

KEVIN BROWN:

SOCIAL ACTIVISM, TELEPRESENCE, AND COLLABORATION IN *The Orphan Sea*

This project is based on a recent collaboration I undertook with internationally recognized, award-winning playwright Caridad Svich, called *The Orphan Sea*. The finalized ‘audio paper’ will be constructed during the Fluid Sounds conference workshop. The finished product will be a combination of a conference-style paper (the text of which follows), interspersed with sound bites from recordings undertaken during our collaboration in the fall of 2014. Audio samples will include recordings of the playwright and actors reading the play in rehearsal and the final production, possibly some interview materials and clips of recordings from a colloquium with Svich during her residency, and also audio from a talkback session held at the university after one of the performances. Sound snippets will be interspersed with my own reading of the following theoretical text to create the final audio paper.

During the collaboration, Svich visited the University of Missouri campus twice in person, once in the beginning of the rehearsal and once for the opening of the play, but otherwise our communication was performed using electronic media of various kinds to foster communication. Thus, this collaboration might serve as an example and test case for future collaborations, both artistic and scholarly, which might utilize similar models of collaboration and communication. This collaboration as a topic for the seminar is especially well fitting on several levels. The concept of the Fluid States North meeting is a telepresence meeting between four island locations in the North Atlantic. Just like this conference, during the writing and production of the play, Svich, myself, and the cast collaborated virtually, through Skype, email, and sharing sound and video files through Google collaborative online tools. In addition, the text of the play includes themes that are related to the conference theme, including social activism, immigration, war, global warming and the environment, equal rights, and the way that technology isolates us by creating borders between one another, the media dividing humanity into ‘us versus them.’

Sailing *The Orphan Sea*

[Please note that not all of the text from the following written portion of the paper will be used in the audio paper. It is my intention that during the workshop I will explore the sound files that I have recorded, find examples of audio that will couple well with sections of the text. Thus, I expect that the finished product will be a combination of the text in this file and audio segments that have yet to be compiled.]

During the fall of 2014, award-winning playwright Caridad Svich was commissioned to write a new play for a world premier production at the University of Missouri at Columbia. The product of this effort is *The Orphan Sea*, a meditation on the archetypes of Penelope and Odysseus, mythological characters from Homer’s *Odyssey*. I had the great honor of directing this play, and working hand-in-hand with the author during its development stage. Svich flew out to Missouri for two two-week periods, once in September of 2014 and again for the opening of the play. During that time Svich and I ran workshops with the newly auditioned cast in order to get the play up on its feet.

The Orphan Sea is unlike any play I have ever encountered. The title of the play is inspired by the words of the late, great poet Mahmoud Darwish from his collection *Memory for Forgetfulness*: ‘Hallowed be your hands, which, all by themselves, raise mountains from

the ruins of the orphaned sea' (Darwish 1995: n.p.). Svich's play, although rooted in classical themes, breaks almost every 'rule' of narrative drama that has ever been derived from Aristotle's work on tragedy. In the promotional materials, Svich writes: '*The Orphan Sea* is a story of us, here, now, and also of who we were once. It is a story of those that cross rivers and seas and those that wait for them, of a lover who searches for one lost years ago, and of someone called Penelope, who may be waiting for someone called Odysseus. Told in poetry, song, film and dance, *The Orphan Sea* is a dream play for anyone that dares to dream' (C. Svich 2014: pers. comm. 21 July).

In terms coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in his famous treatise *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), this script may be Svich's bravest move to date into a new choral, Dionysian mode of narrative. The lines of individual characters not delineated in the script, forcing the director to work out the Apollonian elements of the play in the production process. In addition, like much of Svich's work, the play incorporates media elements, and invites a gestural world based in mode of hybrid dance-theatre.

