

*DELIMITING DIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATRE:  
A STUDY OF THE USE OF IDENTITY-BASED CATEGORIES IN INTRODUCTION TO  
THEATRE TEXTBOOKS*

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Theatre & Dance

2014

This thesis entitled:  
Delimiting Diversity in Contemporary American Theatre:  
A Study of the Use of Identity-Based Categories in Introduction to Theatre Textbooks  
written by Nathaniel Lawrence Stith  
has been approved for the Department of Theatre & Dance

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Delimiting Diversity in Contemporary American Theatre:

A Study of the Use of Identity-Based Categories in Introduction to Theatre Textbooks

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Oliver Gerland

This project examines the act of introducing the diversity of contemporary American theatre to undergraduate students in Introduction to Theatre textbooks. Due to an increased focus on multicultural pedagogy in the late twentieth century, textbook authors began to include chapters or sections which pointed to diversity as a unique feature of contemporary American theatre. In doing so, new genres were created based on the identity of the playwrights and the types of plays they wrote (African American theatre, Asian American theatre, Hispanic theatre, Native American theatre, feminist or women's theatre, and gay and lesbian theatre). Diversity is a salient component of contemporary American theatre and it is important to note the vital role diversity plays in present-day theatre. For the first time in history, traditionally underrepresented groups have been given a theatrical voice in mainstream theatre. However, this study asserts that categorizing contemporary American playwrights in theatre textbooks based on their race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexuality does a disservice to theatre students because it presents an incomplete picture of the playwrights and their work. In addition, the opinions of the playwrights regarding whether or not they wish to be included in an identity-based category is ignored by textbook authors. By labeling a playwright and his or her work as representative of a singular category textbook authors are also ignoring the reality that many playwrights self-identify as members of multiple identity groups and that each of these impact the playwright's worldview and the types of plays he or she writes. The conclusion of this project proposes a new model for introducing the diversity of contemporary American theatre. This new model maintains an emphasis on the important role diversity plays in contemporary American theatre. In addition it presents a more comprehensive image of the playwrights and their work to undergraduate theatre students and includes the playwrights' own views and opinions regarding labeling them and their work based on their race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexuality.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Statement of Purpose

Consider the following scenario: you are teaching two sections of an undergraduate level Introduction to Theatre course. You assign the students to read a play by a critically acclaimed Pulitzer and Tony-winning playwright who is both African-American and homosexual. Prior to reading the play you provide biographical background information to your students about this playwright. However, for one section you only discuss the playwright in relation to his race and in the other section you focus on the playwright's sexuality, intentionally leaving out the fact that the playwright is African-American. What kinds of responses would expect to receive from your students after they have read the assigned play by this playwright? Would the responses be different despite the fact that both students read the same play by the same author simply because they were only aware of the playwright's race or sexuality but not both? Would you expect that one class would read the play looking for its relation to the African-American experience and the other class read the play searching for homosexual themes? Are these identity markers relevant to an understanding and appreciation of a play? What about other identifiers? Height? Weight? Hair Color? What if the playwright publicly announces that he or she only wants to be viewed as an African-American playwright and nothing else? What if the playwright acknowledges his or her sexuality but does not wish to be seen or read as a homosexual playwright? Should we honor these requests by playwrights? Does the pedagogical approach to introducing a playwright change when we know the playwright's biographical background? Should it?

This project was inspired by a controversial speech given by playwright Edward Albee at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Lambda Literary Awards. On May 26, 2011, Albee received the Pioneer Award, meant to acknowledge individuals who have "broken new ground in the field of LGBT literature

and publishing” (“Pioneer Awards” n.pag.). In his acceptance speech, Albee ruffled some feathers in the LGBT community by stating, “I happen to be gay . . . but I am not a gay writer” (Albee n.pag.). Albee made these remarks in an effort to distance himself from being labeled as *only* a gay playwright because, in doing so, he felt he would be limiting himself and the potential of his work, meaning that his work would only be read, studied, or viewed in relation to his sexuality. Albee clearly considers himself a member of numerous categories. “I am a member of many minorities,” he said during the speech, “I am male, I am white, I am educated, I am creative, I live in what passes for a democracy, and on and on, and I will not accept any definition of my sexual proclivities to be a limitation of me” (Albee n.p.). Because Albee sees the category of gay playwright as limiting and being imposed on him from the outside, he rejects the idea that his plays (or any plays by other members of this category) should focus solely on gay themes (Bernstein 186). As he told Renee Montagne in an interview on National Public Radio shortly after making his controversial speech at the Lambda Literary Awards, “any definition which limits us is deplorable” (Montagne).

Albee’s remarks led me to question how he is being introduced to undergraduate theatre students, especially in an Introduction to Theatre textbooks. In twenty-first century pedagogy, there are multiple options for the instructor with regards to modes of delivery. For example, professors can choose to distribute classroom material via online educational software systems such as Blackboard or Desire 2 Learn. In addition, the use of online textbooks is becoming more prevalent throughout higher education. The conclusion of this study will address the possibility of creating an online textbook which can address the diversity of contemporary American theatre in a more holistic manner. However, because a discussion of diversity in contemporary American theatre began in the mid-1990s within hard-copy textbooks, and because hard-copy

textbooks remain a staple of twenty-first century pedagogical tools, this study will be primarily focused on the ways these textbooks introduce the diversity of contemporary American playwrights and theatre to students.

Do theatre textbooks present Albee as a homosexual playwright? What I found was that Albee is most often introduced to undergraduate theatre students via textbooks in one of three categories. First, textbooks such as Edwin Wilson's first edition of *The Theater Experience* (1974), as well as almost all of the subsequent editions, refer to Albee as a member of the Theatre of the Absurd category. Wilson states that Albee, "an American playwright, has also written plays in the absurd form. His *The American Dream*, a study of the banality and insensitivity of American family life, introduces a handsome young man of around twenty as the embodiment of the American Dream" (133-134). The second method for discussing Albee within theatre textbooks is to note that some of his works could fit the definition of Theatre of the Absurd while other work falls into alternative categories. Oscar Brockett's 1974 edition of *The Theatre: An Introduction* suggests that Albee's early works "led many critics to consider Albee an absurdist." Brockett continues by noting that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) bears a "likeness to Strindberg and Williams with an essentially realistic work about characters who use psychological blackmail as their primary tool for dealing with others" (417). The third way textbooks introduce Albee to undergraduate students is to label him within much more broadly defined categories. For example, Orley Holtan's *Introduction to Theatre: A Mirror to Nature* (1976) discusses Albee as a writer of tragicomedies. Holtan says, "Perhaps one of the finest examples of tragicomedy in the modern theatre is Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* There are many laughs in the play, but . . . by the end of the third act its mood has become distinctly serious" (161). Likewise, Stephanie Arnold's 2011 edition of *The*



*Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre* compares the work of Albee and Sam Shepard and includes both as examples of “American playwrights who write tragi-comedy” (400). Despite Albee’s remarks at the Lambda Literary Awards, one category that he isn’t included in by theatre textbook authors is that of gay and lesbian theatre. It’s rather fascinating to consider that a playwright who has made no secret of his sexuality, who has been honored by Gay and Lesbian advocacy groups, and who *has* included several homosexual characters in his more recent plays would not be listed in any of the textbooks examined in this study as part of gay and lesbian theatre. Further, even when gay and lesbian theatre becomes a widely acknowledged genre of theatre in the mid-1990s none of the textbooks refer to any controversy surrounding Albee’s relationship with LGBT Theatre or the fact that some of his plays contain homosexual themes or characters. I assert that this points to a reality of developing theatre textbooks rather than to any kind of mistake or purposeful exclusion on the part of theatre textbook authors. Albee entered the theatrical scene, and thus the pages of theatre textbooks, before American classrooms began to consider the study of diversity as an important component of the American educational system. Despite the fact that textbook authors categorize him in a multitude of ways, they see his work as examples of previously established genres from Theatre of the Absurd to realism to tragi-comedy. They do not view his work as being consciously tied to his identity because he made his impact on American theatre before textbook authors and educators began to think of playwrights in those terms.

What I discovered in my analysis of theatre textbooks with regards to Albee is that by the mid-1990s, theatre textbooks began to include a chapter or a significant section of a chapter devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre, often referred to as Theatre of Diversity. In the discussion on diversity, textbook authors present contemporary American theatre as an art

form which has given voice to traditionally underrepresented populations. Within these newly created chapters or sections, authors acknowledge diversity by categorizing many contemporary American plays based on the identity of the playwrights. Thus, in each of these textbooks there are subsections devoted to African American Theatre, Asian American Theatre, Gay and Lesbian Theatre, Hispanic Theatre, Native American Theatre, and Women's (or sometimes Feminist) Theatre. Within these subsections the textbook authors generally list playwrights and their plays which typify these identity-based categories. Two things struck me when reading the sections devoted to diversity: first, by introducing a playwright as a member of an identity-based category and focusing on one or two of his or her plays which also fall into that category the authors are providing an incomplete image of the playwright and his or her plays because they are only referring to a portion of his or her work. Secondly, the textbooks have not taken into account the playwrights' own views or opinions on identity-based categorization. What if the playwrights included in these categories do not wish to be viewed, read, or taught in relation to their identity? What if they agree with Albee and consider themselves a playwright who happens to be gay (or African American, or Asian American, etc.) rather than a playwright who should be primarily discussed in relation to his or her identity?

It makes sense that textbook authors would place playwrights into clearly defined categories in an effort to simplify their readers' understanding of the playwright and the types of plays he or she writes. But where do the personal views and opinions of the playwright come in to play? Are there other examples, like Albee, where the playwright rejects or attempts to distance him or herself from an identity category? Are there examples of playwrights who embrace an identity category? Should instructors take into consideration the views of a playwright regarding being identified with a particular sexual orientation, race, or gender when

discussing a playwright and his or her plays with their students? Should textbook authors acknowledge the playwright's opinions regarding identity when introducing the playwright or his or her plays to students?

There can be no doubt that certain identity markers are more highly charged than others. While it may be true that a playwright's height influences his or her worldview, we don't see textbook authors making distinctions between tall playwrights and short playwrights. And it seems unlikely that a playwright would take exception to being categorized as a tall playwright if he or she were, in fact, taller than average (assuming, of course, that such a category existed in critical discourse). However, indicators such as race, gender and sexuality are highly charged identity markers. By grouping playwrights based solely (or primarily) on these identity markers, playwrights lose their individuality and quickly become members of an identity-based category whether they wish to be a part of it or not. Because of this I have chosen to examine the response of five prominent contemporary American playwrights to being placed into identity-based categories by textbook authors. The five playwrights are August Wilson (who is categorized as an African American playwright); Tony Kushner (who is labeled within the gay and lesbian theatre category); David Henry Hwang (who is introduced to textbook readers as an Asian American playwright); Maria Irene Fornes (who is categorized as a Hispanic playwright as well as a feminist playwright); and Marsha Norman (who is either included in the category of Women playwrights or labeled as a feminist playwright).

In selecting playwrights, I chose the ones who were most commonly referred to in the diversity discussions for each identity-based category. When more than one playwright was regularly discussed in the various textbooks, I used additional criteria to determine which playwrights to discuss. These criteria included selecting playwrights with a significant body of

work, playwrights who have achieved a degree of mainstream success (one or more Broadway productions and awards for playwriting such as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama), and playwrights who have commented on identity-based categorization in published and recorded interviews throughout their career. For example, in the sub-sections devoted to African American Theatre, there are three playwrights commonly referenced in the textbooks: Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and August Wilson. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is significant because it was the first play written by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway; however she only had one other play appear on Broadway before her death in 1963. Amiri Baraka has also played a significant role in the African American theatre movement, and although he wrote a number of plays, none were produced on Broadway. August Wilson is given the most attention within the African American theatre sections in the theatre textbooks. He has written numerous plays, including a ten-play cycle chronicling the African American experience in America, has had nine original productions in Broadway theatres, and he has won two Pulitzer Prizes and one Tony Award (ibdb.com "August Wilson"). In addition, he has commented on identity-based categorization throughout his career, most notably in his controversial 1996 speech titled, "The Ground on Which I Stand," which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. In the textbooks written after the mid-1990s which include a section devoted to Asian American Theatre, there are only two playwrights mentioned: Philip Kan Gotanda and David Henry Hwang. Gotanda has a large body of work, but none of his plays have achieved mainstream success. David Henry Hwang has had six plays appear on Broadway, has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist three times, and won a Tony award for Best New Play for *M. Butterfly* in 1988 (ibdb.com "David Henry Hwang"). In addition, the success of *M. Butterfly* catapulted Hwang to fame and he quickly became the de facto spokesman for Asian American artists, much to his chagrin. The chapters

and sections devoted to Hispanic theatre in theatre textbooks are often sub-divided into three groups: Chicano theatre, Nuyorican theatre, and Cuban-American theatre. The playwright most commonly referred to in the Chicano theatre sub-section is Luis Valdez. His most successful play, *Zoot Suit* (1979) had a brief run on Broadway, and while his theatre company El Teatro Campesino has played a significant role in giving a theatrical voice to Chicanos, his body of work does not fit the criteria noted above. The subsection devoted to Nuyorican theatre generally includes a list of playwrights such as Miguel Pinero, Yvette Ramirez, Candido Tirado, and Edward Gallardo; however, like Valdez, they do not fit the established criteria for this project. The sections devoted to Cuban-American theatre also include a list of playwrights; however, Maria Irene Fornes is the only one who has achieved any degree of mainstream success. In addition, Fornes is sometimes also included in the section devoted to feminist theatre by theatre textbook authors which adds an interesting layer to the discussion of identity-based categorization. The sub-sections devoted to women's or feminist theatre generally refer to three contemporary American playwrights, all of whom match the criteria noted above. Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, and Marsha Norman each have plays which have appeared on Broadway and all three have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. All three of these playwrights could have easily been included in this discussion; however I chose to focus on Marsha Norman because she has also written lyrics and librettos to several successful Broadway musicals. This is significant, in my opinion, because although most theatre textbooks published today include a section devoted to musical theatre, the authors of these textbooks, with one exception, have chosen to focus on the work which relates directly to Norman's gender identity and ignore or overlook her contributions to musical theatre. Finally, in the sub-sections which discuss gay and lesbian theatre there are several names discussed including Mart Crowley, Harvey Fierstein, Terrence

McNally, and Tony Kushner. Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968) played a significant role in bringing plays which address gay and lesbian themes to the mainstream; however the play never made it to Broadway. Harvey Fierstein and Terrence McNally both have significant bodies of work, many of which have appeared on Broadway and been honored with Tony Awards for Best Plays. In addition, both have written librettos for Broadway musicals and their contributions, unlike Norman, are referenced in chapters discussing musical theatre in theatre textbooks. I have chosen to focus on Tony Kushner rather than Fierstein or McNally for one significant reason: the play most commonly referred to by textbook authors when discussing Kushner's contributions to gay and lesbian theatre is *Angels in America* (1993). While this two-part Tony and Pulitzer Prize winning epic does address many gay and lesbian themes, it also confronts issues which have nothing to do with sexuality. It is curious that textbook authors have chosen to ignore these themes and primarily refer to the play and Kushner in the context of his sexuality.

It should also be noted that many of the discussions regarding diversity in contemporary American theatre also include a sub-section devoted to Native American theatre. I have chosen to not include this identity-based category in this study because of my primary interest in the views and opinions of playwrights regarding this type of labeling. In the sections devoted to Native American theatre no individual playwright is discussed. For example, the seventh edition of Edwin Wilson's *The Theater Experience* (1998) refers to Native American theatre as one "which stressed ancient rituals and communal celebrations" and mentions Native American theatre groups such as The Red Earth Theatre in Seattle and the Native American Theatre Ensemble in New York. The only Native American play discussed in this section is a 1993 production of *Black Elk Speaks* at the Denver Center Theater Company. Wilson notes that the

play “was a collaboration between Native Americans and others, including Donovan Marley, the director of the Denver company” (248). While Native American theatre is an identity-based category worthy of discussion, the fact that no individual playwrights are referred to within the diversity sections of theatre textbooks has led me to exclude this category from this study.

In addition to revealing the attitudes the five playwrights noted above have towards being placed in an identity-based category, I will also provide a detailed overview of each playwright’s career to determine whether or not their body of work supports their inclusion in an identity-based category. As noted, textbook authors generally focus on one or two plays by these playwrights in order to illustrate why they are labeled based on their identity. This provides an incomplete image of the playwright. By examining their entire body of work I can offer a more accurate image of the playwright and his or her plays which will assist in determining whether or not categorizing these playwrights purely based on their identity is the most effective manner in which to introduce the playwrights and their plays to undergraduate theatre students.

This investigation will lead me to the central research question of the dissertation: is there a way to introduce undergraduate theatre students to contemporary American playwrights which honors the opinions of the playwrights regarding identity-based categorization, acknowledges the role the playwrights’ identity plays in the creation of his or her work, and provides a more complete image of the playwright and his or her body of work to theatre students? By examining the current approaches to introducing these five playwrights to theatre students in theatre textbooks and providing a detailed overview of these playwrights’ bodies of work, as well as their own views on identity-based categorization, I will be able to offer alternative methods by means of which textbook authors can acknowledge diversity in contemporary American theatre *and* present a more accurate picture of these playwrights and their work.

## **Significance of the Study**

Much has been written by scholars in various fields regarding the idea of constructed identity and the presentation of the self. What hasn't been investigated as fully is what happens when a person's (in this case a playwright's) identity is constructed by outside forces. When a textbook author decides that a particular playwright should be placed into a singular identity-based category, it must have some effect on the reception of all of the plays written by that individual. This study serves as a starting point for considering why textbook authors often label contemporary American playwrights based in their race, sexuality or gender. Categorization helps us to better understand the world in which we live. Thus, the act of categorizing a playwright allows students to read or watch a play with a body of knowledge about what to expect before they open the cover of the script or walk through the lobby door. Categorizing playwrights based on identity offers a simplistic way for textbook authors to discuss contemporary American plays and playwrights. The instructor can also benefit from this type of categorization because it makes it easier to explain the particular subject matter of an offered course. Labeling playwrights based on their identity allows the professor to structure syllabi so that equal time is given to each category of play or playwright.

Prior to the mid-1990s, few theatre textbooks addressed diversity in a substantial way. It is fascinating to note that social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Feminist Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement of the 1960s elicited relatively quick changes in academia. The first Black Studies department in the United States was established in 1969 at San Francisco State College (Rojas 86). The first Women's Studies department also began in 1969 at San Diego State University (Mohanty 150). While the shift from social movement to



academic discipline took somewhat longer for homosexuals, many college courses included the study of gay literature as early as the 1970s. The first department of gay and lesbian studies wasn't established until 1989 at the City College of San Francisco (Cruikshank 108). Despite the fact that academic disciplines devoted to the study of diversity of contemporary society were becoming more prevalent throughout the 1970s and 1980s very few theatre textbooks addressed the diversity of contemporary American theatre in a substantial manner until over twenty years after the establishment of the Black Studies department at San Francisco State College. For example, Kenneth Macgowan and William Melntiz's expanded and revised edition of *Golden Ages of the Theater*, published in 1979, discusses contemporary theatre in a chapter titled, "The Theater of Today." The chapter includes sections devoted to the work of playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, Sam Shepard, and Neil Simon, among other Caucasian, male playwrights (239-275). Four brief paragraphs are devoted to diversity and they include a mention of Luis Valdez's Hispanic theatre company, Teatro Campesino, as well as a list of several theatre companies devoted to "plays by women, for women, and about women" (271-272). In this brief discussion, the authors merely discuss the companies and fail to mention any playwright or specific plays which address the diversity of contemporary American theatre.

