinny see the media taking advantage of the situation, explaining “Had this been a heterosexual, these two boys decided to take out and rob, this never would have made the national news” with Gil Engen supporting with his thought “that the gay community took this as an advantage, said this was a good time for us to exploit this” (Kaufman 2001, 53). In such an example, the news has been presented in several ways: an outlet of facts and information on events; and a capitalist corporation, presenting any story it can sensationalize. The play is then more a connecting outlet for a multitude of opinions and accounts than it is about presenting one specific story, seemingly granting the authorship to the interviewees to structure an objective truth from their subjective interviews, much like a court of law might depend upon witnesses to construct the narrative timeline of a crime.

In order to analyze Kaufman's approach in structuring the truth, it is important to look at who controls the story. For while Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Company may have sourced many interviews, ultimately the story is left to Kaufman to structure, which brings up the question of whether the story truly belongs to the interviewees, or the Tectonic Theatre Company. Throughout the play, "we are constantly being reminded that this story is being *mediated*; that what is being presented is not simple truth" (Bottoms 2006, 62). Not only are the interviews being relayed to us through actors, having been edited by the director, but the material itself challenges the play's underlying purpose. For example, inclusion of material such as Rebecca Hilliker's line: "when you first called me, I wanted to say you've just kicked me in the stomach. Why are you doing this to me" (Kaufman 2001, 25). Bottoms argues that this "invites audiences to question the role and assumptions of the interviewer-actors and writer-director" (2006, 65). Another example of this blurring of "truth" comes from another of Hilliker's lines when she expresses her fears by saying, "I was really scared that [they] were going to try and say that it was a robbery, or it was about drugs. So when they used 'gay panic' as their defense, I felt this is good, if nothing else the truth is going to be told... the truth is coming out" (Kaufman 2001, 81). In a new analysis of the case, Stephen Jimenez's *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About The Murder Of Matthew Shepard* claims the murder was not a hate crime, but a drug deal gone awry, directly undermining not only Hilliker's idea of "the truth," but also the validity of the play's presented truth. If, indeed, Jimenez's claim is "true," then the entire ethos behind *The Laramie Project* becomes that shared intent of media outlets of which the citizens of Laramie were so wary. This point is directly addressed by Bottoms, who claims that inclusion of inserts such as Hilliker's line on page 25 "raises the uncomfortable question as to whether they too – like the media – are simply in Laramie to capitalize on an "angle" they have a vested interest in

pursuing” (2006, 66). Not only this, but Kaufman, in his introduction, poses the question to his company: “Is theatre a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events” (2001, 12). This shows the play’s meta critique of itself, willing to insert that shard of doubt that its intentions are shared with the media, capitalizing on the sensationalizing story.

With a presentation of the mosaic of voices to contribute to an overall truth, and the continuous conflicting ideas and opinions within the construction of the piece, *The Laramie Project* becomes a harbor for multiple networks of voices. It no longer exists as the “Truth,” but as a question intended to spark discussion in communities, each of which will pull something slightly different out of the play. Perhaps it even asks of the audience to be the jury with the presented testimony. In the postmodern spirit, it calls into question the status quo for its time, and constructs an underlying narrative truth from the perspective of several.

Beyond form and story lies a more abstract element: theme and idea. Several recent plays have been created with conflicting themes and a multitude of ideas. Action Hero’s *Slap Talk* took on hours of ideologies in combat, *Love and Information* brings together a mosaic of situations and moments in time, and Hofesh Shechter’s *Grand Finale* presents a multitude of abstract ideas surrounding one central theme. Of the most interesting new postmodern plays, specifically in its approach in creating the piece, is Andrew Schneider’s most recent work: *After*. Similar to sourcing a multitude of musicians, or an affluence of accounts, Schneider and company drew from a plethora of perceptions (ideological, and physical) to create the spine of his show, where ideas spout from the speakers, themes co-exist and saturate the play, and nothing belongs to anyone. It is as postmodern in its creation as it is in its presentation and aesthetic.

*After* has been described as a thematic (acid) trip by lighting designer Bobby McElver in an interview conducted 9 February, 2018. Designed specifically so the audience would leave the

theatre questioning their senses and known world, the high-tech play introduces sight, sound, and smell to induce an unstable world. One moment, there's a table; and the next it vanishes. The two actors (Andrew Schneider and Alicia Ayo Ohs) throw themselves around the room between brief moments of darkness to create a completely new stage image. The split-second scenes throw around philosophy, "lines lifted from a relationship spat, others repurposed from a self actualization seminar" to create "a sequence of quick takes, frenetic and exact" (Krulwich 2018).

The approach of collecting material, and creating the show, was the same disorienting (albeit precise) method as the presentation. Ideas were written whenever they appeared, scenes were conceived and tinkered with to millisecond perfection, and no coherent story was written (McElver 2018, personal communication). In such a manner of creation, no central theme arose; rather the play became clay-like in design, molding to any and all abstract ideas and scenes, aligning itself with no defined form. Krulwich writes "Maybe *After* is about the last sensory burst just before brain death... Maybe it's about sandwiches. I don't really know" (2018). Much like the problem with defining *SpongeBob*'s style, or discerning the objective truth of *The Laramie Project*, *After* leaves the audience with a multiphrenic pile of things. It achieves its form through a coalition of "subjectivities," or themes, and belongs to several themes and messages at once, as no single scene is telling of what the audience is supposed to take away from the show. For example, one scene is a woman dying of hypothermia, while another takes place at a dance rave. A good chunk of the play takes place completely in the dark, in which stray thoughts and sounds are tossed about. In line with Barthes's philosophy of the dead author (where the audience is tasked with determining the meaning of a work), and Baudrillard's preposition of pluralism (in which art changes several times within its duration): due to the multiplicitous nature of the

scenes and thematic ideas in *After*, it is up to the audience member to decide what they want to focus on, and ultimately what to take away.