One of the first things one should consider when either reading or staging one of Svich's plays, is that the text does not live on the page, but rather is meant to be embodied. Because of its poetic structure, it is tempting to treat these plays as static, as literature. As we entered rehearsal with Svich and began to explore the text with the actors, it was very important for all of us to see how the words came alive when spoken by actors, and the emotional content of the play to live and inhabit their bodies. Svich explains the importance of embodiment in her plays in relation to her plays *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart* (a rave fable) and *Twelve Ophelias* (a play with broken songs), two of her plays that are often performed at Universities: 'Sometimes when people produce them they opt for a very static and declamatory approach because they think "classical" somehow, but forget that the work is visceral and that the language of the plays lives in the body. I think that how the plays invite synesthetic approach to performance without being prescriptive' (C. Svich 2015: pers. comm. 28 January).

Instead of telling a linear story from A to Z, the play challenges us to piece together fragments from the ruins of the *Poetics*. In this way, the play is less of a traditional story and more of a meditation on the archetypes of Penelope and Odysseus, mythological characters from Homer's *Odyssey*. The setting of the play is 'Now. And a memory of times before (mythic time).' In contrast to many plays that are set among the ruins of the ancient Athenian civilization, this play breaks out of the typical ruins-as-tragedy trope to end in a rhapsody of optimism and utopianism. Rather than individual protagonists and antagonists, three choruses share the stage, and dialogue can be interchangeably assigned by the director between multiple actors who each play a version of an archetype.

Experiencing the play, the waves of meaning wash over you. There are many ideas buried in the strata of the play, typical of Svich's geographical texts. Some of the recognizable themes are related to borders, including contemporary preoccupations like immigration and war, personal categories of identity, and the way that technology isolates us by creating borders between one another, the media dividing humanity into 'us versus them.' These elements swirl in a whirlpool of dramaturgy that includes methods of technological mediation that are worked into the play to emphasize the themes, such as isolation, division, and reunion. Sometimes these methods are purposefully distancing, but more often are meant to immerse the audience and sweep them up into the world of the play.

The script of *The Orphan Sea* moves in a choral, Dionysian mode of narrative. Three choruses are comprised of versions of mythological figures, including the Odysseus Chorus, (those that cross rivers and seas), the Penelope Chorus (those that wait for those who are crossing), and The Chorus of the City. The metaphorical structure of the play blinks in and out on several levels, ranging from the romantic poetic rapture of the reuniting to a contemplation of the post-modern nausea of isolation. Yet, in the end, our couple is reunited, daring us to dream about the ways that some of the best things in life emerge from ruins. Thus, there is an inherent optimism in the work, a hope that humanity will be one day reunited, despite being separated for so long.

Memory Theatre

The plays of Caridad Svich can be thought of as a kind of ‘Memory Theatre’: an attempt to bring physical form to the memories that haunt her characters. This haunting becomes especially viable in the plays when they are staged, and the audience is invited into the action, participating in an all-enveloping, all-encompassing dance with the ghosts of her neo-mythological characters. In her plays, these memories are collisions between archetypes sending reverberations through time and space, to the point where they become undistinguishable, interchangeable, and ultimately, obliterated.

New School professor Simon Critchley’s book *Memory Theatre* (2014) is a genre-blurring hybrid, part philosophical essay, part memoir, part novel. For Critchley, Memory Theatre is any work of art that is ‘an act of memory – an attempt to reconstruct a place’ (Critchley qtd. in Fraser 2014: n.p.). In the book, the protagonist (also named Simon Critchley), receives a set of boxes from a late professor friend’s estate. In the boxes he finds a set of unpublished treatises about ‘Memory Theatre,’ a theory about an architectural space in the mind and material world where memories can be stored forever – a space that supposedly contains the sum of all knowledge. Ultimately this project fails, suggesting that the any attempt to add up the sum of all memory ultimately produces a kind of obliteration, a Gestaltian implosion of both memory and knowledge.

The fault lines between memory and history become especially precarious when Svich takes on topics such as immigration, migration, and displacement. In *The Orphan Sea*, the disruption of time and space comes about through the power of memory, in this case cultural memory, amplified because the entire play takes place simultaneously in mythic time and the present moment. In a play about borders, temporal and geographical constructions are rendered invisible and fluid. Multiple instances of the archetypes of Penelope and Odysseus play out their story, but at the same time the myth is witnessed by representatives of the contemporary moment – the citizens of The City as well as the audience. As the play reaches the final movement, the previously triad chorus merges, becoming one. Eventually all of the mythic characters fall away, obliterated. Just the actors remain, the last traces of the mechanism of theatre. Critchley explains: ‘There is a sense in which the way we enforce remembrance produces obliteration’ (Critchley qtd. in Fraser 2014: n.p.). So too it is in Svich’s Memory Theatre.