Once diversity became an important buzzword in academia, textbook authors began to acknowledge the contributions of playwrights from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. However, little has changed in the almost twenty years since textbook authors began to include a discussion on diversity in these publications. Contemporary playwrights are pigeon-holed in identity-based categories by textbook authors primarily based on themes and issues prevalent in their most successful works. What is missing from this conversation are the views and opinions of the playwrights who find themselves placed in these identity-based categories. What if the

playwright does not want to be labeled in this manner? What if the playwright self-identifies in more than one category? What if the playwright identifies with an identity-based category but much of his or her work has little to do with that particular category? Should the playwright still be labeled based on his or her identity? Even when a playwright does embrace an identity-based category, are textbooks doing a disservice to the student by “pre-defining” the playwright and his or her plays? Theatre textbooks have remained mostly stagnant over the past twenty years with regards to presenting the diversity of contemporary American theatre to undergraduate students; perhaps it is time for a new method of introducing contemporary playwrights and their plays in higher education theatre classrooms.

## **Review of Literature**

This project will engage with literature which examines the central question from three different angles. First, in order to provide an understanding of the process in which higher education textbooks are written and published, I will utilize several guides to textbook publishing including Mary Ellen Lepionka’s *Writing and Developing Your College Textbook* (2008), M.N. Hegde’s *A Singular Manual of Textbook Preparation* (1996), and Thomas D. Brock’s *Successful Textbook Publishing: The Author’s Guide* (1985). These books will provide details regarding how textbooks evolve from concept to published teaching tools; the central players involved in ushering a book through the publication process, including acquisitions editors, copy editors and peer reviewers; and basic guidelines for politically correct writing for college-level textbooks.

Because the central focus of this project examines the ways in which theatre textbooks present the diversity of contemporary American theatre, I have amassed a collection of introduction to theatre textbooks. By analyzing the means in which these textbooks introduce these five playwrights before and after a section devoted to the diversity of contemporary

American playwrights became commonplace several interesting facts are revealed. First, prior to the mid-1990s, playwrights were generally categorized in one of two ways: either they were discussed in relation to the era in which they wrote their plays (Ancient Greece, Elizabethan England, Post-World War II America, etc.) or they were categorized based on the genre of the plays they wrote (realism, symbolism, Theatre of the Absurd, etc.). With the advent of multiculturalism as a pedagogical philosophy meant to acknowledge and celebrate diverse cultures and backgrounds, entirely new genres were created, based on the identity of playwrights. Because academics wanted to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of contemporary American theatre, new genres needed to be manufactured to categorize plays written by traditionally underrepresented groups. The result is the genre of identity or identity-based categories.

Although I have examined textbooks published as early as John Gassner's *Theatre In Our Time*, published in 1954, I will mostly refer to textbooks which include references to one or more of the five playwrights mentioned above. These include: *The Play's The Thing: An Introduction to Theatre* (1990), by Marvin Carlson and Yvonne Shafer; *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* (1991), by Milly S. Barranger; Dennis Sporre's *The Art of Theatre* (1993); *The Enjoyment of Theatre* (1996), by Kenneth Cameron and Patti P. Gillespie; Stephanie Arnold's 2011 edition of *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*; and *Theatre in Your Life* (2012), by Robert Barton and Annie McGregor. In addition, I have analyzed all twelve editions of Edwin Wilson's *The Theater Experience*. I have chosen to utilize all twelve editions of Wilson's textbook because it has been adopted by many Introduction to Theatre courses across the country, including the University of Colorado Boulder, and because by examining numerous editions of the same textbook, I can easily track the ways in which the five playwrights addressed in this project were

introduced to students both before and after diversity in contemporary American theatre began to be addressed in theatre textbooks. I have also chosen to include a few textbooks which are written mostly for Theatre History courses rather than Introduction to Theatre courses. These include Oscar Brockett's 1991 and 2008 editions of *History of the Theatre*, and *Living Theatre: A History*, published in 2000 by Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb. These theatre history texts are useful because they address diversity in much the same way as the Introduction to Theatre courses do and illustrate the need for a shift in approach to discussing contemporary American playwrights throughout higher education theatre courses. While I acknowledge that this list of theatre textbooks is by no means comprehensive, the examples do provide excellent case studies from which we can understand the various ways in which theatre textbooks introduce these five playwrights and address diversity in contemporary American theatre.

The third group of literature relates to the playwrights themselves. In order to determine whether identity-based categorization limits a student's understanding of a playwright and his or her work, it is important that the reader has a full understanding of the overall body of work of each playwright. Therefore, I have utilized several biographies and collections of critical responses to the plays written by each of these playwrights. Included among these are Peter Wolfe's *August Wilson* (1999), Mary Ellen Snodgrass's *August Wilson: A Casebook* (2004), Mary Bogumil's *Understanding August Wilson* (2011), James Fisher's *The Theatre of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* (2001) and *Understanding Tony Kushner* (2008), Douglas Street's *David Henry Hwang* (1989), *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), edited by Marc Robinson, Diane Lynn Moroff's *Fornes: Theater in the Present Tense* (1996), *Maria Irene Fornes and Her Critics* (1996), by Assunta Bartolomucci Kent, Scott T. Cummings's *Maria Irene Fornes* (2013), *Marsha Norman: A Casebook* (1996), edited by Linda Ginter Brown, and

*Women Pulitzer Playwrights: Biographical Profiles and Analyses of the Plays* (2004), by Carolyn Casey Craig. These books provide biographical background and details regarding the plays written by each of the playwrights discussed in the study which will allow the reader to determine if the complete body of work by the playwrights discussed in the following chapters warrants the labeling of the playwright within an identity-based category.

In order to understand the views and opinions of each of these playwrights regarding the way they self-identify and how they feel about identity-based categorizations, I will look to two different types of sources. The first is recorded and published interviews with each of the playwrights. These five playwrights have been interviewed extensively throughout their careers and each of them has addressed the issue of being stereotyped in numerous interviews. Included among these is an interview with August Wilson, conducted by Bonnie Lyons, in which he discusses the ways in which his plays are used to inform predominately white audiences about the realities of black life in America. I will also reference a 1988 interview with Michael Cunningham in which Tony Kushner, who does not shy away from being categorized as a gay playwright, but also equally acknowledges all of the categories in which he has been labeled, was directly asked if he takes issue with being referred to as a gay playwright (42). In a 2012 interview with Rosemarie Tichler and Barry Jay Kaplan, David Henry Hwang speaks of his early plays which he wrote during what he calls his isolationist period where he worked primarily with other Asian artists and his work focused on Asian themes and included only Asian characters. As he explained to Tichler and Kaplan, he began to worry that he was merely creating “Orientalia for the intelligentsia” and this fear created a change in his writing in which he moved away from purely Asian themes and characters and into a period where he began to explore the fluidity of identity (39). Some of the interviews examined in this study also reveal that the

playwrights discussed are aware that their work is being categorized based on their identities within college classrooms. For example, Maria Irene Fornes is troubled by the manner in which her plays are being discussed and taught in higher education. In a 1977 interview with Maria Delgado she said, “Young people in college read essays and literary criticism on my work that distorts their viewing of the work, and I doubt that they will ever see it any differently” (252). If textbook authors ought to consider the opinions of playwrights with regards to the manner in which they are introduced to students, this statement illustrates a need for a different approach to presenting contemporary American playwrights in theatre textbooks. Finally, Marsha Norman has been asked in several interviews whether or not she considers herself to be a feminist writer. In her responses to these questions Norman states that she is a member of various feminist organizations but rarely attends meetings. She implies that she believes in the issues these organizations are fighting for but never explicitly refers to herself as a feminist. These interviews, along with many others, will serve as a starting point towards providing an understanding of how these particular playwrights feel about being placed in an identity-based category.

Along with interviews of the five playwrights, I have also examined published writings and speeches by the playwrights which more deeply reveal their own views on being categorized based on their identity. Included among these are August Wilson’s controversial keynote speech before the Theatre Communications Group in 1996, titled “The Ground on Which I Stand” in which he centers himself in the historical lineage of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s calling it “the kiln in which I was fired” and refers to himself as “a race man” (14, 16). In a 1997 article in *The Kenyon Review*, titled “Notes About Political Theatre,” Tony Kushner illustrates the ways in which his plays not only deal with gay themes but also include issues which mark

him as a Jewish playwright and a political playwright. He writes, “I am committed to do work that participates as fully as possible in the struggle of the oppressed for power, in the desperate need for economic democracy, for socialism, for feminism, for environmentalism, for an end to bigotry of all kinds, for the building of a better world” (26). In a 1989 article in the journal *Melus* titled “Evolving a Multicultural Tradition,” David Henry Hwang takes issue with separate theatres devoted specifically to presenting works by and about racial and ethnic minorities. He also suggests that all plays are ethnic plays because all plays are about a particular group of people and it is the focus on the human condition in all plays which makes them universal regardless of the race or ethnicity of the playwright or the characters in the play (17). In an article titled “Creative Danger,” published in *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), Fornes notes her discomfort with critics and scholars who believe that because she is a Cuban-American woman, her plays should be read and studied as only addressing issues related to her identity (231-232). Marsha Norman has written several articles addressing her identity-based categorization, most noteworthy is a 2009 article published in *American Theatre* titled “Not There Yet,” in which she suggests that one of the difficulties female playwrights have had in gaining respect in mainstream theatre is that the “qualifying word ‘women’” is attached to their occupation as playwrights and until they are seen as “playwrights” not “women playwrights” they will not achieve respect in the theatre community (80).

This collection of literature will provide the necessary data to understand: 1) the process of publishing a college-level textbook; 2) how these five playwrights are introduced to undergraduate theatre students in textbooks (both before and after the advent of a section devoted to diversity); 3) whether or not the total body of work by each playwright warrants their inclusion in a single identity-based category; and 4) what the playwrights themselves feel about

being categorized based on their identity. As a whole, this literature will illustrate that the current method for introducing these five playwrights via theatre textbooks does a disservice to the students because it provides an incomplete picture of the playwrights and their plays.

## **Methodology**

In the world of identity politics, the words used to describe a group of people carry great meaning. However, the authors of the textbooks examined for this study do not seem to be concerned with contemporary discourses about identity. Rather than attempt to navigate the often rocky road of nomenclature within identity politics, I have chosen to follow the lead of the authors of theatre textbooks in naming the various minority groups represented in this project. For example, textbook authors use the terms “Black Theatre” and “African American Theatre” interchangeably as will I. They also generally refer to “Hispanic Theatre” (although some name this category “Latino Theatre” despite the fact that Latino is a male gendered noun and many of the playwrights mentioned in these sections, such as Fornes, are female); again, I will follow the terms used by textbook authors when discussing Maria Irene Fornes and this identity-based category. While it is somewhat troubling that textbook authors don’t acknowledge semantics when discussing these racial groups, it is especially odd with the identity-based category related to gender. Some textbook authors refer to theatre by and about women as “Women’s Theatre,” while others refer to it as “Feminist Theatre.” For this reason, I have chosen to examine both categories in the chapter devoted to Marsha Norman. Is she a “woman” playwright? Is she a feminist playwright? Is she both? Or is she simply a playwright?

It should be noted that the textbooks examined for this study rarely define these identity-based categories. For example, few authors include a clear definition of feminism in the sub-



section devoted to feminist theatre. This category, in particular, would benefit from a simple explanation such as noted feminist author and scholar bell hooks' definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitations, and oppression" (1). The simplicity of this definition, if included in an introduction to theatre textbook, would clear up much of the debate regarding whether or not playwrights such as Maria Irene Fornes and Marsha Norman are writing plays which should be included in the category of feminist theatre. Furthermore, the lack of definitions of these categories can lead to confusion for the reader. For example, should David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* be included in the category of Gay and Lesbian Theatre because it deals with homosexuality, or must it be excluded from this category because the playwright is heterosexual?

There is a set list of questions which I will be asking of each of the texts referred to in the review of literature. For the texts related to textbook publishing the questions are simple: what is the process of publishing a textbook? Who are the individuals involved in creating a textbook and what are their roles? The biographical and critical responses to the playwrights and their work will be analyzed to determine whether or not the identity-based category the textbook authors have chosen to place them in provide sufficient context for understanding these playwrights and their plays. The implication of identity-based categorization is that playwrights in these categories are only (or at least primarily) concerned with stories and characters that in some way relate to the identity of the playwright. Therefore, I will examine the playwrights' bodies of work to determine whether or not all (or the vast majority) of the plays written by each of these playwrights do, in fact, address issues relevant to his or her identity. The majority of textbook authors refer to the most significant or commercially successful plays written by these playwrights in an effort to support their placement within a particular identity-based category. If

the playwright's less well-known work examines issues unrelated to their identity, should they still be labeled within these manufactured genres? In examining the recorded and published interviews of the playwrights as well as their own non-theatrical writing and public speeches, I will ask how each of these playwrights views the reality of being placed into an identity-based category. Do they embrace the identity label or try to distance themselves from the category or some combination of both? By asking these questions I will be able to offer a clearer understanding of the impact of identity-based categorization and begin the discussion regarding alternative methods for introducing contemporary American playwrights and their plays in higher education theatre textbooks.

## **Chapter Outline**

Following the introduction chapter, the first chapter of the body of the dissertation will be devoted to textbook publishing. Because the primary question of the dissertation concerns alternative methods for presenting the diversity of contemporary American theatre in higher education theatre textbooks, it is important to understand how textbook publishing industry works. The chapter will provide a brief overview of the process of publishing a college-level textbooks, introduce the major players in the process, including the role of the author, various editors, and reviewers who contribute to the creation of a textbook, as well as how and why subsequent editions of textbooks are published.

Chapters Two through Six will examine each of the five playwrights individually. In the theatre textbooks examined for this study there is no codified structure for introducing the various identity-based categories. Most begin with a discussion of African American theatre and conclude with gay and lesbian theatre; however the order in which they refer to Asian American,

Hispanic and Women's (or Feminist) theatre varies from textbook to textbook. I have chosen to examine all twelve editions of Edwin Wilson's *The Theater Experience* which follows the same structure in each version of the textbook; therefore, the arrangement of the chapters devoted to the playwrights will follow Wilson's organization of identity-based categories. I will begin with August Wilson, followed by David Henry Hwang, Maria Irene Fornes, Marsha Norman, and conclude with Tony Kushner.

Each of the five chapters focused on these playwrights will follow the same format. The chapter will begin with an analysis of the ways these five playwrights are introduced to undergraduate students from their first mention in the selected textbooks through their inclusion in the most recently published textbooks included in this study. By analyzing textbooks published prior to the addition of a section devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre, I will be able to note the shift, if any, in the ways these playwrights are presented once a discussion related to diversity becomes commonplace in theatre textbooks.

The second section of each of these chapters is devoted to a detailed overview of the works written by these playwrights as well as their own views and opinions regarding identity-based categorization. In his 2011 acceptance speech at the Lambda Literary Awards, Edward Albee referred to himself as a "writer who happens to be gay" rather than a gay writer (Albee n.pag.). Following this idea, the second section of each of these chapters will seek to examine whether each of the artists discussed are "X" playwrights or playwrights who happen to be "X," with the "X" referring to the identity-based category they have been placed in by theatre textbook authors. In examining both the total body of work produced by these playwrights as well as their own views regarding identity-based categorization, I will be able to determine whether or not categorizing the playwrights based on their identity is the most effective manner

in which to introduce these playwrights to undergraduate theatre students. The final section in each of these chapters will seek to synthesize the ways in which they are presented in theatre textbooks, the work produced by the playwrights, and their opinions regarding being labeled based on their identity. In doing so, I will illustrate both the pros and cons of introducing each individual playwright to theatre students using identity-based categorization.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation will address several issues related to identity-based categorization in higher education theatre textbooks. What are the benefits of using identity-based categories to introduce students to contemporary American playwrights? What are the potential downsides to placing playwrights into these categories? Should textbook authors consider the opinions of the playwright regarding placing them in these categories? Finally, is there an alternative method in which authors can more effectively introduce contemporary American playwrights to undergraduate students? Is it possible to recognize the role their identity has played in their work and thus celebrate diversity while also acknowledging the playwrights' own opinions on identity-based categorization *and* still present a complete image of the playwright and his or her plays to the readers?

## CHAPTER ONE: Textbook Writing and Publishing

This project examines the ways in which theatre textbook authors introduce contemporary American playwrights to their readership. Writing a higher education textbook can be a solitary undertaking but it is not done in a bubble. The textbook author must answer to a publisher, various editors, reviewers, instructors and ultimately the students who use the textbook. In order to fully appreciate why textbook authors introduce contemporary American playwrights and their plays based on the identity of the playwrights, it is helpful to understand a little bit about the textbook publishing process. What follows is a brief overview of textbook publishing from development through revised editions of a text.

In the second edition of *Writing and Developing Your College Textbook* (2008), author Mary Ellen Lepionka describes textbook publishing as “big business” (6). In fact, in relation to trade books and other forms of publishing, it can be extremely lucrative for both the publishers and authors (Brock 2). The irony is that unlike other types of authorship, writing textbooks is not an occupation. Textbook authors are generally academics who, for one reason or another, are dissatisfied with the currently available textbook options for their particular field and thus have chosen to write their own. However, success in textbook publishing is measured in exactly the same way as success in any product-oriented commercial industry. Lepionka describes success in textbook publishing as “revenues from sales over the cost of producing the goods and being in business.” In order to be successful, a textbook must be adopted by college professors throughout the country (and the world) for their relevant courses and purchased by students enrolled in those courses (Lepionka xiii). If an academic, unhappy with the current textbook offerings, writes a well-researched, easily understandable and dynamic textbook which is

adopted by colleagues and purchased by students, the potential exists for a lot of money to be made by both the publisher of the textbook and the author. Lepionka notes that “according to statistics for the textbook publishing industry, in 2006 . . . college publishers had total estimated sales of \$3.5 billion” (1). The potential for financial gain is clear, but exactly how does a textbook evolve from a desire to create a more useful teaching tool by an individual instructor to a hardcover text available in the local college bookstore?

There are many different types of college textbooks, from large survey texts for an introductory college course to highly focused and detailed texts for a graduate level seminar. Introduction to Theatre textbooks, which is the primary focus of this project, are referred to in the publishing industry as A-books (or sometimes AA or AAA). They are generally a large investment for a publisher because they are “four-color” textbooks, meaning that they have many photographs and illustrations which require four colors to produce (Lepionka 273). As described by Lepionka, the process for getting an introductory textbook published has five phases. First, a prospective textbook author provides a chapter or two of the potential textbook to an acquisitions editor. If the chosen publishing company has a need for this type of textbook and if the acquisitions editor is pleased with the submitted chapters, a contract is drawn up and the acquisitions editor creates a publishing plan for the process of publishing the textbook. The second phase is development. During this phase the author writes chapters of the textbook which are then revised based on comments and suggestions from the acquisitions editor and peer reviews. Once the text has been revised, the process enters the production phase. During this phase the acquisitions editor hands the completed manuscript to a copyeditor who examines the text for grammar, spelling, and structural errors. After the text is again revised and typeset it is given to the printer and enters the manufacturing phase. Here the completed text is printed and is

sent to a warehouse where it is prepared for distribution. The final phase is advertising and marketing of the textbook to various colleges and instructors using the publisher's web presence, catalogs, displays at academic conferences, and direct sales on college campuses (Lepionka 30). The entire process can often take two or more years and there are numerous business considerations which need to be taken into account while the author is preparing the text. Not least is the length of the textbook. All publishers have length requirements for textbooks and there are many reasons why length is so important. First, the publisher must consider the cost of vendors who will produce the textbook, including the price of the paper. More importantly, to potential users of the textbook, the length of the text must work for an average college course. Most colleges follow a semester system which typically runs fifteen to sixteen weeks, some run on a trimester or quarter system which could last ten to twelve weeks, or shorter. A textbook must be able to adapt to these situations. If a textbook has twenty (or more) long, in-depth chapters, it would be difficult to break the chapters down in a manageable way for an instructor. Likewise, if the textbook has forty (or more) short, overview chapters it might be difficult for an instructor to cover so many diverse topics during a single course. The standard for most introductory textbooks is fifteen to sixteen chapters which can easily be divided into a typical semester schedule and adapted for shorter courses (Lepionka 229).