Beyond the disorienting nature of scene changes, the technical aspects of the show utilized the actors as conduits. The best example of this is the way McElver designed the sound, specifically the vocals. The actors mouthed the lines, while pre-recorded audio was played through speakers, which allowed for one actor to literally speak in a different voice. At times, the two main actors' voices would switch; at others, they were given to two other people entirely. In this manner, the actors became blank slates; conduits for which the recordings to flow, and re-written in each scene. There are no concrete characters to connect with in *After*; only a revolving door of philosophies and situations (made even more ambiguous by the minimalist set design). It is ultimately up to the audience member to place those situations in context, a practice that is not set in stone, but only by the individual's experience, and perspective on the scene.

Going one step further, the hypnotic trip of a play "intentionally manipulates the senses" (Karp 2018), turning them into subjective facts (what is seen, smelt, or heard are sometimes illusions). With every turn, the play causes audience members to question their senses, and the reality of the play (and their own world), as they struggled to make sense of the chaos presented on stage. In general, people rely on their senses to understand the world. If someone sees a table, they accept that object exists in the physical world; if they hear a person talking, they know how to locate the person based on where the sound is coming from, and who is speaking; if they smell burning wood, they look for fire and think about safety. *After* introduces mind tricks in order to upset that reliance on sight, sound, and smell. Tables appear and reappear, sound is thrown around the room through wave synthesis, the smell of burning wood is introduced to the audience in the dark, and at one point, the essence of a figure can be seen walking around the

stage fringe (but not if looked at directly). In this manner, that pesky concept of “truth” is disrupted, as audience members are forced to call into question what senses they can trust. The objective truth becomes subjective, as the audience is unsure of what they’ve seen or experienced. Through its methods of devisement, the approach of creating an acid-like trip for the audience becomes a postmodern form of theatre creation, and presentation.

Samuel Beckett theorized in his time that art would take on a new form that admits to the chaos of the world, and places it on display (Driver 1996, 506). To the modernist and romantic person, this postmodern society, where the world becomes saturated with conduits of information and ideas, and truth becomes subjective, might seem like absolute chaos. However, this chaos is neither unpredictably random, nor disorderly. What Beckett was referring to, although he could not have known this at the time, was the postmodern movements in deconstructing truth, and the saturation of relationships and ideas within the world: the liberating form of not following one specific form, and constantly questioning “truth.” *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* liberated the musical form from being restricted to just one genre of music, and challenged what a Broadway musical is “supposed to be.” *The Laramie Project* constructed a multiplicity of truths within its presented narrative. *After* spanned countless genres, styles, and themes, while also challenging the audience’s trust in their senses. Through these three plays, and their creators’ approaches in developing them, it becomes very clear that the postmodern theatre piece takes simple sets of pre-determined elements and blurs the lines between them, mixing and matching until a final product is achieved. There’s an inclusion of many perspectives and identities embraced and presented to the audience, which asks them to form their own interpretation and opinions of the piece, rather than the author spoon-feeding one definition of their play.

Recall that the postmodern theatre is a blank slate for a hybrid of voices to draw upon, and present themselves to the audience. No set underlying truth, or message, is defined, as each audience member will analyze the work in their own perspectives. *SpongeBob*, *The Laramie Project*, and *After* all incorporate this principle within their approach and aesthetic. While each play had different elements that were constructed with postmodern approach, each offers valuable insight into how trends in theatre have evolved out of Modernist practices. They upset the status quo of theatre, challenging form and authority, and picking up a fluctuating set of identities. These pieces no longer adhere to traditional boundaries of sets, but fuse together elements from any they see desirable. *SpongeBob* gathered musical talent from multiple styles of music, *Laramie Project* gathered interviews from several perspectives, and *After* assembled a collection of ideas to present as scenes. In this way, all three plays have the postmodern stamp of being a connection between multiple terminals of ideas which, when presented to audiences, gives the aesthetic of belonging to many things at once, while at the same time belonging to no unifying idea. Boundaries cease being boundaries, and singular definitions no longer apply. *SpongeBob*'s musical genre cannot be defined; the truth of Matthew Sheppard's death, and the reason to why the play exists, is not presented as factual evidence; and the amalgamation of ideas and themes within *After* render it without an overall message, or belonging to one theme.

Through this, Beckett's vision of chaos turns into the breakdown of traditional sets in a multiphrenic world. Approaches and aesthetics of these postmodern works strive to admit any and all ideas into their creation and presentation, even if they conflict with each other the entire time. Mario Botta, a swiss architect said: "The [artist] is no more than an interpreter of the time in which he or she lives. [Art] is a formal expression of history" (Gergen 1991, 113). In this light, it would seem that Postmodern theatre, its approaches, and its aesthetic becomes a

reflection of the saturation that has occupied modern society, as people inhabit a multitude of interests and personalities, and as authority is challenged by perspective and alternate (albeit equally-valid) voices.

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