A similar approach to understanding Svich’s work can be found in the article ‘Cruel Mercies and Tender Ecstasies’ by Tamara Underiner, the introduction to the Svich’s collection of plays *Instructions for Breathing* (2014). Underiner calls attention to similar aspects of Svich’s dramaturgy, in terms of her particular use of time and space. Underiner calls Svich’s approach ‘Hauntological Realism.’ According to Underiner, ‘hauntology’ is a term coined by post-structuralist Jacques Derrida that ‘takes up where ontology leaves off in

its charge to explain the nature of what is. Whereas the latter is preoccupied with being, hauntology privileges what lurks at the borders of being – the ghost, the echo, the revenant, the reverberation – those presences that are here but not here, related to an original source that is dimly discernable and of which they partake, but do not share an identity’ (Underiner 2014: xi). The use of Derrida’s concept of hauntology seems apropos in light of our previous discussion about Svich’s work and the convergence of time and space, memory, and obliteration. Svich writes: ‘I’m interested in the remains of/ghosts of culture, and also the inheritances that are borne and marked in our very bones by these remains’ (Svich 2012: 7). In *The Orphan Sea*, mythological characters haunt people from contemporary times, coexisting in the same world, resurrected from cultural memory. According to Underiner: ‘Svich’s contribution to US dramaturgy is an expansion of the type of language available to us in order to portray the unspeakable, but still perceptible’ (Underiner 2014: xvi).

Uncharted Territories

In a 2009 article in *American Theatre*, Justin Maxwell writes: ‘Svich reveals herself as a cartographer of cultural dreamscapes. Each play maps out profoundly different, but profoundly human, terrain. These plays, one might say, are like people we know – different on the surface, but driven by similarly human hearts’ (Maxwell 2009: 33). The concept of cartography is another key to understanding the plays of Caridad Svich. Each of Svich’s plays has its own unique geography. That is, the dramaturgical structures that comprise many of her plays can be understood as if one were an explorer discovering a new world. It is almost as if each play is its own microcosm, its own planetary world, its own universe, complete with its own physical principles and rules for gravity, space, and time, and emotional principles such as love, hope, and forgiveness. As such, it is the task of the audience, reader, actor, or director to chart his or her own path through these undiscovered territories.

Sometimes the geographies in Svich’s plays are physical, but sometimes we encounter landscapes that are cultural and emotional as well. In ‘Considering Utopia,’ the introduction to the edited volume *Envisioning the Americas* (2011), Svich explains: ‘As a playwright (and in my parallel careers as translator and editor), I find myself constantly negotiating the difficult, complex terrain of utopian desire(s). Much of my writing for the stage in particular addresses the shifting political and emotional fault lines of characters left behind by their societies or caught in the rigid hierarchies of non-utopian states. I write hybrid, Latina/o, Anglo, Black, Creole, Asian, Indigenous, transgender, bi, queer, straight figures who often are not labeled or categorized, and do not want to be either’ (Svich 2011a: 9–10). On other occasions, the plays turn the explorer into a time traveler as well, rapidly shifting or combining settings from different historical time periods.

Svich writes about the importance of ‘landscape’ in the introduction to *Blasted Heavens* (2012) collection, ‘Making Plays.’ She writes: ‘My plays, are often, but not always, set in despoiled landscapes composed of fragments of specifically rooted but consciously blurred geographies and multiple historical time frames that bleed into each other to create a savage, salvaged world: a world of transformation and healing, rising out of, but not always, cruelty, and violence’ (Svich 2012: 6–7). She expands on this theme in her 2009 article about her teacher and mentor, ‘The Legacy of Maria Irene Fornes’: ‘[I]n *Language and Theatre*, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri speak eloquently about the way many of the “language playwrights” (Mac Wellman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Ruth Margraff, Matthew Maguire, Len Jenkin, Erik Ehn) are truly “landscape playwrights.” Their use of language is topographical, expansive, physical, and demands embodiment in a different manner than say, the work of