As Lepionka notes, getting a textbook published can be a relatively simple task, however, the success of any textbook is most often the result of finding the right editor (15). There are other measures which can influence the success of a textbook. Lepionka describes the four most significant criteria: "(1) having a market for your textbook, (2) having institutional affiliation and a professional track record, (3) knowing publisher's existing products, and (4) intending to provide an intellectually and pedagogically sound work in a well-written and otherwise

acceptable form” (50). For a professor who teaches an introductory course at a large university, these criteria are not difficult to fulfill. The market exists at his or her university, especially if there are multiple sections of the introductory course. The professor/author has an institutional affiliation and, if he or she is tenured, should have a professional track record. Assuming that the professor has taught the introductory course on a regular basis, he or she should be aware of the introductory textbooks which currently exist. Finally, if the professor is dissatisfied with the currently available textbooks it is likely because the professor feels that those textbooks are not “intellectually and pedagogically sound work” and he or she intends to rectify the situation by authoring a new textbook. The question becomes, is the introductory textbook market oversaturated? Lepionka assures her readers, “There usually is room for a new introductory text in any field.” She believes this to be the case because a textbook

that your students can read and like and learn from, that covers adequately material you regard as important, and that is revised often enough to remain current – is hard to find [ . . . ] in addition, college textbook marketing practices encourage frequent changes in adoptions, such that new intros are marketed successfully each year. (51)

Even if the market is saturated, it doesn’t seem to prevent publishers from seeking out new introductory textbooks to add to their list of titles.

The reality is that although an instructor might choose to write a new introductory textbook because he or she wants to provide students with a more pedagogically effective tool, it is his or her colleagues at other colleges and universities who are actually making the decision to require the textbook for purchase. This can be a major difficulty in creating a new textbook. As Thomas Brock notes, “the book must be written so that it is *readable* by students, but it must be



produced so that it is *attractive* to professors (4, original emphasis). Therefore, as the dissatisfied instructor writes a new textbook he or she must keep both audiences in mind: the professors who will require the textbook to be purchased and the students who will actually be reading the text.

In addition to making the textbook “attractive” to professors, the author must keep in mind that the purpose of any textbook is as a teaching tool. As M. N. Hegde notes in *A Singular Manual of Textbook Preparation* (1996), “the more closely an instructor can follow your text in teaching a course, the greater the chances that the book will be adopted” (8). Hegde also suggests that because introductory textbooks are basic overviews of the field for which they are written, authors should steer clear of polemic statements of any kind. In addition, all discussions should be presented in as simple a manner as possible (7). Lepionka agrees, she asserts that “above all, textbooks should teach . . . Critical analyses of your field and crusades (reforming the field or changing the way your subject is taught) unfortunately tend to be too idiosyncratic and difficult (hence inappropriate) for introductory undergraduate textbooks” (104). This can easily be seen in the discussion regarding identity-based categorization of contemporary American playwrights in the following chapters. In an effort to present playwrights and their work in as simple a manner as possible and to avoid any controversy, authors have chosen to categorize contemporary American playwrights based on their identity. The argument of this project is not that academics need to change the way the material is taught, but that in an effort to simplify the material, textbook authors have both ignored any opinions the playwrights themselves have regarding being identified based on their identity as well as the reality that the act of categorizing a person or their body of work based on a singular category is reductive and presents an

incomplete picture of the playwright and his or her work to students in an introduction to theatre course.

Several of the textbook writing and publishing guides examined for this chapter note the importance of maintaining political correctness while writing textbooks. Lepionka notes that “textbooks enter an already made world that changes, and publishing as a social institution is no less influenced by political and economic factors than other social institutions such as the family, education, or medicine.” She suggests that the author, editor and publisher need to work together to “draw the line regarding political correctness” (108). In order to assist with this, Lepionka provides “Guidelines for Making your Textbook Culture and Gender Fair,” which include suggestions such as “balance your representation of people, places, and activities so that your readers can identify with your textbook examples”; “include ethnically diverse given names and both male and females in examples”; “scrupulously avoid all stereotypes”; and “use nonsexist language, including occupational designations” (107). These guidelines may be helpful to an author working in math or science; however when the topic covered is diversity itself there are no guidelines. Instead, when diversity in contemporary American theatre became an issue textbook authors found worthy of inclusion in introduction to theatre textbooks the authors had to establish their own guidelines. Beginning in the mid-1990s, theatre textbook authors began to include a chapter or a section of a chapter devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre. In an effort to acknowledge the contributions of various identity-based groups to contemporary American theatre and to present contemporary playwrights in as simplistic manner as possible, these textbooks devoted space to African American Theatre, Hispanic Theatre, Asian American Theatre, Gay and Lesbian Theatre, Native American Theatre, and Women’s (or sometimes Feminist) Theatre. As noted above, textbook authors should avoid controversy and

not attempt to change the way the subject matter is taught in order to produce a financially successful textbook. Therefore, in the almost twenty years since theatre textbooks began including sections devoted to diversity, little has changed in the structure of these sections. Despite the fact that some playwrights do not want to be included in an identity-based category, some identify with multiple categories, and some defy categorization, the practice of labeling contemporary playwrights based on their identity continues in theatre textbooks.

In addition to a desire for simplicity and the avoidance of controversy, there is another possible reason why textbooks continue to categorize many contemporary plays based on the identity of the playwright: the reviewer. Unlike other forms of publishing where reviews are printed in journals and newspapers after the book has been published, textbooks are reviewed throughout the publishing process. Reviews are essential because most acquisitions editors are not experts in the fields covered by the textbooks. According to Hegde, “the role of the reviewers is to evaluate the manuscript to assure accuracy, currency, and adequacy of information covered by the author. The reviewer also will be asked to judge the appropriateness of both the content and the writing level for the intended audience” (77). This is relevant to the diversity issue above because each reviewer likely has his or her own ideas regarding what categories should be included and who should be labeled within those categories. If an author wishes for his or her textbook to be published, the opinions of the early reviewers must be carefully considered, and likely included in the final product. Brock describes several different types of reviewers who are used throughout the publication process from the initial outline prepared by the author to the color-printed final product. These include students, specialists in the field, and potential users (29-30). According to Brock, the comments submitted by the usually paid reviewers serve three purposes: “1) to determine that the book is worth publishing;

2) to obtain information on the likely market for the book; 3) to detect technical errors of fact” (30). Once the book is published and is adopted by instructors for their classes another important review is conducted. Publishers will send evaluation forms to instructors who have adopted the textbook which are then forwarded to the author. As Hegde notes, “these questionnaires help assess the strengths and limitations of your texts . . . [which] is a valuable source of information for revising and improving your text” (87-88). Textbook revisions are the final piece in the textbook publishing process.

Revising textbooks and publishing subsequent editions of the textbook have both a practical and a financial reason. Changes in a particular field of study or discipline are the primary reason for revising a textbook (Hegde 86). In terms of the theatre textbook this could mean newly discovered research about an historical era or, more likely, due to the passage of time, the change in significance of a particular playwright (a playwright whose works were rarely produced when the textbook was originally published may have experienced new attention by regional theatres and commercial producers which a textbook author may want to acknowledge in a future edition) or the introduction of new playwrights who have recently received commercial success or artistic acclaim. From a financial perspective publishing subsequent editions of a successful textbook are a necessity in order to maintain the publisher’s bottom line. Once a textbook has been adopted by instructors, the second and third academic years the textbook is in print see a significant drop-off in sales mostly due to the sale of used copies of the original text (Brock 2). In order to avoid competing with used copies, publishers will often request that a revised version be published and encourage instructors who have adopted the original text to require their students to purchase the revised edition. Therefore, it is important for the textbook author to include suggestions made by reviewers, especially those

experts who are also using the text in their classrooms, and find ways to improve the content and look of the textbook while maintaining pedagogical consistency. If done successfully, subsequent editions of introductory textbooks can be extremely lucrative for both the author and publisher.

This overview of textbook publishing has been brief by necessity. However, several important factors are worth summarizing as they impact the discussion which follows. First, introductory textbooks like the ones examined for this study have the potential to be very profitable for the author and publisher. This explains the number of introduction to theatre textbooks which are currently available. Second, authors need to write for both the students who will learn from their texts *and* the instructors who will adopt the textbook. This is especially important for the author to keep in mind with regard to avoiding controversy and maintaining a degree of political correctness while writing the textbook. Third, textbook authors should not attempt to change the way a subject is taught. This accounts for the stagnancy in twenty-first century introduction to theatre textbooks with regards to categorizing contemporary American plays based on the identity of the playwright. Finally, editors rarely have expertise in the discipline of the textbook and therefore rely heavily on the response of reviewers throughout the publishing process. Because these reviewers could potentially use the textbook in their classrooms (and thus require their students to purchase the textbooks) it is important that the author acknowledge and include the suggestions offered by the reviewers. Subsequently, in order to create a financially successful textbook, the author must maintain a balance between writing for students and professors; make the subject matter come alive on the text without attempting to change the pedagogy of the discipline; and keep reviewers happy by adopting the suggestions which they provide in written reviews of the textbook. This is no easy task. With all

of this in mind, the following chapters will provide an analysis of the ways in which textbook authors categorize contemporary American playwrights based on their identity *and* examine the playwrights' responses to such categorization in order to determine whether or not a different approach to introducing undergraduate students to contemporary American playwrights can be found that both fulfills the requirements noted above *and* provides a more accurate and complete picture of the playwrights discussed in these textbooks and their plays.

## **CHAPTER TWO: August Wilson**

### **Wilson in Theatre Textbooks**

It is fascinating to note the way(s) in which theatre textbooks published between 1988 and 2013 deal with the plays of August Wilson, as well as the playwright himself. As Wilson gained notoriety within the theatrical community throughout the end of the twentieth century his presence on the pages of theatre textbooks increased. In fact, more space is devoted to Wilson and his plays in the textbooks examined for this study than any of the other four playwrights this project analyzes. One can sense a struggle, however, among theatre textbook authors as to exactly how to approach Wilson and his plays especially in textbooks published prior to the mid-1990s when, for the most part, a section or chapter on diversity in theatre did not exist. Does he belong in the discussion of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and other significant American realists? Is a brief mention of Wilson in captions to photos of his productions sufficient enough for the growing call for multiculturalism in education in the late twentieth century? Once significant sections devoted to diversity in theatre are established within the textbooks, the question becomes how much space ought to be devoted to Wilson in a brief discussion of African American theatre history? It seems that a playwright who has devoted his career to a ten-play cycle detailing the African American experience should be thoroughly analyzed within a discussion of African American theatre, but does that mean the discussion needs to include mention of Wilson's controversial "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech in which he called for a separate black theatre? If Wilson is given significant attention within a section on diversity in theatre, should he not also be included in sections on American

realism noted above? What follows is a detailed examination of the ways the textbooks examined for this study have approached August Wilson and his plays.

The first mention of August Wilson in the textbooks analyzed for this project comes in Edwin Wilson's fourth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1988. However, the reference to Wilson and his work is minimal at best. Wilson's 1987 play *Fences* is used as an example of plays with realistic costumes in the first appendix but, despite the fact that *Fences* won both the Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987, it is not listed in the appendix devoted to a chronology of significant works of drama. The only other references to Wilson come in captions to production photos of *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), and a photo of Wilson with director Lloyd Richards at work on the original Broadway production of *Fences* (45, 235, 249, 279). While it is admirable that a relative newcomer to commercial theatre, such as August Wilson, is included in this textbook, there is no context provided by the author which would suggest who August Wilson is or why his plays are included in the textbook.

Marvin Carlson and Yvonne Shafer's 1990 edition of *The Play's The Thing: An Introduction to Theatre* is one of the first textbooks to devote space within a chapter on "Recent American Dramatists" specifically to minority playwrights. However, the single sentence in the textbook acknowledging August Wilson's contributions to American theatre is vague and confusing. It reads: "The continuing importance of black drama is suggested by the major position held among dramatists of the 1980s by August Wilson." The authors follow this with a list of plays written by Wilson in the 1980s and conclude the sentence by noting that the plays were "developed under the direction of Lloyd Richards (b. 1922) at the Yale Repertory and [were] important successes in New York" (375). By neglecting to define what is meant by



“major position” or how Wilson’s work suggests “the continuing importance of black drama” as well as using the vague phrase “important successes in New York,” the authors do a disservice to both Wilson and the introduction to theatre students’ understanding and appreciation of “Recent American Dramatists.”

Milly S. Barranger’s 1991 edition of *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* provides slightly more space to Wilson and his work. In a chapter devoted to playwrights, Barranger includes a list of plays by August Wilson produced on Broadway prior to 1991 and a brief biography of Wilson which includes the mention of the ten-play cycle Wilson was working on, devoted to the exploration of the African American experience in the twentieth century (89). In addition, Barranger includes Wilson in a list of playwrights who write tragicomedies; a list of playwrights who compose a third post-war wave of American writers who have “tested the American character, family, and dreams, and found them wanting,” and playwrights who have “continued the strong current of realism and social protest” in their plays (195, 277, 307). Of the textbooks written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Barranger does the best job of contextualizing Wilson with regards to the importance he places on the African American experience in his plays as well as allowing the reader to understand how Wilson compares to other contemporary American playwrights regarding the style and structure of his plays.

Oscar Brockett’s sixth edition of *History of the Theatre*, published in 1991, refers to August Wilson in the chapter devoted to “Theatre and Drama after 1968.” Brockett provides a brief overview of Wilson’s career, including a discussion of *Fences* in relation to Wilson’s ten-play cycle. However, rather than comparing the dramatic structure of Wilson’s plays to specific playwrights, as Barranger does in *Theatre: A Way of Seeing*, Brockett concludes the section on Wilson by noting that “Wilson’s plays, unlike those of several earlier African American

dramatists, do not exploit themes of rage about whites so much as concentrate on African American identity and quests for fulfillment and dignity” (630). By not contextualizing the plays of August Wilson in relation to other playwrights discussed in the textbook Brockett leaves the reader with the sense that the only value of Wilson’s plays is that they provide a positive image of African Americans.

Dennis Sporre’s 1993 edition of *The Art of Theatre* makes two references to August Wilson, both of which are somewhat problematic. The first is in regards to the use of language by playwrights. Without mentioning race, Sporre refers to the dialogue in *Fences* as “contemporary, realistic language.” By following a brief synopsis of the play with excerpted dialogue such as “putting up with them crackers every day,” the phrase “contemporary, realistic language” is revealed to be little more than a thinly veiled racist euphemism (37). The second reference to August Wilson comes in a “Profile on August Wilson” included as part of “Chapter 5: The Audience.” The profile is actually an interview with Wilson conducted by Bill Moyers. In the interview Wilson speaks of several issues that will comprise his “Ground on Which I Stand” speech three years later, including referring to himself as a cultural nationalist and a discussion of the differences between a black and white aesthetic (131-132). The interview is helpful in contextualizing August Wilson as a black playwright but coupled with the reference above regarding the use of language, the reader is, again, left with an incomplete image of Wilson and his plays.

Similar to the fourth edition of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience*, the fifth and sixth editions’ references to August Wilson come almost entirely as captions to production photographs. However, in the seventh edition, published in 1998, Edwin Wilson has added an entirely new chapter to the textbook titled “Theatre of Diversity.” With this addition a more in-

depth examination of August Wilson and his plays would seem obvious. However, the only reference to August Wilson in the chapter comes in a breakout box titled “Getting Started in Theater,” in which an excerpted interview with David Savran is used to provide background information regarding Wilson’s entry into the world of theatre (239). The seventh edition also includes a two-page plot synopsis of *Fences*, but Wilson is not mentioned at all within the text devoted specifically to black theatre. Instead Wilson’s plays are mentioned in a discussion on “Crossover Theater,” a subsection of “Multiethnic, Multicultural and Gender Theaters,” in Chapter 2 of the seventh edition (63). The only other reference to Wilson in this edition is the inclusion of Troy Maxon, the central character in *Fences*, in a list of characters who are “examples of characters who stand apart from the crowd, not by standing above it but by summing up in their personalities the essence of a certain type of person” (316). By including a synopsis of *Fences* as well as the breakout box within the section on black theatre, Edwin Wilson does point to August Wilson as a significant playwright, worthy of additional inquiry, but once again, by not contextualizing Wilson or his work, the space devoted to August Wilson is inadequate.

Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb’s third edition of *Living Theater: A History*, published in 2000, does make some progress with regards to contextualizing August Wilson within and outside of his race; however, it also feels incomplete. Within a section on contemporary African American playwrights, three full pages are devoted to August Wilson. Included here is a biography tracking Wilson’s life, details regarding his relationship with director Lloyd Richards, and a brief discussion of the ten-play cycle. However, the authors move beyond merely categorizing Wilson as simply a black playwright. They describe his characters as “universal figures, standing for everyone who has ever struggled with himself or herself and with social

forces” (479). In addition, the authors have included a detailed discussion of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* in which they illustrate how the play “follows the traditions of realism” and how the play “deviates from realism in significant ways” (480). For the first time in the textbooks examined for this project, Wilson is presented to the readers as a playwright who is firmly entrenched in the world of black theatre in the late twentieth century as well as one whose plays can be studied in terms of dramatic structure irrespective of the race of the playwright.

Unfortunately, Edwin Wilson does not refer to the playwright in the same terms in subsequent editions of his introduction to theatre textbook, *The Theater Experience*. The eighth edition (2001), ninth edition (2004) and tenth edition (2007) add very little with regards to assisting the reader in understanding the various ways in which August Wilson can be included in a discussion of contemporary American theatre. For example, in the tenth edition a caption to a production photo of *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) refers to August Wilson as “a premier African American playwright (whom many regard as the finest dramatist of his generation),” leaving the reader to wonder a) what exactly is a “premier African American playwright;” and b) if he is regarded so highly by “many” why isn’t more attention devoted to him within the textbook?

The only textbook in this study to reference Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand” speech is the tenth edition of Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy’s *History of the Theatre*, published in 2008. In a chapter titled “Contemporary Theatre,” the authors provide a brief biography of Wilson, referring to him as “internationally regarded as one of America’s great playwrights.” After discussing the plays which comprise the Pittsburgh Cycle, the section concludes by noting:

Aside from his plays, Wilson made his greatest impact with an impassioned speech in 1996 to the Theatre Communications Group national conference

concerning the lack of financial support for African American professional theatres, which he declared essential if African Americans were to explore their own culture and history in a context not dominated by white society. (546)

Although the authors do not provide details regarding the speech or the debate it generated, this mention does provide an excellent opportunity for an instructor to include a more in-depth analysis of the speech in a classroom discussion.

Although the eleventh (2009) and twelfth (2011) editions of Edwin Wilson's *The Theatre Experience*<sup>1</sup> reference Wilson's ten-play cycle and include him in a list of significant African American dramatists, both editions continue to refer to Wilson mostly through captions to production photos. This is unfortunate since, as previously noted, the author has allowed space for a more detailed investigation into African American theatre in the editions published after 1998. It would seem obvious that such a discussion ought to include more information regarding August Wilson and his plays. In addition by noting in the twelfth edition that "many people feel that the most important American playwright of the latter part of the last century was the African American dramatist August Wilson," Edwin Wilson provides an excellent opportunity to prove this statement's factuality by illustrating the ways in which the plays of August Wilson exemplify contemporary American theatre. Regrettably, Edwin Wilson does not take advantage of this opportunity in the two most recently published editions of his textbook.

Fortunately, there are textbooks that address Wilson and his plays in more creative ways. For example, Stephanie Arnold's 2011 edition of *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*, devotes a significant portion of the second chapter, "The Playwright's Vision," to a discussion of the structure and content of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. In this section Arnold analyzes the text of the play, which she refers to as "a social document and the

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<sup>1</sup> Note the change in title from *Theater* to *Theatre* beginning with Edwin Wilson's eleventh edition of his textbook.

dramatization of a heroic struggle,” and includes a detailed description of a 1993 production of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (47-55). Arnold examines the text to reveal the ways in which August Wilson is continuing the African tradition of oral storytelling. She notes that “his characters are storytellers, using myth and personal stories like jazz improvisations to underscore the meanings of his plays” (55). Arnold does not include any mention of Wilson’s adherence to Western theatre traditions in this section; however, in Chapter 7, titled “Understanding Style: Realism,” Arnold continues the discussion of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* by noting that Wilson “constructs his play with an earthy realism to give us a richly detailed view of African American life at a turning point in American history” (198-199). By referring to August Wilson and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* throughout the textbook, Arnold illustrates the importance of presenting diversity in twenty-first century pedagogy. Arnold both acknowledges and celebrates Wilson’s racial and cultural background by providing her readers with a deeper understanding of the playwright, his vision, his goals, and the ways in which his plays seek to find a balance between African theatre and contemporary American theatre.

Finally, Robert Barton and Annie McGregor’s 2012 edition of *Theatre in Your Life* provides the readers with a clear understanding of Wilson’s place in both African American theatre and contemporary American theatre. The textbook includes a biography of Wilson, noting that “most of his plays are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, a slum community where he was born in 1945. His genius expands this neighborhood to become Black America itself” (379). This is followed by an excerpt of *The Piano Lesson* (1990) along with a brief overview of critical response to the original Broadway production. By introducing Wilson in this manner, the authors are presenting the playwright as a significant dramatist within the identity category of black playwright. However, in the final pages of the textbook the authors note that “the reason

why Wilson is not simply regarded as the finest African American playwright, but one of the finest American writers, period, is that [*The Piano Lesson*] also moves beyond the confines of race to capture essential humanity and conflicts within families everywhere and every time” (436). After establishing the significance of Wilson as one who writes plays which celebrate African American culture, the authors expand their readers’ understanding of Wilson by removing the African American modifier and acknowledging his relevance and significance as one of the “finest American writers, period.” However, it should be noted that the astute reader may find some conflict in the presentation of August Wilson in this textbook. Despite the laudatory comments regarding Wilson’s significance within the text of the book, an appendix listing “Best Known Western Plays” includes *Angels in America*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, among others. However, none of the plays authored by August Wilson are included in the appendix. If Wilson truly is considered one of the finest *American* playwrights, his omission in this list is significant.

This analysis illustrates the difficulties textbook authors have with categorizing August Wilson. His plays do focus on the African American experience, but to place him solely in the category of black theatre is problematic because, as we have seen, his plays can also be used to provide examples of tragicomedies, realism, and contemporary American theatre. However, what is missing from this discussion is the voice of August Wilson himself. How does Wilson view his work? Does he wish to be viewed as only, or primarily, a black playwright? Has his views regarding categorization shifted over time? Is August Wilson a black playwright or a playwright who happens to be black?

## **AUGUST WILSON: Black Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be Black?**

In his contribution to *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* (2004), scholar John Valery White says, “August Wilson is a black playwright . . . he is *not* a playwright who happens to be black” (63, original emphasis). While this statement may be true, it does not tell the full story of August Wilson and his plays. August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the fourth of six children born to Frederick Kittel and his wife Daisy Wilson (Bogumil 1). Frederick, Wilson’s father, was a white, Austro-Hungarian baker who abandoned his family shortly after Wilson’s birth leaving Daisy, a black housekeeper, to raise August and his siblings alone. In 1957, Daisy married David Bedford, an African American man who had recently served a prison sentence for murder and robbery. Bedford moved the Wilson family to Hazelwood, a mostly white neighborhood in southeast Pittsburgh. Wilson’s skin tone was darker than his siblings and he often bore the brunt of racist behavior by his neighbors while his lighter-toned siblings were mostly welcomed in their new neighborhood. Despite the difficulties he encountered in Hazelwood, or maybe because of them, Wilson spent most of his time in the Negro section of the local public library, reading and re-reading poetry and novels by early African American authors such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. Wilson attended Gladstone High School in Pittsburgh and in the tenth grade was accused by an African American history teacher of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon. Rather than prove his innocence, Wilson dropped out of high school and ended his formal education at the age of fifteen (Snodgrass 7). After leaving high school, Wilson began a self-directed education on the political, social and cultural history of black America at the main branch of the Pittsburgh public library. Wilson was moved by the works of Langston Hughes,



Booker T. Washington, and James Baldwin and began writing poetry inspired by these men (Snodgrass 8).

After his birth father died in 1965, Wilson officially changed his last name and joined the Black Power Movement. His involvement with the Black Power Movement informed his writing and he turned his attention from poetry to drama because he felt he could more effectively convey his strong beliefs in black cultural nationalism through theatre (Snodgrass 10). In 1965, Wilson formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop and in 1968, he co-founded Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theatre Company, a community theatre troupe devoted to the staging of plays by Amiri Baraka (Bogumil 3). The following year, Wilson married Brenda Burton, an African American woman and a member of the Nation of Islam. Wilson respected much of the teachings of his wife's faith, but he refused to follow the strict edicts of the religion and the two divorced shortly after the birth of their daughter, Sakina Ansari (Snodgrass 10).

Wilson's first published play was *The Homecoming* (1976). It premiered at the Kuntu Repertory Theatre at the University of Pittsburgh. The same year, he began writing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, although it wouldn't be published until 1985. In 1977, Wilson left Pittsburgh and settled in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he joined the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and began writing another full-length play called *Jitney* (Snodgrass 11). Wilson spent the next few years writing new works and re-writing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. He decided early on that this play would become the first play in a ten-play cycle (often referred to as the Pittsburgh Cycle because nine of the ten plays in the cycle take place in Pittsburgh), tracking the African American experience through each decade of the twentieth century. In 1981, he married his second wife, Judy Oliver Wilson, and began to spend his summers at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. He also submitted several scripts to the National Playwrights

Conference where he caught the attention of its Artistic Director, Lloyd Richards. (Herrington 51). Richards would become instrumental in Wilson's success as a playwright. Wilson and Richards began producing readings of many of Wilson's early plays, including *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at the National Playwrights Conference. In 1984, Richards, who was also the dean and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre, produced the first full production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The Yale production was extremely successful and six months later, on October 11, 1984, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* premiered on Broadway at the Cort Theatre. The production earned Wilson a Tony Award nomination as well as a Drama Desk Award for Best Play, encouraging Wilson to continue his focus on a ten-play cycle chronicling the black experience in America (Snodgrass 13).

Desperate to avoid being known as a one-hit playwright, Wilson immediately turned his focus on rewriting *Fences*, a drama set in the 1950s chronicling the life of Troy Maxon, a former professional baseball player turned garbage man who struggles with the racist behavior of his employers and his failure as a husband and father. In the spring of 1985, *Fences* premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre, again under the direction of Lloyd Richards. In 1987, *Fences* opened at the 46<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in New York and garnered Wilson a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Wilson once again returned to a drama he developed at the National Playwrights Conference for his next play. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* tells the story of Harold Loomis and his estranged wife who have migrated to the industrial north during the second decade of the twentieth century. Running concurrently with *Fences*, the play opened on Broadway on March 18, 1988, marking the first time an African American playwright had two plays on Broadway at the same time (Snodgrass 13-14).

Wilson's next play, *The Piano Lesson*, was inspired by a painting by the African American artist Romare Bearden. The play, set in 1936, focuses on arguments between siblings, Boy Willis and Berniece, over a piano, a family heirloom, with the faces of their enslaved ancestors carved into it. Directed by Lloyd Richards, *The Piano Lesson* opened on Broadway in 1990 and won four Tony Awards as well as a second Pulitzer Prize for Wilson. Later that same year, Wilson divorced his second wife and moved to Seattle with Constanza Romero, a costume designer Wilson had met while working on *The Piano Lesson* (Snodgrass 14).

In 1992, Wilson's premiered *Two Trains Running* at the Walter Kerr Theater in New York. Set in the 1960s, the play explores the changing views of race and racism during this tumultuous period of American history. The play ran for four months and won the Drama Critics Circle award for Best Play of the year. Two years later, Wilson married Romero while writing his next play, *Seven Guitars*. The play is set in the 1940s and tells the story of blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton who struggles with self-acceptance in the face of past wrongs. *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in 1996 and earned Wilson his sixth Tony nomination for Best Play (Snodgrass 15-16).

Despite the fact that he is of mixed race Wilson defined himself as an African American and his plays reinforce the importance he places on his race as a constitutive factor of his identity. In 1996, at the height of his artistic success as a playwright, Wilson was asked to be the keynote speaker at the 11<sup>th</sup> biennial Theatre Communications Group gathering in Princeton, New Jersey. Wilson's controversial keynote address was titled "The Ground on Which I Stand" and was published in its entirety by Theatre Communications Group in 2001. After acknowledging the Western roots of theatre as well as prominent black artists who came before him, Wilson centers himself in the historical lineage of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, referring to

it as “the kiln in which I was fired” (12-13). This is important to Wilson because, as he notes, he has difficulty separating himself as a black man from his views on the American theatre (13). In fact, not only does Wilson associate himself with the Black Power Movement, but he refers to himself as “a race man” (14). He explains further:

I believe that race matters – that it is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men most respond. Race is also an important part of the American landscape [. . .] [it] is also the product of a shared gene pool that allows for group identification, and it is an organizing principle around which cultures are formed [. . .] the term black or African-American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory. (14, 16)

Wilson’s speech was more than a declaration of his views on the importance of race. He accused theatre funding organizations of privileging “institutions that preserve, promote, and perpetuate white culture. . . There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art” Wilson said, “that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America” (17, 18). Ultimately, the speech was a call-to-action to provide funding to establish black theatres and provide opportunities for black artists to “become,” as Wilson said in the speech, “the cultural custodians of our art, our literature and our lives” (36). Critic Robert Brustein, who Wilson called a “cultural imperialist” in his speech, offered a response to Wilson’s remarks in the October 1996 issue of *American Theatre* magazine. In his comments, Brustein referred to Wilson’s speech as “the language of

self-segregation.” He also noted that Wilson failed to take into account that we live in an increasingly racially mixed society and Wilson’s suggestion that we need specifically black theatres fails to acknowledge those artists who have multiple racial backgrounds (26). Finally, Brustein noted that all of Wilson’s plays received their world premieres in the very institutions that Wilson accuses of not providing opportunities for African American artists (27).

Brustein’s assertion that Wilson’s greatest successes were nurtured in mainstream regional theatres is true, with one exception. Encouraged by Edward Gilbert, the artistic director of the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Wilson began re-writing one of his earliest plays, *Jitney*, in 1996. *Jitney* tells the story of a group of unlicensed cab drivers fighting to make a living in 1970s Pittsburgh. Over the next four years, *Jitney* would have numerous productions throughout the country, including a 1997 production at the Crossroads Theatre, a black theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey. However, the decision to produce *Jitney* at Crossroads was due to practicality rather than any kind of political statement about black vs. white theatres. Wilson originally intended to produce *Jitney* at the Huntington Theatre, which is a member of the League of Resident Theatres, a group Wilson spoke out against in his speech. Due to a scheduling conflict, however, the Huntington production of *Jitney* was postponed and rather than leave the play untouched for almost a year after its initial production in Pittsburgh, Wilson chose to produce it at Crossroads (Herrington 142). After several more productions, *Jitney* finally arrived at the off-Broadway theatre Second Stage in 2000. *Jitney* is the only play in the Pittsburgh Cycle which has not appeared on Broadway (Snodgrass 17).

In May 2001, Wilson’s eighth entry in the ten-play cycle, *King Hedley II*, debuted on Broadway at the Virginia Theatre. *King Hedley II*, starring Tony winner Brian Stokes Mitchell in the title role, is a dark drama set in the 1980s about an ex-con who is trying to rebuild his life.

Despite a Tony nomination for Best Play as well as a Pulitzer Prize nomination, the production closed after seventy-two performances (ibdb.com). Wilson's ninth contribution to the Pittsburgh Cycle was *Gem of the Ocean*. Set in 1904 in Pittsburgh, *Gem of the Ocean* is the story of a 285 year-old former slave, Aunt Ester, who cleanses souls. The play opened on December 6, 2004, and also ran for a disappointing seventy-two performances (ibdb.com). Wilson's final contribution to the Pittsburgh cycle was *Radio Golf*. It premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2005 and chronicles the efforts of Harmond Wilkes to redevelop the Hill District of Pittsburgh in the 1990s. Wilson would never see the play debut on Broadway in 2007. A few months after the Yale production of *Radio Golf*, Wilson was diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer. He died on October 2, 2005 (Bogumil 13). Two weeks after his death, Wilson was honored by becoming the first African American playwright to have a Broadway theatre named for him when the Virginia Theater on West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street was renamed the August Wilson Theatre (Bogumil 19).

Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle fills a glaring hole in contemporary American theatre. By chronicling the African American experience throughout the twentieth century Wilson gives a desperately needed theatrical voice to the African American community. Does this mean that he should only be addressed in theatre textbooks as an African American playwright? Do his plays have more to offer to undergraduate students? Many of the plays in the Pittsburgh Cycle are attempts at finding a balance between traditional Western drama and the oral tradition found in African theatrical forms. Wilson admitted as much in his speech before the Theatre Communications Group. Wilson said:

In one guise, the ground I stand on has been pioneered by the Greek dramatists – by Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles – by William Shakespeare, by Shaw and Ibsen, and by the American dramatists Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and

Tennessee Williams. In another guise, the ground that I stand on has been pioneered by my grandfather, by Nat Turner, by Denmark Vessey, by Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammed. (11)

As noted above, there are textbooks which include Wilson's plays in a discussion of Western realism. Many scholars agree with this categorization. In his book, *August Wilson* (1999), Peter Wolfe notes many similarities between the dramaturgical choices made by Wilson and that of Russian realist playwright Anton Chekhov. Wolfe says:

Both writers have the rare gift of creating dramatic tension from small events and well-observed details, like the bottle of Coca-Cola Ma Rainey insists on holding during her recording sessions. Then there is the profusion of Chekhovian elements in *Two Trains Running*, starting with the sugar bowl the undertaker West always asks for after ordering coffee but then usually ignores. The restaurant where West sips his unsweetened coffee is slated for demolition in the name of urban renewal . . . the razing of the old neighborhood landmark cases the same regret as the flattening and subsequent conversion into dachas of the Ranevsky's cherry orchard. (14)

The elements of realism in Wilson's plays appear throughout his work, but Joan Herrington suggests that many of Wilson's later plays, including *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, and the revised version of *Jitney* do not follow the same Western sense of dramatic construction as his earlier plays. Wilson acknowledges the difficulty he has had with maintaining a balance between a black aesthetic with that of contemporary realism. In an interview with Sandra Shannon and Dana Williams in 2004, Wilson notes that the Black Nationalism Movement and Blues music make the black aesthetic unique; however, he reiterates a statement he made in the

1996 “Ground on Which I Stand,” speech admitting that “the art form that I work in is a European art form [. . .] [and] this black aesthetic is still based on a European art form until [. . .] some other form or method of what theater is and some new conventions are developed by black Americans” (187).

Wilson is a post-colonial subject. As such, he has internalized Western principles. The contradictions seen in his speech before the Theatre Communications Group as well as in the structure of his plays illustrate a kind of forced hybridity inherent in post-colonial artists. On the one hand, he has a desire to maintain his presence in mainstream theatres and provide predominately white audiences dramas which are dramaturgically familiar to them; on the other hand, as a member of a marginalized group who has achieved mainstream success and respect within the theatre community, he is compelled to call for increased support for black artists and maintain his cultural roots in the plays he writes.

With this in mind, the question becomes, what does Wilson see as the purpose or import of his work? Is he writing for a black audience, a white audience, or both? As stated in numerous interviews Wilson views his work as the creation of an oral narrative in order to provide a distinctively African American drama. He maintains the Western dramatic structure, but he uses his ten-play cycle examining the African American experience to educate other African-Americans. By doing this he is attempting to provide other African-Americans, other members of his identity category, with a more positive self-image. In a 1990 interview with Vera Sheppard, reprinted in *Conversations with August Wilson* (2006), Wilson said:

What I want to do is place the culture of black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parents’ house, you are not in the world alone . . . you have a ground to stand on, and you



have a viewpoint, and you have a way of proceeding in the world that has been developed by your ancestors. (qtd. in Sheppard 104-105)

Through his plays he can show African-Americans what he refers to as “the content of their lives being elevated into art” (Lyons 205). However, he is not writing *only* for a black audience. As he explained in a 1999 interview with Bonnie Lyons, he believes that “all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks, I think my plays offer them a different and new way to look at black Americans” (205). These statements suggest that perhaps Wilson is writing for both a black and a white audience; in some ways, he is. However, it is not quite as simple as that. In a 1988 interview with David Savran, also republished in *Conversations with August Wilson* (2006), Wilson explains that “the history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks. And whites, of course, have a different attitude, a different relationship to the history. Writing our own history has been a very valuable tool, because if we’re going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past. This is basic and simple; yet it’s a thing that Africans in America disregard” (27). In other words, Wilson uses his plays to present a history that has rarely, if ever, been dramatized: the history of African Americans in America from an African American’s perspective. Wilson is using his plays to inform his audiences (regardless of race or ethnicity) as well as to celebrate the social and cultural differences of African Americans.

If Wilson is using his plays to educate Americans of all backgrounds about the black experience in America, it seems apropos that he is categorized in theatre textbooks as a black playwright. The difficulty with this categorization is that it has the potential to mislead theatre students into believing that his plays are only relevant to a black audience. Wilson has acknowledged that his plays do have universal themes and messages to which all people,

regardless of cultural or racial background, can relate (Sheppard 109). As Joan Herrington notes, “racially diverse audiences come to Wilson’s plays because he has succeeded in creating powerful dramas recognizable to all who encounter them; they come because he can simultaneously feed both the black and white spirit” (145). In addition to noting the thematic universality in much of his work, Wilson also softened his stance on the role of black theatre in America in the last years of his life. In “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Wilson admonished black artists for participating in color-blind casting or all-black versions of classic American plays such as *Death of a Salesman*, saying that doing so “is to deny us our own humanity, our own history” (31). However, in the 2004 interview with Shannon and Williams, Wilson changed his tone. Not only does he state that the function of white theatre and black theatre is the same in that they both “create art that responds to or illuminates the human condition,” but he goes on to state that it is not his place to tell a black artist how to approach his or her art. Wilson says,

I don’t want to force a writer or an actor into “this is what you should be doing.”