more “interior” playwrights like Christopher Shinn, Rebecca Gilman, Neil LaBute, and so forth’ (Svich 2009: 3). Although not historically named in criticism surrounding the so-called ‘landscape’ playwrights, Svich’s writing betrays a heavy influence thereof. Language is mastered through straightforward use of poetry as play text, the clarity of her prose, the resonance and beauty of her words and phrasings. But the words, the language, the script has a topographical quality as well, thus language and landscape converge. or media elements to be integrated into the show. If one were to look at the structure of the play as if it were a landscape, geographically, it is the play’s fault line.

In *The Orphan Sea*, the first half of the play is spent in tension, as the Penelopes of the play wait for their Odysseuses to return from war and adventure. The structure of the play then shifts drastically as the men return from the war half way through the play. The second half of the play evens out and becomes the story of what happens after the couple is reunited. While the characters are archetypes from ancient mythology, anachronism eventually creeps in, with references to Google Maps and the world of wires that keeps us alienated from each other in our never-ending quest for ‘access.’

Another cartological oddity, that has been used in Svich’s plays to varying degrees, is that she sometimes uses of layout of the page of the play script to delineate the poetics of the performance. The dramaturgical landscape of *The Orphan Sea* has its own oddities as well as pleasant familiarities. The basis of the structure is episodic. The play is essentially 43 short episodes. Each is one to a couple of pages in length. The setting of the play is itself a topography: ‘a fluid space, one that can evoke river, road, city, ice floe and a rock in the middle of the ocean.’ The particular shape of the play will also be informed by level of mediation used in each production. Although the use of technology in the staging of this play is not a requirement, certain episodes are noted as possible places where voiceover, film, montage, and dance sequences might occur within the flow of the play.

Neo-Radical Naivety

In a world where everything seems to be increasingly regarded as ‘radical,’ how does one achieve what is rapidly becoming a sort of ‘radical norm?’ Svich discusses what it means for theatre to be radical in ‘Popular Forms for a Radical Theatre,’ the introduction for the edited volume of the same name (2011). Svich identifies a trend among theatre practitioners at the beginning of the twenty first century when, in response to negative perceptions of avant-garde theatre as a form that holds contempt for the audience, these artists begin to experiment with popular forms: ‘[T]heatre artists are pulling apart and/or resurrecting old forms of popular entertainment to tell stories anew in a provocative manner, and thus reawaken the radical impulse in performance’ (Svich 2011b: 8). Svich maintains that work does not need to be transgressive in order to be radical. It is possible to create work that challenges and upends tradition without the draining negative energy of that wing of avant-gardists who insist on irony as the dominant artistic tone. Instead, Svich argues: ‘Work that ruptures existing traditions, upends convention, brings together disparate energies into cohesion, or markedly shifts the perspective and point of view of an audience and/or witness to a performance event is radical without the necessity of containing material that goes against-the-grain of popular sentiment’ (Svich 2011b: 9).

In ‘Exit the Author,’ an introductory chapter of Vicky Angelaki’s edited volume *Contemporary British Theatre* (2013), Dan Rebellato discusses trends in British playwriting during the first decade of the twentieth century. He notes, ‘The British theatre’s first decade of the twenty-first century began and ended with the death of the author’ (Rebellato 2013: 9).

The first death was Sarah Kane's suicide, which came closely upon her play *4.48 Psychosis*, which Rebellato calls her 'suicide note.' The death at the end of the decade was the character Tim Crouch in Tim Crouch's play *The Author*, who slits his throat in a flotation tank. (The stage direction reads 'The death of the author' (Rebellato 2013: 9)). Rebellato bookends the decade with these deaths to make a larger point, that the overall trend in playwriting during the last decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century was a removal of the author from their own work, even if that death happened by their own hand.