I don’t want to say that what you’re doing should fit this set of rules. . . You can’t tell people, “you guys are doing that, but you should be dealing with black liberation or that which presents positive role models to our kids.” (191)

These statements reveal a shift in attitude for Wilson. He sees the commonalities in black and white drama and he no longer insists that black artists should follow a pre-determined set of rules about what black theatre is or should be. However, as we have seen, his previous comments in which he centers himself within the discussion of race and theatre have led the authors of theatre textbooks to ignore, for the most part, the possibility that Wilson should be read and studied by undergraduate theatre students as anything other than a leading figure within his racial category.

### **What This Means for Wilson and Identity-Based Categorization**

An analysis of the ways in which August Wilson is presented to undergraduate theatre students in theatre textbooks reveals the difficulty the authors of these textbooks have had in defining and categorizing August Wilson. Clearly the plays can and do fit into an identity-based category. By chronicling the African American experience throughout the twentieth century Wilson has succeeded in presenting an oral history of his culture. Wilson *is*, undeniably, a black playwright. However, this does not simplify his placement in theatre textbooks for the authors of these texts. Is he a black playwright who champions a separatist notion of theatre by, for, and about African Americans? Is he a playwright who presents the black experience to white audiences in established regional theatres and on Broadway? Does the fact that many of his plays follow the tenets of realism and are easily compared to Chekhov, Miller, or Williams mean that he should be studied and examined within the confines of contemporary realism? Do non-realistic dramatic elements in his plays negate the elements of contemporary realism? Can or should textbook authors use Wilson and his plays as an opportunity to discuss post-colonial subjectivity? Wilson is referred to by most, if not all, of the textbook authors in this study as one of the most significant playwrights of the last half of the twentieth century. However, other than listing him among other significant playwrights based on rather vague categories (playwrights who write tragicomedies, third post-war wave of American playwrights, plays which are examples of modern domestic dramas, etc.) the authors of these textbooks do little to support this claim. It is impossible to deny the importance of race in the plays written by August Wilson. However, *only* discussing Wilson's plays in reference to race does a disservice to the theatre student. It is also impossible to deny the influence both Western and African theatrical traditions have had on Wilson and his plays. However, ignoring race in any discussion of Wilson and his

plays does a disservice to the plays, the playwright, and African American theatre in general. In order to honor the important role Wilson has played in giving a theatrical voice to his identity category and at the same time acknowledging his significance to contemporary American theatre regardless of his race, a new way of presenting Wilson in theatre textbooks to twenty-first century undergraduates needs to be found.

## CHAPTER THREE: David Henry Hwang

### Hwang in Theatre Textbooks

Theatre textbooks also present an incomplete picture of David Henry Hwang. Most of the references to Hwang in the textbooks examined for this study only discuss his most popular play, *M. Butterfly* (1988). Despite the fact that Hwang's first play, *FOB* was produced at the off-Broadway Public Theater in 1980, he does not appear in any of the analyzed textbooks until ten years later, in 1990. Even after significant space is devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre in the mid-1990s, Hwang's inclusion within a discussion of Asian American theatre remains incomplete and does not provide the undergraduate theatre student with a clear picture of Hwang or his work.

The first reference to David Henry Hwang in the textbooks examined for this study comes in Marvin Carlson and Yvonne Shafer's 1990 edition of *The Play's the Thing*. However, despite the fact that by 1990 five of Hwang's plays had been produced off-Broadway, Carlson and Shafer only refer to the 1988 Broadway production of Hwang's most well-known play, *M. Butterfly*. What is fascinating about the way in which Hwang is presented to undergraduate theatre students in this textbook is that he is not mentioned within a discussion of Asian American theatre. Carlson and Shafer discuss the increasing presence of African Americans and Women in contemporary American theatre but make no mention of theatre by or about Hispanics, Asian Americans, or any other racial or ethnic category. The authors do, however, note that "The 1980s have also seen another minority taken seriously by the theatre, the homosexuals" (576). After brief mentions of Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979) and Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) and *La Cage aux Folles* (1983), the authors refer to

Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* because it examines a relationship between a French diplomat who falls in love with a male Chinese opera star who is posing as a woman. The authors note that Hwang has "fascinatingly combined Oriental-Western relationships" but not in order to comment on East-West interactions; instead the authors suggest that the important component of the relationship discussed in *M. Butterfly* is that it addresses a "homosexual theme." This brief mention of Hwang and his most successful play is immediately followed by a discussion of significant AIDS plays, including William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) and Fierstein's *Safe Sex* (1987). What is interesting about the inclusion of Hwang's *M. Butterfly* here is that the authors introduce this section as a discussion in which homosexuals are "taken seriously by the theatre." The authors could be referring to the content, characters and themes of the plays mentioned; however, the manner in which the authors have presented the plays and playwrights discussed could easily lead the reader to the conclusion that the "homosexuals" who are being "taken seriously by the theatre" are the playwrights themselves. David Henry Hwang has never self-identified as homosexual but because the authors make no further reference to Hwang, his race, his sexuality, or any of his other plays the reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions about Hwang and the types of plays he writes.

Milly Barranger's third edition of *Theatre: A Way of Seeing*, published in 1991, further illustrates the incompleteness of any discussion of Hwang or his work in textbooks published in the early 1990s. Hwang is included in a list of ten playwrights whose work was developed in regional theatres (179). While this is somewhat true – Hwang's early work was developed at the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut – much of his development as a playwright took place at the Public Theater in New York City, not

at a regional theatre. Further, *M. Butterfly* had no regional premiere. Instead, the play had a brief out-of-town tryout in Washington, D.C. before coming directly to Broadway in 1988.

Edwin Wilson's fifth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1991, also has a single mention of Hwang. Like August Wilson, the first reference to Hwang's work in Edwin Wilson's textbooks comes in the form of a photo caption. Within a chapter devoted to scenery, a production photo of the Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* appears. After a brief description of the play and the set designer, Eiko Ishioka, Wilson notes that "the designer incorporated many Asian elements in the design, most striking being a large curved ramp that came from a top level to the stage floor. Colored bright red, it also encompassed a playing area where many scenes took place" (329). This quote is littered with inaccuracies. The ramp led into the orchestra pit, rather than the stage floor, and it was made of bleached wood which appeared red because of lighting effects. Moreover, this caption is especially problematic because it suggests that "a large curved ramp" is an "Asian element" but it provides no information to support this claim. An undergraduate student with little knowledge of Asian theatrical conventions is left to assume that either all plays with a large ramp are Asian or that all Asian plays contain a large ramp which leads from the top level to the stage floor, both of which are untrue.

Also published in 1991, Oscar Brockett's 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *History of the Theatre* declares that Hwang is the "most successful" of the contemporary Asian American playwrights. He notes that Hwang's career began in 1979 (the date Hwang's *FOB* was workshopped at the O'Neill Theatre Center) and that his early plays "intermingled Asian and western conventions." However, his brief discussion of *M. Butterfly* is incomplete. Brockett says that "Hwang uses the story to suggest that the West has always looked upon the East as the submissive female accepting domination from the macho West" (631). This reading of the play has been noted by

many critics as a central fault of the play. However, Hwang, as we shall see, believes that this reading is incomplete. The play, says Hwang, is “fairly even-handed as well in saying that the East also misperceives the West, and that the East is guilty or equally complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping” (qtd. in DiGaetani 164-165). The single mention of Hwang in Brockett’s textbook along with this incomplete interpretation of the play could easily lead the undergraduate theatre student to believe that Hwang is an Asian American playwright who uses his plays to point a finger of blame against Western stereotypes of the East. Again, the examination of Hwang is inadequate.

Edwin Wilson’s sixth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1994, also makes a single mention of Hwang. This time, instead of a confusing description of Asian scenic elements in *M. Butterfly* found in a photo caption, Wilson includes Hwang in a list of plays and playwrights “from groups with a special perspective [which] have often entered the mainstream of American theatre.” Wilson is referring to the Broadway production of *M. Butterfly* but because he provides no description of the play other than “an Asian American drama” and does not elaborate on what he means by “special perspective” the theatre students’ knowledge of Hwang or his most successful play is lacking (64). It should also be noted that this reference to Hwang is included in all subsequent editions of Wilson’s textbook.

Kenneth Cameron and Patti Gillespie’s reference to Hwang in their 1996 edition of *The Enjoyment of Theatre* is the most incomplete of all of the textbooks examined for this study. In a section titled “Noncommercial to Commercial” in the chapter titled “Changing World, Eclectic Theatre: 1960s-1990s,” the authors begin by noting the differences between commercial theatre of the 1990s and that of previous decades. Included in these differences are plays which address previously taboo subjects such as homosexuality; successful productions of plays by African



American and female playwrights; and, most relevant to this discussion, contemporary commercial theatre which “offers new opportunities for diversity among performers.” This statement is followed by a list of plays including *M. Butterfly*, which offers performance opportunities for actors of Asian descent. The list also includes contemporary plays which offer “opportunities for diversity among performers” who are Latino (*Zoot Suit*), hearing impaired (*Children of a Lesser God*), and African American (*Driving Miss Daisy*) (387-388). Not only is the discussion of Hwang and his play incomplete, but perhaps more troubling is the fact that suggesting that opportunities for performers from diverse backgrounds is a new phenomenon is extremely misleading.

As noted in the previous chapter, the 1998 edition of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience* is the first to have an entire chapter devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre. In addition, Wilson has made a concerted effort to provide a more thorough image of Hwang throughout the textbook. In addition to the inclusion of Hwang in a discussion of plays by minority playwrights which have seen mainstream success, Wilson also includes a two-page plot synopsis of Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (172-173). Wilson also elaborates on the photo caption found in the fifth edition by including Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* in a discussion of collaboration in theatre noting the importance of “Asian elements” in the play and that “all those connected with a production of this play – the director, the performers, the designers – must be aware of this and must incorporate it in their contributions” (160). The most thorough description of Hwang and his plays come within the chapter titled “Theatre of Diversity,” in a subsection on Asian American theatre. Wilson begins by providing a biography of Hwang, including a brief synopsis of his early plays as well as a more complete description of *M. Butterfly*. Wilson also notes Hwang’s role in the controversy surrounding the casting of the original Broadway production of

*Miss Saigon* (1990), which will be discussed below. Subsequent editions of Wilson's textbook remain largely unchanged in presenting David Henry Hwang to theatre students. However, there are a few noteworthy additions worth mentioning. In the ninth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 2004, a caption to a photo of the 2002 Broadway revival of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*, which had a revised libretto written by Hwang, notes that Hwang's revision had "a strong Asian American point of view." Wilson continues by noting that "in other plays of his such as *M. Butterfly* and *Golden Child*, Hwang has given full reign [sic] to his point of view as an Asian American playwright" (253). Although no explanation is given as to what full rein means, this photo caption clearly places Hwang within the identity-based category of Asian American playwright. In the tenth edition, published in 2007, Wilson removes the description of Hwang's early plays and adds a brief mention of Hwang's collaboration with composer Philip Glass on *The Sound of a Voice* (but neglects to mention the two other pieces Glass and Hwang worked on earlier in their careers) (365). The eleventh edition (2009) and twelfth editions (2011) are essentially the same except that a synopsis of *M. Butterfly* is no longer included in the text. While Hwang is given a more complete introduction to theatre students compared with textbooks published earlier in the 1990s, the emphasis Wilson places on the "Asian American point of view" seen in Hwang's plays is reductive. As we have seen previously with August Wilson, by underscoring Hwang's inclusion in an identity-based category, the reader is easily led to the conclusion that Hwang's plays are only relevant to Asian Americans. If this were true, Hwang would not have achieved the widespread success that Wilson also points to in the textbook. As we shall see, Hwang prides himself on the universal themes contained in all of his plays.

Once a more multicultural approach to presenting contemporary American playwrights in theatre textbooks is introduced in the mid-1990s by Edwin Wilson and others, it would seem obvious that a more complete image of Hwang would be found in the textbooks published in the early twenty-first century. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In fact, Stephanie Arnold's *The Creative Spirit: an Introduction to Theatre*, published in 2011, makes no mention of Hwang or his plays whatsoever. This is somewhat surprising given Arnold's unique approaches to presenting both August Wilson and Tony Kushner, discussed here in Chapters Two and Six, respectively.

Robert Barton and Annie McGregor's 2012 edition of *Theatre in Your Life* offers the most creative introduction to Hwang of all of the textbooks examined for this study. In the first of what is referred to as "Dramatic Interludes" (breakout sections which examine plays throughout history in a more substantive manner), the authors examine the theme of "love" by comparing William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. The authors note that "*M. Butterfly* . . . explores the complexities and unexpected turns of love" by examining the relationship between the French diplomat, Renee Gallimard, and Song Liling, who is masquerading as a female opera star (56). Throughout the next ten pages of text and photos, the authors compare the ways Shakespeare's comedy and Hwang's play examine the theme of love. In doing so, the authors provide details about the play, but because they are focused on thematic similarities and differences between the two plays, the textbook authors do not present Hwang's work as an "Asian American play." In fact, there are only two references to Eastern vs. Western culture in the entire discussion. The authors suggest that Hwang's play "challenges the widespread Western belief that we know what is right for other people even when we do not really know them (although we may think we do)" and the play "focuses on the

elusive challenge of translating levels of meaning between cultures” (64). Both of these references point to what Edwin Wilson might refer to as “Asian elements” in the play, but they do not specifically refer to the play as “Asian” or to Hwang as an “Asian American playwright.” The authors continue to provide a more complete picture of Hwang by including him in discussions throughout the textbook. *M. Butterfly* is used as an example to help students understand what an inciting incident is in the chapter devoted to “storytellers and stories” and although the explanation is rather vague, Hwang is included in a list of American playwrights “from non-Eurocentric cultures” who write in the style of magic realism (87, 319). However, in a section on “Ethnic Theatre in America” in the chapter devoted to “Contemporary Voices,” Hwang is once again relegated to an identity-based category within the discussion of Asian American Theatre. The authors mention Hwang’s revision of *Flower Drum Song*, his 2007 play *Yellow Face*, and refer to *M. Butterfly* as “the best-known work by and about Asian culture” (380-381). The authors make a valiant effort in presenting Hwang, and *M. Butterfly* in particular, outside of any identity-based category, but because categorization based on identity has become the simplest way of introducing contemporary minority playwrights, Barton and McGregor follow the accepted protocol and include Hwang in the category of Asian American playwright.

The ways in which the authors of theatre textbooks introduce David Henry Hwang is clearly incomplete. Those who only refer to *M. Butterfly* ignore a body of work which examines many different themes and issues. Those who categorize Hwang as *only* an Asian American playwright provide a picture of Hwang and his work that is reductive. How should Hwang be presented to theatre students through the textbooks? Does Hwang take issue with his identity-based categorization? Or does he identify himself as an Asian American playwright? Does he

see his work as only relevant to Asian Americans or does his work have universal significance? The following section outlines Hwang's career and seeks to answer these questions by allowing Hwang to respond to the issue of identity based categorization.

**DAVID HENRY HWANG: Asian American Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be Asian American?**

According to John Timpane in his introduction to an interview between Hwang and Marty Moss-Coane, published in *Speaking on Stage* (1996), "David Henry Hwang has characterized himself as a "Chinese-Filipino-American-born-again-Christian from suburban L.A.'" (277). This multi-hyphen self-description illustrates the many aspects of Hwang's identity that influence his work. As he explained to Bonnie Lyons in a 1992 interview, Hwang views his identity as a hybrid of various identity indicators and because of this many of his plays examine "the issue of fluidity of identity" (231). Hwang understands that there is a multiplicity of identities which influence his work. However, he is most often viewed by scholars and critics as simply an Asian American playwright. In fact, he is often described as the most successful Asian American playwright of the twentieth century. In his biography of Hwang, Douglas Street refers to Hwang as "the first widely acclaimed, Broadway-produced Asian-American dramatist to capture the imagination of the Asian-American communities on both coasts, the international Asian arts contingents, and the non-Asian theater-going public" (46). While all of this may be true, is there more to Hwang than his race and ethnicity? How does Hwang view his categorization as an Asian American playwright?

Born on August 11, 1957, Hwang spent his childhood in San Gabriel, California, a northern suburb of Los Angeles. His father, Henry Y. Hwang, born in China and raised in Taiwan, was obsessed with American culture and eventually traveled to America in the late 1940s, settling in California and enrolling in the University of Southern California as a Business

major (Street 8). David's mother, Dorothy Yu Hwang, was also born in China but spent most of her childhood in the Philippines. She was raised in a fundamentalist Christian home and studied piano from a very young age. In 1952, she moved to the United States to study music at the University of South California. Dorothy and Henry met at an international students dance on the campus of USC and shortly after Henry converted to Christianity, the two were married (Boles 125).

Growing up in a fundamentalist home with his two younger sisters, Hwang describes his childhood neighborhood as "pretty multiethnic . . . it was mostly European American, Latino, some Asian, some African American. Fairly mixed" (qtd. in Moss-Coane 117). Throughout his experience in high school at the exclusive Harvard Boys School, he viewed himself more as simply an American rather than as an Asian American. "We were raised pretty much as white European Americans in terms of the things we celebrated," he told Marty Moss-Coane in 1996. "There was no particular desire for us to speak Chinese or celebrate Chinese holidays at all. I dated a Chinese girl when I was a senior in high school, and that was the first time I figured out when the Chinese New Year actually was!" (284). However, he was very much aware of the racist depictions of Asians in film and television. As he explained to Moss-Coane, war films depicting Asians as "the enemy" or the servile Hop Sing on the television series *Bonanza* "made me feel embarrassed frankly. You could argue that that was the beginning of some impulse," says Hwang, "that led me to create my own Asian characters later in life" (285).

Hwang studied violin as a child and became a star on the debate team at Harvard Boys School (Street 9). Unlike August Wilson, who began writing at a very young age, Hwang had no intentions of pursuing a career as a writer during his youth. His only experience with writing

prior to his college years was the creation of a family history based on interviews with his maternal grandmother which he compiled into a novel at the age of ten (Moss-Coane 282).

In 1975, Hwang began his studies at Stanford University with the intention of eventually going to law school (Boles 125). However, these plans quickly changed when, as a sophomore, he took a creative writing course taught by author John L'Heureux. L'Heureux was honest in his assessment of Hwang's early writing and suggested that he begin to read and watch as much theatre as he could (Moss-Coane 277-278). Hwang followed his mentor's advice and in 1977 received an internship at the Asian American theatre company East/West Players where he spent a summer building sets, painting scenery and immersing himself in the theatre (Street 10).

During this summer spent at the East/West Players Hwang left his family's church and turned away from his fundamentalist upbringing. As he explained to Bonnie Lyons, "it was a rejection of a kind of fundamentalist mindset. The rejection of the idea that there is immutable truth that needs to be reached and then preserved . . . my rejection of fundamentalist thought parallels my belief in fluid identity" (240). Hwang returned to school with a new mindset about his life and his future. He continued to read as many plays as he could and the following summer he enrolled in the inaugural season of the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival where he studied playwriting with Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes, who he describes as "one of the best playwriting teachers on earth" (qtd. in Savran 119). This workshop would be instrumental in defining the type of playwright Hwang would become. In a conversation with Rosemarie Tichler and Barry Jay Kaplan published in their book *The Playwright at Work* (2012), Hwang explained the impact the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival had on him:

There were writing exercises, and as I did them . . . I didn't know I was going to write about East/West stuff or Asian American stuff. I just wanted to be a

playwright. But when this stuff started coming out, I realized, “oh, some part of me is very interested in this and my conscious mind hasn’t figured that out yet.”

(29)

Upon returning to school, Hwang officially changed his major from pre-law to English and continued writing about the Asian American experience. As William Boles explains, “this was the beginning of what Hwang has called his ‘isolationist/nationalist’ phase, when he desired to relate only to other Asian Americans.” He transferred to the Asian American dormitory, joined an Asian American rock band called Bamboo, and began to study Chinese language and read Chinese fiction (Boles 125). He also began writing what would become his first produced play, *FOB*.

*FOB*, which stands for “fresh off the boat,” is a comic three-character play examining the hierarchy among Asian Americans between those whose families have lived in America for several generations, first generation Asian Americans, and newly arrived immigrants from Asia (those who are fresh off the boat). Hwang produced and directed the play at Stanford’s annual campus arts festival of student generated theatre. The production was performed in the Okada House, the Asian American dormitory on the campus of Stanford in the spring of 1979. After the success of this initial production, Hwang applied to have the play included in the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. The play was one of twelve chosen for a workshop production and a month after graduating from Stanford, Hwang was in Connecticut working with Robert Ackerman, resident director for the New York Shakespeare Festival, on *FOB* (Street 11). Ackerman was so impressed with the play that he convinced Hwang to allow him to send it to Joseph Papp in the hopes that it might be produced at Papp’s off-Broadway Public Theater in New York. Papp was equally captivated by the play



and in early 1980 the play went into rehearsals at the Public Theater (Street 11-12) Mako Iwamatsu, a Japanese American actor and director was hired to direct the production. In a 1988 interview with David Savran, Hwang relates that there was a stylized portion of the play which Hwang envisioned as “an American avant-garde thing. But as soon as . . . Mako and Joe Papp read it for the Public, they felt it should be done in the style of Chinese opera.” Hwang had no background or experience with Chinese opera, so the actor John Lone, a trained Chinese opera performer, was cast and assisted with this portion of the play (Savran 121). *FOB* opened at the Public Theater in June of 1980 and received two Obie Awards, for best off-Broadway play and best actor for John Lone. The play also earned Hwang the Drama-Logue Playwriting Award and the 1981 U.S.-Asia Institute Award (Street 17).

After the critical success of his first play, Hwang remained in what he refers to as his isolationist/nationalist period and while he worked on his next play, he began his graduate studies at the Yale University School of Drama. Hwang’s second play, *The Dance and the Railroad*, was written while he was at Yale. The play, as he explained to David Savran, represented a conscious decision on Hwang’s part to “write a play that would combine Western and Asian theatre forms” (121). *The Dance and the Railroad* takes place during a strike at a Chinese railroad camp in the mid-nineteenth century. In the two-character play, Ma, a newly arrived immigrant begs Lone, a former Chinese opera performer, to teach him to play the traditional role of the Gwan Gung, the God of fighters in Chinese opera. The play was directed and starred John Lone in the role of the former Chinese opera performer. It opened at the off-off-Broadway New Federal Theater in March 1981 and after positive reviews transferred to Public Theater for an extended run (Street 22). With two successful off-Broadway plays, Hwang withdrew from the Yale School of Drama and moved to New York City (Street 23).

As scholar Robert Cooperman notes in his article “New Theatrical Statements: Asian-Western Mergers in the Early Plays of David Henry Hwang,” the first two plays by Hwang represent a melding of Eastern and Western theatrical traditions. “While Asian characters with genuine and understandable hostility toward Westerners still populate [these] plays,” says Cooperman, “there also exists an element of integration, a theatrical meeting of the minds.” Cooperman believes that this mixture of Eastern and Western staging techniques “advance[s] the cause of cultural pluralism” and “represent Hwang’s continuing [. . .] attempt [. . .] to use the stage as an arena for demonstrating not only what drives cultures apart, but for suggesting how the theatre can bring cultures back together” (202). Hwang’s third play, produced at the Public Theater in 1982, is titled *Family Devotions*. It is a somewhat autobiographical depiction of an upper-class, evangelical Chinese American family who await the arrival of a relative from China. Cooperman suggests that *Family Devotions* plays “with cultural pluralism by plugging Asian characters into the standard Caucasian American family equation,” that of upper-class, materialists (208). For Hwang, the play marked the end of his “isolationist/nationalist period.” (It is worth noting the irony that Hwang refers to this period with these terms, despite the fact that his work was produced by non-Asian Americans and enjoyed success in a mainstream theatre.) He explained to Tichler and Kaplan that the success of his first three plays,

came at a time when I felt like the answer to the riddle of identity had something to do with ethnicity and I guess what eventually came to be called identity politics. But then, toward the end of that period, I began to wonder if I was creating Orientalia for the intelligentsia – that is, repackaging the older kind of Oriental approach that was kind of more satisfying to the *New York Times* or whatever. (39)

However, rather than turn away completely from work related to his identity as an Asian American, Hwang simply shifts the focus to another ethnicity within the category of Asian American theatre in his next plays, two Japanese-inspired one-acts, performed on a single bill and titled *Sound and Beauty* (1983). As described by Douglas Street, “these two pieces had Japanese settings, characters, and storylines . . . Hwang shows the insider dealing with an outsider, and he develops the relationship which evolves in each case” (31-32). It does seem odd for Hwang to attempt to break free from his isolationist/nationalist period with two plays which remain grounded in Asian theatrical traditions, most notably Japanese Noh theatre. However, the plays, often referred to as Hwang’s “Japanese plays,” have many elements which reference twentieth century Western theatre as much as those of Asian performance forms. This is especially true of the first of the two one-acts, titled *Sound of a Voice*, based on a ghost story Hwang had seen in several Japanese films. The one-act play is about a man who meets a mysterious woman living alone in the woods. The relationship grows throughout the play but when the man leaves, the woman commits suicide. As Cooperman notes:

The play employs elements which could be said to be “Eastern” – scenes without words, stylized sword play, symbolic movement and props – but these techniques are equally at home in Samuel Beckett’s universe, and the play further includes such Beckettian touches as the longing for companionship and human contact, aborted suicides, alienation and loneliness, a general sense of timelessness . . . and a Artaudian belief in the limitations of words to express thoughts. (209)

Cooperman continues by suggesting that “it is a mistake” to categorize the early plays of David Henry Hwang as “‘Asian’ when so much about his early work is distinctly and idealistically ‘American’” (212).

What began as an attempt to isolate his identity as an Asian American began to trouble Hwang when he examined his early work. In a 1989 article in the journal *Melus* titled “Evolving a Multicultural Tradition,” Hwang writes that after the “Japanese plays,” “I began to look at this whole idea of going through an isolationist period . . . as necessary in terms of creating a certain amount of growth and understanding and making oneself whole again – but it is perhaps limited if one wants to go beyond that” (17). He also began to take issue with the idea of a separate theatre for ethnic or racial minorities. He began to look at the American theatre landscape as either mainstream theater, which has universal appeal, or ethnic theatre which he says only has “anthropological value [and] sociological value.” His conclusion in the article examines diversity in contemporary American theatre from a completely new perspective. Rather than a separate American theatre for traditionally marginalized groups he believes that “all American theater is ethnic theater to some degree, that even if you have Tennessee Williams for instance, writing primarily about whites in the South, that a lot of writers derive their authenticity from focusing on a particular group and then drawing the universality from those particular specifics” (17). In other words, Hwang is suggesting that all plays could come under the heading of “Diversity in Theatre” and, furthermore, what makes a play universal is not simply themes which all groups can identify with, but rather a focus on specific issues related to a specific group which, in turn, reveal the universality of all people in all identity categories.

This new vision of his role as an Asian American playwright seems to have stymied Hwang. After the success of *Sound and Beauty*, Hwang went into a period of writer’s block where he completely stopped writing for two years. During this time Hwang traveled to Europe and Asia, followed by a trip to Canada. There he met the Chinese Canadian actress Ophelia Chong whom he married in 1985 (Street 34).

Hwang emerged from what William Boles describes as a two year “identity crisis and writer’s block” with the biggest flop of his career, a play called *Rich Relations*. As odd as it was for Hwang to end his isolationist/nationalist period by writing a play based, at least in part, on Japanese performance forms, Hwang’s first play after his self-revelation that cultural or ethnic specificity is what leads to universality was an equally unusual choice. Hwang describes *Rich Relations* as “an autobiographical play in which I didn’t want to deal with the ethnic issue. I wanted to talk about family matters, some of the spiritual issues in *Family Devotions*, but in terms of a family that can be any color. So we cast it Caucasian and it was extremely successful when we read it” (Savran 1223). However the off-Broadway production at Second Stage was not well received. It was panned by critics and lost a substantial amount of money (Street 36). Hwang realized that the play was, as he calls it “a bit of a miscue. While I think it is perfectly valid for me to [cast all-Caucasian actors],” said Hwang in the *Melus* article, “what I did was wrote an autobiographical play and then I just made the characters white” (17). As he explored the fluidity of identity, Hwang’s attempts at ignoring race in a play about his own upbringing proved unsuccessful. However, this failure was an important stepping-stone towards his greatest mainstream success as a playwright. Hwang notes that “the experience of doing *Rich Relations*, and starting to feel more comfortable working with non-Asian actors and things, made *M. Butterfly* possible” (qtd. in Tichler 39).

The laudatory comments regarding Hwang’s 1988 Broadway debut are seemingly endless. Robert Cooperman calls *M. Butterfly* “arguably the most important play in terms of challenging political/social/cultural identities of the West over the last decade” (201). A longtime critic of Hwang, scholar Williamson B.C. Chang admits that the play is “the most successful, well-publicized, and widely viewed contemporary Asian or Asian American literary

creation” (181). And author Esther Kim Lee suggests that *M. Butterfly* “put Asian American theatre on the national and international cultural map” (1). The importance of this play for the Asian American community cannot be underplayed. *M. Butterfly* was the first play written by an Asian American playwright to be produced on Broadway and its success provided new possibilities for all artists from traditionally underrepresented groups.

As Douglas Street relays in his biography of Hwang, “The play was given the most lavish staging of the [1988] season, at a cost of 1.5 million dollars . . . *M. Butterfly* opened at the O’Neill Theatre, 20 March 1988, to overall ecstatically positive reviews” (42). In addition to a Pulitzer Prize nomination, the play was nominated for seven Tony Awards and won for Best Play and Best Director; actor B.D. Wong won the award for Best Featured Actor for his portrayal of Song (Boles 132). Hwang says that the play was “an attempt to take some of the themes I had explored as an Asian American and see how they worked on an international stage with an international story” (qtd. in Tichler 39). *M. Butterfly* does examine many of the themes Hwang addressed in his earlier works, most notably the stereotyping of East by the West, and of the West by the East, but, as William Boles notes, this play also examines another theme related to identity: that of gender politics (131).

Despite the rave reviews and enthusiastic audiences, responses to the play were not universally positive. Several Asian American scholars had problems with both the play itself and its journey to Broadway. In *A Brief History of Asian American Theatre*, scholar Esther Kim Lee takes issue with the development process of *M. Butterfly*. Lee acknowledges the pride many in the Asian American theatrical community had of Hwang’s Broadway success, but points to the involvement of mainstream (Caucasian) director John Dexter and producer Stuart Ostrow as a “thorny detail [Asian Americans] hesitate to bring up.” “In other words,” says Lee, “the most

famous Asian American play did not get developed at an Asian American theatre company or receive direct support from the community. Instead, the production's creative team consisted of non-Asian American artists from mainstream theatre" (129). This illustrates the difficulty many playwrights from traditionally marginalized groups have with maintaining a balance between retaining their "authenticity" by working in theatres and with artists of their cultural or racial background and achieving more mainstream success.

Scholar Williamson Chang's biggest issue with the play was not its development process, but its content. Chang says:

*M. Butterfly* results in a "victory" of sorts for the East, [but] it does so by *reaffirming the stereotypes that are used against Asians*. Asians, particularly Asian women, are portrayed as cunning, shrewd, manipulative, and deceptive. Westerns are trusting, idealistic, misinformed, and generous, but simply short-sighted in their dealings with the East. (183, original emphasis)

Hwang's response to such criticism has shifted over the years. In a 1995 interview with dramaturge Deborah Frockt, Hwang explains that

For a long time, it was important for me to kind of laugh that [criticism] off and say, "No. That's not really what it's about; I think that both sides are really humiliating each other" – which is true. But more recently, I have to admit to the fact that it probably did reflect some of my own anxieties, my anger and angst about being Asian in a predominately Caucasian world. (124)

Hwang has also noted the value of such criticism, especially from the Asian American community. In 1999, he told Bonnie Lyons, "the debate over my plays seems to be useful for the Asian American community. It allows Asian-Americans to define themselves in relation to a

particular artist by either rejecting or accepting that person's vision" (239). If a certain sector of society hasn't been given an artistic voice there is a sense that when an artist does achieve widespread success that accomplishment should be applauded by all of those within that particular group. However, as Hwang rightly notes, there is no single interpretation of the Asian American experience or what it means to be Asian American and debate within the Asian American theatre community about the success and content of *M. Butterfly* is, ultimately, a positive thing.

This attitude by Hwang regarding his role within the Asian American community and his voice as an Asian American playwright was not necessarily quick to come. Immediately following the success of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang became a sort of de facto spokesperson for all Asian Americans. "I call it the 'official Asian American syndrome,'" he told Moss-Coane in 1996. "When a member of [a] minority gains prominence, they then are asked or expected to represent the experience of the entire community . . . of course that's an unrealistic expectation . . . all an artist can do, all any individual can do, is speak for himself or herself" (287). Hwang told David Savran that he felt unprepared and uncomfortable with being "some sort of spokesperson for Asian America" (122). This struggle regarding his role within the Asian American community impacted his personal life as well. In 1989, Hwang and his wife divorced (Boles 134). In an effort to distance himself from the role of Asian American spokesperson, the subject matter of his next project had nothing whatsoever to do with Asian Americans or East/West relations. Hwang collaborated with composer Philip Glass on a science fiction music drama called *1000 Airplanes on the Roof* about the abduction of a man named M by extra-terrestrial beings (Boles 133). The success of this collaboration would result in several more works, including the 1992 production of *The Voyage* which was commissioned by the New York



Metropolitan Opera to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to America (Boles 134).

Despite this attention to work dealing with themes unrelated to identity, Hwang did not completely shift his focus away from the Asian American community after the success of *M. Butterfly*. In 1990, British producer Cameron Mackintosh announced plans to bring the West End musical *Miss Saigon*, by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, to Broadway. This caused an uproar in the Asian American community because along with the production, Mackintosh announced that Caucasian actor Jonathan Pryce would reprise his role as The Engineer, a Eurasian pimp, in the Broadway production. Both Hwang and B.D. Wong, the star of *M. Butterfly*, wrote letters to Actor's Equity Association denouncing Mackintosh's decision because, according to Hwang and Wong, the producers had made insufficient attempts at finding an Asian or Asian American actor to play the role (Shimakawa 44). Hwang received a backlash from some members of the theatrical community who believed that involving himself in the casting choices of a production he had nothing to do with amounted to censorship. Hwang's response to this accusation was clear:

Criticism from Asian Americans . . . isn't censorship in that it doesn't stop the ability of artists to work. The corporate structure, the mainstream, for years not wanting to release any movies that just had Asians in them, however – that's censorship – in that it does limit the ability of the artists to work. (qtd. in Simakawa 55)

Actor's Equity initially refused to allow Pryce to appear in the production, however, when Mackintosh threatened to cancel the entire production, the union acquiesced and the production opened as planned with Pryce as The Engineer. While Hwang was passionate about the casting

choice in 1990, several years later he admitted that he and Wong should not have protested the casting issue. In a 1992 interview with Deborah Frockt, Hwang admitted that “Jonathan Pryce should be able to play anything he wants. B.D. Wong should be able to play Jewish and James Earl Jones should be able to play Italian; that’s where you want to get to” (135). In 2006, Hwang told author Esther Kim Lee that he regretted protesting the casting choices in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* and wished he had instead protested the “exotic, erotic” depiction of Asian women in the musical (194-195). Regardless, Hwang’s involvement in the controversy reinforced his views on identity and inspired, to varying degrees, much of his future work.

After the success of *M. Butterfly* and his collaborations with Philip Glass, Hwang returned again to the idea of the fluidity of identity in his next play, *Bondage*. The two-character play takes place in an S&M establishment and examines the relationship between Terri, a dominatrix, and her male customer, Mark. During the course of the play, the two actors are completely covered in leather clothing and masks, which hides their racial identity from the audience. The two characters play power games by pretending to be members of various races and ethnicities throughout the play, until they remove their masks at the end of the play revealing that Mark is Asian and Terri is Caucasian (Lee 204). Hwang is not only forcing the audience to examine their own stereotypes regarding race but is questioning race altogether. As he explained to Deborah Frockt,

I’m playing with the notion that maybe race has lost its usefulness as a construct in this day and age. What we’re essentially talking about when we talk about race is culture. We’re saying that if we associate different races with different behaviors we’re not associating the color of the skin as much as we are the culture of that root country . . . the whole idea of skin color doesn’t seem to me to be that

useful anymore . . . We have these mythologies that skin color should mean certain things, that we can gain information about the essence of a person by observing certain things in the exterior. I don't know that that's necessarily true, because a lot of times that which would be information that you infer from looking at someone's outward features may be completely at odds with what their interior actually looks like. (136)

This idea is so important to the discussion of identity-based categorization because it excellently illustrates the heart of the problem of categorizing someone based on external factors. When we talk about race we're essentially talking about skin color and the color of one's skin does not determine the mind, soul, beliefs or politics of the individual. This is a new way of looking at race, a new way of talking about identity and as Mark says near the end of *Bondage*, "when I think about the coming millennium . . . it feels like all labels have to be rewritten, all assumptions reexamined, all associations redefined. The rules that governed behavior in the last era are crumbling, but those of the time to come have yet to be written" (Hwang "*Bondage*" 277). Hwang's shift from the isolationist/nationalist period of his life to this new view on race and identity can also be seen in his personal life. Hwang began dating Kathryn A Layng, a Caucasian actress whom he met when she was an understudy in *M. Butterfly*, during the initial production of *Bondage* at Actor's Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival where she played the role of Terri. The two were married in 1993 and have two children, Noah and Eva (Boles 134).

Hwang's next play, which premiered the same year he married Kathryn Layng was inspired by the controversy surrounding *Miss Saigon*. *Face Value* (1993) is a farcical play which tells the story of a white male actor who was cast to play an Asian character in a fictional play. During the course of the action, two Asian American actors decide to interrupt the opening night

performance by appearing on stage in whiteface. Meanwhile, two white supremacists arrive and attempt to intimidate the white actor because they think he is an Asian actor who is taking jobs from Caucasian actors (Boles 135-136). In a 1998 interview with Misha Berson published in *American Theatre*, Hwang says the play “just didn’t work. My intention,” says Hwang, “was to create an Orton-esque farce about race instead of gender” (20). The play was Hwang’s biggest failure to date; the Broadway production closed prior to its official opening after only eight preview performances (Boles 136).