Rebellato observes strategies developed by several generations of playwrights who began to remove themselves from their work. As evidence, Rebellato offers 'the spread of play texts that have a new kind of openness' (Rebellato 2013: 15) such as Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* – in both plays neither time nor place is specified, and lines are not assigned to actors. In Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, lines either have no character names assigned, or have, according to Ravenhill, the most generic names possible. Simon Stephens' *Pornography* consists of seven sections of text. The script reads: 'This play can be performed by any number of actors. It can be performed in any order.' Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* is divided into seven sections, scenes can be played in any order, extra scenes to be inserted are published at the end of the play (Rebellato 2013: 15).

Svich's plays are radical in ways that reflect the dramaturgical strategies that have evolved through these several generations of radical playwrights. In addition to these radical British playwrights identified by Rebellato, Svich's work can also be seen as another notch on the continuum of several generations of radical American playwrights, such as Ntozake Shange, Suzan Lori-Parks, Paula Vogel, and Sarah Ruhl, whose dramas have challenged the landscape of contemporary drama through radical poetic formations and feminist paradigms, variously in terms of form, style, structure, and content.

Surely, *The Orphan Sea* demonstrates a 'new kind of openness' in content and form. Time and place are fluid. The characters are named briefly in the opening comments of each section, but not delineated in the text itself. The multi-protagonists (speakers) are never identified on an individual basis. There is no 'dialogue' in the way that there is in a traditional play. More of the lines are directed to the audience than other people within the world of the play. The performance is more often (but not always) presentational rather than representational. That is not to say it is declamatory, because the text still must live within the bodies of the actors, but the 'characters' are not impersonated in the same way as they might be in a classical or even more traditional contemporary play. Svich insists in the stage directions for *The Orphan Sea*: 'Text in the play is not differentiated in regards to specific voices. Sometimes Penelope speaks alone, sometimes with chorus. Sometimes Chorus is in unison, sometimes individualized, etc. Decisions regarding this should be made in the rehearsal process and should vary, depending on creative team involved in production.'

In addition to an openness in terms of the dramaturgy of plays of this movement, another strategy that Rebellato identifies in a strand among this new wave of playwrights (such as Mike Bartlett, Nick Payne and Simon Stephens) is 'a turning away from irony [...] In some more recent writers, I observe a note of weariness with irony, and instead a self-consciously naive sincerity' (Rebellato 2013: 16). Rebellato calls this turn away from the ironic 'radical naivety.' He explains: 'This tone is so complex because the characters are naive but we are given no reassurance that their authors are any less so. [...] Instead, these

moments produce a kind of suspension of intentionality, an authorial blankness, where insincerity is banished, but sincerity appears implausible (Rebellato 2013: 18).

I would argue that a similar kind of ‘radical naivety,’ or even ‘radical optimism’ is found in *The Orphan Sea*. Even in a world where radical is the new normal, her plays are exceptionally groundbreaking: politically, formally, and theatrically provocative. Svich’s characters are, most of the time, exactly what they appear to be. They say exactly what they mean to say. Although some of the moments in *The Orphan Sea* are bleak, sometimes desperate and sometimes violent, the overall tone of each of the play is hopeful. By the end of the play, the combined chorus calls for reparations and community.

José Zayas, director of the Manhattan based *Repertorio Español*’s production of Svich’s play *La Casa de los Espíritus* (*The House of Spirits*, in translation) describes Svich as: ‘one of the most intellectually rigorous and linguistically exciting playwrights working in America today. She sees art as a provocation, and her texts are blueprints for creative teams. There is no right way of doing her plays – there is only exploration and transformation’ (Zayas qtd. in Maxwell 2009: 33). This is perhaps what makes Svich’s plays truly radical, or maybe even ‘neo-radical.’ The exact ‘geography’ of each production will be unique. *The Orphan Sea* is multiply choral, and could probably not be done as a one-person-show. However it could, conceivably, be played with as little as one person in the role of each chorus, up to nine or more actors, total. Beyond questions of casting, decisions as to which actors say which lines, and how the technological elements are incorporated into the production, must be worked out by each new team that takes on the play, each in their own unique way. Even in a world where subversion is the norm, that’s pretty radical.

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