In 1993, Hwang wrote the screenplay for the critically panned and financially disappointing film version of *M. Butterfly*. He followed this with the screenplay to the 1994 film *Golden Gate* which was a modest success (Boles 136). Returning to New York in 1995, Hwang sought to reconnect with his past and began working on *Golden Child* (1996) which was inspired by the family history he had written as a child after interviewing his elderly grandmother. *Golden Child* is the story of a Chinese businessman living in the early 1900s who decides to abandon Chinese culture in favor of Christianity and Western values (Vellella B4). This story is the framework for a more intimate story about a man named Andrew Kwong and his wife, who are soon to become parents for the first time (Boles 136). As he explained to Tony Vellela in a 1998 interview in *The Christian Science Monitor*, “I wanted to be able to bring a drama with a mostly or all-Asian cast to Broadway, which hadn’t been done since *Rashomon* in the late ‘50s . . . This was a conscious motivation of mine in creating *Golden Child*” (B4). Although the play examines East/West relations, ultimately the intimacy of the play, according to William Boles, “removes the play from the larger sociopolitical contexts of his previous works and places it on a personal and individual level” (138). Directed by James Lapine, the play had a two-year development process and underwent numerous revisions. Various incarnations of the play were

produced at the Public Theater in New York, the South Coast Repertory Theatre in California, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., as well as a production in Singapore before eventually opening on Broadway in 1998 (Vellela B4). The play ran for a disappointing sixty-nine performances but was nominated for three Tony Awards, including a nomination for Best Play (Boles 138).

Hwang's next project was completely different from anything he had previously done. Hwang was hired by Disney Theatricals to serve as a script doctor for their upcoming Broadway production of Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* (1999) after its initial run in Atlanta. The choice by Disney to hire Hwang seems a bit odd. The musical, based on Giuseppe Verdi's 1871 opera of the same name did not address East/West relationships or the fluidity of identity. However, by 1999 Hwang was no longer solely focused on bringing stories to life on stage which represent Asia America as a culture or examine East/West relations. A few months before the Broadway opening of *Aida*, Hwang explained his shift in focus to Bonnie Lyons:

I've become rather antinationalistic and antiseparatist in my middle age. I'm in a mixed marriage and I have a biracial child . . . at this point in my life I would say that the argument against assimilation assumes that culture is static. It doesn't make any sense to me; culture is what people create at any given time, culture lives and changes. So I think it's accurate to say that while society is going to change me, I am also going to change society. (233)

In his early years as a novice playwright, Hwang was struggling to come to terms with his own feelings about his root culture, his race, and his role in American society. By the end of the twentieth century, Hwang's attitude about all of these things had changed considerably. He wasn't abandoning his culture, he wasn't ignoring his role as an Asian American artist, but he

did understand that his art, his plays, did not *have* to only address issues directly related to his identity as an Asian American.

Hwang's work throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century demonstrates this new-found attitude for Hwang. Some projects, such as Hwang's 2001 NBC miniseries *The Lost Empire* combines elements from his root culture (the miniseries is based on the Chinese story of the mythic half-monkey, half-man Monkey King) with an examination of Eastern vs. Western culture (the Monkey King meets a white man who discovers fundamental differences between American and Asian individualism) (*Yolk* 29). Other projects, such as his re-working of the libretto to Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*, illustrate Hwang's desire to re-present the story of the Asian American experience on the stage. The musical was ground-breaking when it premiered in 1958 because the entire cast was Asian (or at least appeared to be Asian); however, the stage musical and 1961 film version were filled with racist stereotypes making it almost impossible to produce in contemporary America. As Hwang explained to John Yang, in an interview aired on ABC News, by rewriting the libretto Hwang was attempting to "play with the stereotypes and then ultimately unearth them, ultimately fill them so that characters that you may have seen in a certain context . . . by the end of the show you really get to know them as human beings" (Yang). The revival closed after 172 performances and lost over \$7 million dollars. However, as Esther Kim Lee points out, Hwang understood the importance of the revised musical appearing on Broadway in illustrating just how far Asian American theatre had come over the past fifty years (Lee 225).

Hwang followed these two projects, which related to his racial background and root culture in various ways, with two projects that had nothing to do with Asia, Asian Americans, or identity. In 2002, Hwang adapted A.S. Byatt's 1990 novel *Passion: A Romance* into a film. The

film, titled *Possession*, follows the lives of two scholars who accidentally uncover evidence of a secret love affair between two Victorian poets (Boles 140). Sydney Pollack was originally attached to direct the film but after he left the project playwright and film director Neil LaBute came aboard and made significant changes to the screenplay. Hwang is now listed as co-writer with LaBute and screenwriter Laura Jones (imdb.com). After the frustrations of Hollywood, Hwang returned to New York to write the libretto for Disney's *Tarzan* (2006), another project unrelated to his identity as an Asian American.

Hwang's next two stage works were *Yellow Face* (2007) and *Chinglish* (2011). Both plays examine race and identity, but do so in a much more mature and layered manner than Hwang's early plays. In the comedy *Yellow Face*, a character named Hwang mistakenly casts a Caucasian actor in the Asian role in a production of Hwang's *Face Value*. To avoid embarrassment, Hwang must then convince everyone involved in the production that this white actor is actually of Asian descent. Hwang described the play to Tichler and Kaplan as a "staged documentary but turned into a stage mockumentary." He says the play asks "what does multiculturalism mean and what are the flaws in this method? What are the good things about the method? And I guess strives toward something we now call postracialism" (40). Hwang is referring to the twenty-first century idealized objective of a post-racial society, which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a time period, society, etc., in which racism is no longer institutionalized or no longer exists" (n.pag.). Clearly, we do not live in a post-racial society, but through *Face Value*, Hwang seeks to question both multiculturalism as an ideology and post-racialism as a possibility.

The play premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and made a successful New York debut at the Public Theater in 2007. *Chinglish*, is a bilingual play (English and Mandarin

Chinese) about an American businessman living in a contemporary Chinese city (Tichler 32). The play doesn't examine identity of the individual but rather the identity of an entire nation: China. "By writing the play," says Hwang, "I'm trying to figure out what my relationship is to the root culture and more specifically how I feel about China nowadays" (qtd. in Tichler 43). The play opened on Broadway on October 27, 2011, to mixed reviews and ran a modest 109 performances (ibdb.com).

Hwang's most recent work, *Kung Fu*, opened at the off-Broadway Signature Theatre on February 24, 2014. The work is a bio-play chronicling the life of Bruce Lee from his late teens to a few years before his untimely death at the age of thirty-two. The play received mixed reviews, with most critics hailing the well-executed fight sequences and responding unfavorably to the dialogue written by Hwang. Charles Isherwood, of *The New York Times* wrote, "The writing often seems pitched at the level of an informative, morally instructive young-adult novel" (C1). The play does contain many themes Hwang's has explored throughout his career, especially with regards to identity, race, and ethnicity. Elysa Gardner, of *USA Today*, asserts that the play uses simple language and fluid, vibrant movement to examine our notions of, and misconceptions about, race, cultural identity and manhood" (n.pag.). While the play may not have been a hit with critics it does illustrate that Hwang continues to explore the idea of identity.

Is David Henry Hwang an Asian American playwright or a playwright who happens to be Asian American? His body of work would suggest that he is both. Some of his plays examine the Asian American experience directly; others confront the tensions between the East and the West; his work in musical theatre and on film and television is more diverse, sometimes addressing identity factors, and sometimes not. When asked directly by Tichler and Kaplan if referring to Hwang based on his identity was reductive, Hwang responded by stating, "I'm an



Asian American playwright, and I am Asian American, and I am a playwright, so it's true . . . [the label] is no worse than anybody else's label so long as I get to do what I want, which I feel like I've pretty much gotten to do" (45). This response illustrates the often messy nature of identity categorization. Yes, Hwang is an Asian American; yes, Hwang is a playwright; therefore, yes, Hwang is an Asian American playwright. However, self-identifying as an Asian American does not have to limit him or his work. As he told Deborah Frockt,

It's simplistic to say that because I'm an Asian American that that would mean I would necessarily always write about Asian American characters. Nonetheless, I think my perspective is shaped a great deal by the fact that I'm Asian American in the same way that it is shaped by my being a man and being from Southern California. There's a lot of different things that go into making us who we are.

(134)

Hwang recognizes the importance of his identity as an Asian American in his work, but he also understands that to refer to him simply as an Asian American is reductive because there are many aspects of his identity which have influenced his work as an artist.

### **What This Means for Hwang and Identity-Based Categorization**

Hwang's journey from his childhood in a mixed-race neighborhood in San Gabriel, California, to an elite boys preparatory school, to living in an all-Asian American dorm at Stanford, to his successes on and off Broadway with plays examining the Asian American experience and East/West relations, to his role as *the* Asian American artistic spokesman, to his work in musical theatre, film and television which often had little or nothing to do with his racial background, illustrate the difficulty in labelling an individual in a single identity-based category.

Hwang expresses it best in the following quote, which I have included in its entirety because it so clearly illuminates what Hwang calls the fluidity of identity and the problems with pigeonholing an individual into a category based on his or her identity. Hwang says:

I started out being fairly assimilationist, trying to pretend I was white. Then, as I mentioned, I got to a place where I was more isolationist/nationalist, wanting to work only with other Asians and not wanting to have that much to do with European American society. Now I'm more interculturalist, trying to make connections, talking about how all of us have a number of different identities. And these identities are not particularly static. It's not as though I decide I'm a Chinese American and that therefore defines me for the rest of my life. That, to me, is another form of fundamentalism, as insidious as the religious fundamentalism that I grew up with. It's important constantly to question and to change, and part of the experiment that's going on right now in America has to do with the question "can we become a world culture?" Can all these different groups from around the world retain something of themselves and yet feel enough of a bond with one another that we feel that we're a country? (qtd. in Moss-Coane 289)

If this is true, if identities are not static, then using identity to define a playwright is nothing other than limiting to the playwright. Furthermore, when these identity-based categories are used in textbooks to introduce a playwright like Hwang to undergraduate theatre students it does a disservice to those students because it only presents a certain aspect of Hwang's identity. His work does address issues related to his identity as an Asian American and that should certainly not be ignored in introducing Hwang and his work to theatre students, but if textbooks were to

remove the label “Asian American playwright,” and simply present the playwright David Henry Hwang it would provide students with the opportunity to explore Hwang’s work without the influence of a reductive label of a singular identity-based category.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Maria Irene Fornes

### Fornes in Theatre Textbooks

In the textbooks analyzed for this project, playwright/director Maria Irene Fornes<sup>2</sup> is introduced to undergraduate theatre students in one of three ways: 1) she is acknowledged as a Cuban-American playwright within a subsection devoted to Hispanic Theatre; 2) she is listed among significant feminist playwrights; 3) her work *Fefu and her Friends* (1977) is provided as an early example of environmental theatre. The manner in which textbooks present her to theatre students has shifted considerably over the past twenty years. In the early 1990s, prior to the addition of sections devoted to diversity in contemporary American theatre, she was referred to as a woman or feminist playwright who occasionally created environmental theatre pieces. When sections dedicated to diversity were added to theatre textbooks in the mid-1990s, she was almost solely referred to as a Cuban-American playwright. The positioning of Fornes in textbooks published in the twenty-first century has shifted again with some focusing on her identity as a Cuban-American playwright, some noting her work as representative of feminist theatre, and others referring to Fornes and her plays as examples of Hispanic theatre and feminist theatre, while also mentioning the important role *Fefu and her Friends* played as an early example of environmental theatre. What follows is a brief overview of the manner in which theatre textbooks presented and introduced Maria Irene Fornes to undergraduate theatre students over the past quarter century.

Despite the fact that Fornes began her playwriting career in 1960 and the play most often referred to in theatre textbooks was produced in 1977, none of the textbooks examined for this

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<sup>2</sup> According to scholar Assunta Bartolomucci Kent, Maria Irene Fornes dropped the accents from her name following the publication of her first anthology of plays, *Promenade and Other Plays* in 1971 (86).

study include any mention of Maria Irene Fornes or her plays until 1990. The first reference to Fornes is in Marvin Carlson and Yvonne Shafer's 1990 textbook *The Play's the Thing: An Introduction to Theatre*. In a chapter on "The Challenging Modern Theatre," Carlson and Shafer introduce prominent African American playwrights before moving into a very brief discussion of "plays by women exploring the experience of women." Fornes is included here with Tina Howe as examples of female playwrights who have found success in off-Broadway theatres (575-576). It should be noted that no mention of Fornes's race or ethnicity is included in this textbook and although the book does mention contemporary African American, Gay and Lesbian, and Women's Theatre, both Asian American and Hispanic Theatre are not discussed in the textbook.

Milly S. Barranger's *Theatre: A Way of Seeing*, published in 1991, provides slightly more information for theatre students with regards to the works of Fornes. However, like Carlson and Shafer in 1990, Barranger makes no mention whatsoever of Fornes's identity as a Hispanic or Cuban-American playwright. Barranger begins by introducing Fornes to her readers as a playwright whose play *Fefu and her Friends* is an "environmental performance text" in which audience members travel to several locations during the course of the play to view various scenes (75). In a chapter devoted to contemporary playwrights, Barranger notes that Fornes is a playwright and director by including her in a list of other prominent playwright/directors, along with Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett (82). Barranger then includes Fornes in a photo essay of women playwrights, titled "Emerging Voices and Perspectives," who have "provide[d] significant contributions to the contemporary theatre" (86-88). Following the photo essay, Barranger lists several of Fornes's most well-known plays and then situates Fornes within the context of feminist playwriting by providing a quotation from a 1983 article published in the *Performing Arts Journal*, titled "The 'Woman' Playwright Issue." Fornes states, "We have to

reconcile ourselves to the idea that the protagonist of the play can be a woman and that it is natural for a woman to write a play where the protagonist is a woman. Man is not the center of life. And it is natural when this fact reflects itself in the work of women” (87). Fornes did make this statement in the *Performing Arts Journal*; however, its inclusion here suggests to the reader that Fornes is a playwright who is solely, or at least primarily, interested in proving that “man is not the center of life.” In the detailed examination of Fornes and her work in the section below, it will become clear that this is far from the truth.

In the 1991 edition of Oscar Brockett’s *History of the Theatre*, we see the first instance of Fornes’s ethnicity being used by textbook authors to aid in introducing her to theatre students. In a section on “Theatre in the United States after 1968,” Brockett begins by noting significant women playwrights such as Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, and Wendy Wasserstein. Brockett includes Fornes in this list and refers to her as “a versatile and prolific Cuban-born writer.” Brockett then discusses *Fefu and her Friends*, which he presents within the context of feminist theatre, and Fornes’s play *The Conduct of Life* (1985) which Brockett says “draws parallels between the subjugation of women and political subjugation” (628-629). Although identity-based categories are not yet fully established in theatre textbooks in 1991, Brockett’s reference to Fornes as both a female playwright and a Cuban American playwright will be followed by several textbook authors once identity-based categories are more widely used in the mid-1990s.

Not all authors of textbooks in the early 1990s are interested in presenting Fornes within an identity-based category. Edwin Wilson’s sixth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1994, only refers to Fornes in the context of environmental theatre. What’s interesting about the manner in which Wilson presents Fornes and her play *Fefu and her Friends* is that Wilson never mentions the phrase “environmental theatre.” Instead, the play is included in a chapter

devoted to the role of the critic. Wilson uses *Fefu* as an example of a play which, because it moves from location to location during the course of the performance, could be confusing to the average theatregoer. “A critic,” says Wilson, “can explain Fornes’s purpose and techniques so that when audience members attend a performance they will be better prepared for what they are experiencing” (73). While this may be helpful in understanding the role of the critic, it does little to introduce Fornes, or her play, to theatre students in any substantive way.

The 1998 edition of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience* includes the same section above regarding the critic’s role in helping an audience understand a play like *Fefu and her Friends*. It also includes a two-page synopsis of *Fefu* (73-75). In addition, this edition is the first to include a chapter devoted specifically to diversity in contemporary American theatre. Given the fact that most of the references to Fornes in the textbooks published in the early 1990s include her as part of the discussion of feminist or women’s theatre, one might assume that when an entire sub-section devoted to feminist theatre enters the textbook, Fornes would be included in this identity-based category. Instead, Wilson has chosen to include her in a subsection devoted to Hispanic Theatre. According to Wilson, there are three different types of Hispanic Theatre: Chicano, which originated in the Southwest; Nuyoricano which examines issues relevant to Puerto Ricans, especially those living in New York City; and Cuban American. Fornes is included in the brief discussion of Cuban American theatre and is the only playwright mentioned whose work is an example of this type of theatre. Wilson describes Cuban American theatre by suggesting that it “developed chiefly in Florida” and that the “Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s resulted in fourteen Cuban American productions in 1936 and 1937” (247-248). This description seems odd in reference to Fornes because she never lived in Florida and she didn’t arrive in the United States until 1945, almost ten years after the fourteen Cuban American

productions referred to by Wilson. In addition, the one sentence description of Fornes provided by Wilson is inaccurate. Wilson says, “A highly regarded Cuban American dramatist who began to be produced in the 1970s was Maria Irene Fornes.” As noted below, Fornes’s work was produced throughout the 1960s. By 1969, audiences had seen her work in productions on and off-Broadway and she had received the first of many Obie awards for distinguished playwriting. The oddities of Fornes’s inclusion in the newly created theatre of diversity chapter of this textbook reveal the difficulties of placing playwrights into categories based on their identity: Not only does Wilson not include Fornes within the discussion of feminist theatre, where she appeared in several textbooks from the early 1990s, but he also chooses to include her as a representative of Cuban American theatre when she has no relation to the description provided by Wilson of this type of identity-based theatre *and* the facts regarding her career are inaccurate.

The eighth and ninth editions of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience* (2001 and 2004) introduce Fornes to their readers in exactly the same way as the seventh edition. In the tenth edition, published in 2007, Wilson follows previous editions by introducing Fornes within the context of environmental theatre which a critic can assist audiences with understanding as well presenting her as *the* representative of Cuban American theatre. However, Wilson returns to the description used by other authors in the early 1990s to refer to Fornes: that of a feminist playwright. Within the feminist theatre section of the chapter devoted to “Contemporary American Theatre” Wilson notes that “in the 1960s [. . .] many female playwrights questioned traditional gender roles and the place of women in American society.” Fornes’s *Fefu and her Friends* is included in a list of “representative works” of this kind of feminist theatre. Wilson describes the play as offering “insight into female friendship and the struggles women experience in a patriarchal culture” (369). With this addition, Wilson categorizes Fornes as both



a representative of feminist theatre *and* Cuban American theatre. It is interesting to note that, in placing Fornes in multiple categories, Wilson is acknowledging the reality that playwrights do not necessarily fit into a single identity-based category. However, the fact that the only play mentioned by Wilson is *Fefu and her Friends* – which is set in New England, focuses on a group of upper-middle class women, and has nothing to do with any themes which might be related to Fornes’s background as a Cuban American – is sure to cause confusion among any undergraduate theatre student who sets to read or view a production of *Fefu and her Friends* expecting to see a work which represents both gender and racial diversity.

Both the eleventh and twelfth editions of Wilson’s *The Theatre Experience* (2009 and 2011) include the references to Fornes noted above. In the eleventh edition (and repeated in the twelfth edition), Wilson attempts to further support the inclusion of Fornes within the identity-category of feminist theatre by referring to her in a break-out box titled “Creating the World of the Play.” In this section Wilson explains that many feminist playwrights of the 1970s viewed Aristotle’s ideas of the well-made play as a reflection of “the West’s dominant male culture.” Wilson notes that scholars such as Sue-Ellen Case and many female playwrights began to search for a “women’s form” of theatre which was “often cyclical and without the single climax” and one which was “frequently open-ended and offers woman as subject.” To illustrate this idea, Wilson turns to Fornes’s most famous play:

One example is *Fefu and her Friends*, written and directed in 1977 by the Cuban-born American dramatist Maria Irene Fornes (b. 1930). Instead of a plot, there is a cyclical, physical action; and in place of logical cause and effect, Fornes writes each scene as though it were a new event. There is no hero; the subject of the play is a group of educated women sharing thoughts and ideas. (179)

By providing more extensive information regarding this play to his readers, Wilson is not, necessarily, negating the importance of Fornes's ethnic background, but he is certainly more fully presenting her as first and foremost a feminist playwright.

It should be acknowledged that many of the textbooks examined for this project and referred to in previous chapters make no reference whatsoever to Fornes or her plays including Dennis Sporre's *The Art of Theatre* (1993) and Cameron Kenneth and Patti Gillespie's *The Enjoyment of Theatre* (1996). Most noteworthy among this group is Stephanie Arnold's 2011 edition of *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*. Arnold provided a unique approach to presenting the life and works of August Wilson; however, like David Henry Hwang, Arnold makes no reference to Maria Irene Fornes in this textbook. There are likely two reasons for this. First, only one of Fornes's plays made it to Broadway and her off-Broadway successes never garnered her any kind of mainstream notoriety at any point in her career. Second, the absence of Fornes in these textbooks can easily be attributed to the realities of creating a single textbook which provides an overview of several thousand years of theatre history (from Ancient Greece to the present day). A playwright without mainstream success is likely to be overlooked or ignored regardless of how much importance they may have had in reference to theatre movements such as feminist theatre or how much their work might represent an identity-based category such as Hispanic theatre.

Clearly textbook authors are still struggling with what to do with a playwright like Maria Irene Fornes. Should she be included at all? Is her work representative of her racial and ethnic background or should it be discussed in relation to her gender? Or both? An excellent example of this struggle can be seen in Robert Barton and Annie McGregor's 2012 edition of *Theatre in Your Life*. Barton and McGregor first introduce Fornes in a rather unusual way. In a chapter

called “Storytellers and Stories: Freedom and Influence,” the authors begin by discussing the influence several historical playwrights had on the society of their era and conclude by noting:

Living legends like Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Maria Irene Fornes of Cuba, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya are only steps behind [the playwrights of previous eras]. You may not recognize all these names, but you probably recognize some of them, which would be unlikely for other theatre artists, except actors.

Playwrights change lives and reinvigorate cultures. (78)

The point the authors are trying to make is that playwrights and the plays they write have the potential to impact their societies. However, the fact that these three playwrights are introduced in this manner (and that the authors assume that the undergraduate theatre student is familiar with at least some of them) with no additional context renders this section essentially meaningless to the average theatre student. The authors do attempt to provide some additional context with regards to Fornes, but that too falls short. In the subsection devoted to Hispanic Theatre within a section referred to as “Ethnic Theatre in America,” the authors include Fornes in a rather long list of Cuban American playwrights “whose works have received prominent productions” (376). This vague description, once again, offers little to the theatre student. It should also be noted that in Barton and McGregor’s discussion of “Women’s Theatre,” Fornes is not included (382-383).

Of the three categories in which these textbooks have placed Fornes (environmental theatre, Cuban American theatre, and feminist theatre) only the category of environmental theatre is free from debate. *Fefu and her Friends* does ask the audience to travel to several locations throughout the performance in order to witness the play. The authors of many of these textbooks are confident, however, that Fornes belongs in the identity-based categories of Cuban

American (Hispanic) and/or feminist theatre. The question becomes how does Fornes view her work? Does she see her work as part of the Cuban American theatre tradition, developed in Florida as Wilson suggests? Does she see her work, and in particular *Fefu and her Friends*, as representative of feminist theatre? Was she attempting to write a feminist play with *Fefu and her Friends*? How would Fornes wish to be categorized? What follows is a detailed examination of the body of work produced by Fornes and her own views on identity-based categorization.

**MARIA IRENE FORNES: Hispanic Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be Hispanic? (Also: Feminist Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be a Woman?)**

When one examines the life and body of work of Irene Maria Fornes, it becomes evident that the act of categorizing her or her work is as absurd as many of her early plays. She has written over fifty pieces for the stage. These works include full-length plays, Broadway-style musicals, one-acts, environmental theatre, devised pieces, short comic acts, and even adaptations of classic dramas (Cummings xviii). She is one of the most prolific playwrights of the twentieth century and has received nine Obie awards (for achievement in Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatre), more than any other individual with the exception of playwright Sam Shepard (Cummings xx). Despite these accolades, Fornes never achieved mainstream success. However, this was not her goal; she was very content to live and work on the edges of the theatre world.

Fornes was the sixth child born to Carlos Luis and Camren Hismenia Fornes on May 14, 1930, in Havana, Cuba (Kent 63). Her parents have been described as “poor but unconventional” and “humble and eccentric” by her biographers (Kent 63; Cummings 5). According to Fornes, her father was “never a money-earner; he was not interested in a career,” instead, Fornes says, he was a “natural philosopher” and a voracious reader (qtd. in Kent 68). Biographer Scott Cummings describes Fornes’s mother as a “free spirit” who worked at a school

run by Carlos's mother (5). During Fornes's childhood the family was extremely poor and spent a great deal of time living with various family members, including a stint at an uncle's orange farm where the family attempted to sell oranges at a local Havana fruit stand (Kent 70).

Her mother, like her father, was an avid reader and would often read to the children. Although Fornes gained a love for story-telling from her parents, she rarely read, because she only had three-and-a-half years of education in Cuba and because she was dyslexic. "She learned," according to Cummings, "in part, by osmosis." (6-7). Fornes grew up in a home where traditional gender roles were often flipped. Her father cooked all of the meals, while her mother, who had a gift for carpentry, handled many of the household repairs (Kent 71). In the early 1940s her mother decided that the family should move to America. Fornes's father agreed, however, he died of a heart attack before travel visas could be secured for the family. In the fall of 1945, soon after the death of her father, Maria Irene, her sister Margarita, and their mother traveled to America and eventually settled in the upper west side of Manhattan (Cummings 7).

At age 15 and with very little English, Fornes struggled for the first few years in America. She was aided by a group of Cuban nuns who helped her enroll at St. John's Academy, but she dropped out after only six weeks. She helped her family by working several odd jobs and eventually moved out on her own, living for a short time in an apartment on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. She had aspirations of becoming a painter and in her early twenties was able to save enough money to travel to Europe to study painting. Fornes spent a little over two years in the mid-1950s living the life of the struggling artist in Paris, before eventually returning to New York in 1957 (Cummings 7-8).

Fornes continued to live a bohemian lifestyle in New York. Although she had been very moved by a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* she saw while in Paris, Fornes

remained focused on her painting and had no intention (or desire) to become a playwright (Kent 91). She began to socialize with other artists in New York's Greenwich Village where she met author Susan Sontag. According to Cummings, Sontag and Fornes became lovers and lived together from 1959 to 1963 (16). This relationship would prove instrumental in the future of Maria Irene Fornes, not only as an artist, but more importantly as a playwright. In a 1986 interview with Ross Wetzsteon, Fornes explained how she became a playwright. In the spring of 1961, Fornes and Sontag were sharing a cup of coffee at a local Greenwich Village café and looking for a party to attend that evening. Sontag seemed depressed and distracted. Fornes asked what was bothering her and Sontag mentioned that she had been trying to write a novel. Although the two lived together Fornes had no idea that her partner wanted to be a novelist. Apparently, Sontag had been struggling with writer's block for some time. This seemed ridiculous to Fornes, who, as she explained to Wetzsteon, told Sontag, "How silly. If you want to write, why not just sit down and write?" Sontag thought she was joking, but she was clearly not. Fornes immediately took Sontag back to their apartment and forced her to sit down and write. "Just to show you how easy it is," Fornes said, "I'll write something, too." Fornes grabbed a cookbook on their kitchen counter and begins to write a short story using the first word of every sentence in the cookbook. This, according to Fornes, was the beginning of her career as a writer (Wetzsteon 25-26).

From this spring night in 1961 until her last play in 2000, Fornes molded herself into one of the most prolific and eclectic writers of the post-war era. But what kind of playwright would she become? The theatre textbooks analyzed above suggest her works are representative of both feminist theatre and Cuban American theatre. Does Fornes see her plays in this way? Does she use her plays to comment on the patriarchal system in our society? What role does her childhood

play in her drama? Additionally, what influence, if any, does her experience as a lesbian, living in Greenwich Village during the final decades of the twentieth century have on her plays? Could one make the argument that she should be categorized within the gay and lesbian theatre category? Because she has written so extensively, it is impossible to examine each of her works in this project. However, there are many plays which are prototypical Fornes works which can assist in answering these questions. What follows is an overview of the many of the works of Maria Irene Fornes which will provide a clearer picture of any possible thematic or dramaturgical parallels among the plays she wrote as well as a deeper analysis regarding her views on identity based categorization in relation to her life and her work in the theatre.

Many of Fornes's early plays read more like vaudevillian sketches than traditional dramas. They also often deal with power struggles between men and women. Her first play, *Tango Palace* (1964) is described by Cummings as "a wild, claustrophobic, two character drama that uses forms of social hierarchy to explore the bounds and bonds of an ambiguously intimate relationship" (11). Fornes wrote the play in nineteen days and immediately submitted it to the San Francisco Actors Workshop where it was staged by director and theoretician Herbert Blau (Cummings 10-11). During this time, Fornes began working in the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio in New York where she also studied Method acting. The Actors Studio, impressed by her work in the Playwrights Unit, produced a one-night "special performance" of *Tango Palace*, on April 4, 1964, marking her New York debut as a playwright.

Like *Tango Palace*, Fornes's next major work, *The Successful Life of 3* (1965) is a quick-moving exploration of power dynamics in male-female relationships. And like much of her early work the characters are two-dimensional caricatures rather than fully realized individuals. *The Successful Life of 3* follows the story of HE, a handsome young man; SHE, a sexy woman; and 3,

an overweight middle-aged man who finagles his way into a bizarre threesome of sorts with the young couple. During the course of the play we witness the “life” of a relationship in fast-moving vignettes which ultimately reveal that a “successful” relationship is meaningless (Cummings 24-25). After a brief run at the Firehouse theatre in Minneapolis, the play made its New York premiere at the Open Theatre in March 1965 (Cummings 22, Kent 210). Although both of these plays explore power relationships between men and women, Fornes was not attempting to make any kind of political statement regarding the role of women in society and did not wish viewers to “read into” the play. In the preface to the published versions of *Tango Palace* and *The Successful Life of 3* and republished in *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), edited by Marc Robinson, Fornes writes:

To approach a work of art with the wish to decipher its symbolism, and to extract the author’s intentions from it, is to imply that the work can be something other than what it demonstrates, that the work can be treated as a code system which, when deciphered, reveals the true content of the work. A work of art should not be other than what it demonstrates. (207)

In other words, Fornes believed that her plays should be taken at face value. What she was attempting to do in these two plays was simply explore the relationships of these particular characters rather than use the characters to present a symbolic message or make a political statement.

As mentioned previously, Fornes spent the vast majority of her career working outside of the mainstream of American theatre. The one exception was her only stint on Broadway, in a 1966 production of her play, *The Office*. The play comically follows the downfall of the fictional Hinch, Inc. after the death of its founder (Cummings 27). She began writing the play while



working with the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio. After a workshop presentation, the rights to the play were acquired by several producers including movie mogul Joseph E. Levine, Peter Cook, and others. Jerome Robbins, fresh off the success of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), was hired to direct the play on Broadway. The producers intended to open the play at the Henry Miller Theatre on May 12, 1966, however, after ten lackluster preview performances the producers predicted that critics would not respond favorably to the play and it closed prior to its official opening. Fornes never returned to Broadway (Cummings 27, 28).

After the disappointment of *The Office*, Fornes's next project was actually more of a performance event than a play. *The Vietnamese Wedding* (1967) was written as part of a Vietnam War protest event called Angry Arts Week in the winter of 1967 (Cummings 30). At the performance, four readers help to reenact a traditional Vietnamese wedding with audience members filling the role of Matchmaker, Bride, Groom, Father-of-the-Bride, etc. As Diane Moroff describes it, "the context will likely be alien and unfamiliar to Western audiences [but] when they adopt the roles the context prescribes, they inevitably transform the context into something habitable and familiar" (8). There is no denying that the performance piece is political in nature; Fornes is illustrating the commonalities between the American and Vietnamese cultures to make the point that we are more alike than different. However, this is an excellent example of a piece of work by Fornes which defies identity-based categorization. There is nothing Cuban and little which is feminist about this piece; its purpose is entirely different.

As her playwriting matured, Fornes began to create exercises to assist in beginning to write a new piece. These exercises would later be used in the various playwriting workshops she would teach throughout her career. In one exercise she made two stacks of index cards. In one

stack were locations; in the other were character types. On one occasion she randomly drew from the cards and selected “Jail” as the location and “Aristocrats” as the character types. She set to write a scene which took place in a jail with two imprisoned aristocrats whom she named Prisoner 105 and Prisoner 106. This scene would eventually become one her most successful works: *Promenade* (1969) (Cummings 35, 40). As she continued to work on the play she felt that it needed music to effectively tell the story of the two prisoners who escape from prison and she began working with musician Al Carmines to create a full-length musical based on her initial scene. The expanded version was the premier production at the newly built Promenade Theatre (named after Fornes’s play) on Broadway and 76<sup>th</sup> Street, on June 4, 1969.<sup>3</sup> The production ran for 259 performances making it the longest running single production of Fornes’s career (Cummings 40, 46).

The 1970s marked a brief lull of sorts in Fornes’s writing career. This is mostly due to two factors. First, she joined with six female playwrights, including Adrienne Kennedy, Megan Terry, and others, to form the New York Theatre Strategy (NYTS) which had a mission of promoting plays written, directed, and produced by women (Cummings 52). Second, Fornes began directing her own plays, both New York premiers and regional productions around the country. From the mid-1970s until she retired in 2000, Fornes would direct almost all original workshops and productions of her plays (Cummings 54). In the late 1970s Fornes began working with the off-off-Broadway theatre company INTAR (International Arts Relations). INTAR was formed in 1966 as a company originally devoted to presenting classic works by Latin American and Spanish playwrights. Fornes’s relationship with INTAR would last for more

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<sup>3</sup> According to Scott Cummings, the Promenade Theatre was the only Off-Broadway Theatre on the street Broadway in New York City. From 1969 to 2006 it housed such notable productions as *Godspell*, *Hurlyburly*, and *Three Tall Women*. Today it has been converted into a Sephora cosmetics store (46).

than twenty-five years and she would play a major role in shifting the focus of INTAR from classic works to more contemporary theatre by and about Hispanics (Cummings 56).

While working with the members of the INTAR company, Fornes and composer Jose Raul Bernardo collaborated on a piece which would become *Cap-a-pie* (1975). The music-play marked the first original play produced by INTAR. The title means “from head to toe.” The play has no plot, setting, or defined characters. Instead Fornes held a workshop with eight Hispanic American actors in which they relayed stories from their childhood and their thoughts regarding their bicultural identities. The anecdotes were crafted together by Fornes, some becoming songs written by Bernardo, and were presented to the audience in a casual presentational format (Cummings 58). This marked the first time Fornes directly dealt with issues related to her own background as a Cuban American. However, as Cummings points out, “the piece avoided mention of historical events or familiar place names in favor of evocative memories of childhood” (58). Again, rather than making a political statement regarding immigration or the Othering of Hispanics and their culture, Fornes simply sought to theatricalize the specific stories from the eight individuals chosen to participate in the production.

If *Promenade* was Fornes’s longest running play, *Fefu and her Friends* (1977) is certainly her most well-known. It is the play most often referred to by theatre textbook authors because of its unique staging and its supposed examination of feminist issues. *Fefu and her Friends* was first produced by Fornes’s New York Theatre Strategy at the Relativity Media Lab in 1977. Fornes chose the location because, in addition to a traditional performance space, it also had a large dressing room, a kitchen, and a business office, all of which Fornes intended to use when she directed the piece (Moroff 33). The play takes place in the well-to-do New England home of Stephany Beckmann, known as Fefu. During the first section of the play, eight women

arrive at the home to rehearse for a fundraising event. In the opening scene, Fefu surprises her guests by picking up a shotgun and shooting at her unseen husband through an open door. She confesses that the bullets are blanks and the shooting is simply an unusual game she plays with her husband. The second section of the play takes place in various locations in Fefu's home (and in the Relativity Media Lab). Each of the four scenes in this section is repeated four times so that the audience can view each scene in small groups as they travel through the building. Each scene contains private conversations amongst various characters in which they discuss relationships and sex. These scenes in particular have led many scholars and critics to refer to *Fefu and her Friends* as a feminist play. Scholar Beverly Pevitts says that in these scenes we see "women's need for women. Although the title character says women need men because we cannot feel safe with each other, the other characters prove her wrong as they interact" (302). In the final section of the play the audience returns to the theatre space and Fefu's living room. One of the friends, Julia, is confined to a wheelchair. However, Fefu believes she has seen Julia walking and questions Julia's paralysis. As the play reaches its climax, Fefu yells at Julia but is interrupted by the entrance of Christina. Fefu leaves the home, carrying the shotgun with her. A moment later a shot is heard and Julia slumps in her wheelchair. Fefu reenters the living room carrying a dead rabbit. Julia can be seen bleeding as the curtain falls, leaving the audience with a bloody, violent image, but few answers.

In addition to the possible feminist themes in the play, Fornes includes another element of her identity in the form of two lesbian characters who recently have broken up. Cecilia, who appears to have been unfaithful to Paula during their relationship, makes antagonistic sexual advances on Paula who is clearly still hurt by their breakup. The act of putting a lesbian character on stage in 1977 is itself a political statement, but like the stories told by the actors in

*Cap-a-pie*, she does not use the characters to make a declaration about homophobia or sexuality in general.

There is little debate among scholars and critics regarding the feminist themes addressed by *Fefu and her Friends*. Pevitts says that the play “explores basic feminist issues . . . the sensibility, the subject matter, the ‘universal’ female characters and the very structure of the play are clearly feminist” (302). Fornes’s response to any feminist themes in this play (and in her plays in general) is a little more nuanced. In response to a controversial 1983 article by Mel Gussow in the *New York Times* titled “Women Playwrights: New Voices in the Theater,” the *Performing Arts Journal* published an article titled “The ‘Woman’ Playwrights Issue”<sup>4</sup> in the fall of 1983 in which several prominent female playwrights responded to Gussow’s article. Fornes wrote, “If they write a play where a woman is a protagonist men get all confused. They cannot make heads or tails of it. The only answer they have is that it is a feminist play. It could be that it is a feminist play but it could be that it is just a play” (91). In a 1984 interview with Allen Frame, Fornes says that *Fefu and her Friends* “is a pro-feminine play rather than a feminist play” (227). In these two quotes, Fornes illustrates her central view regarding her plays and their relation to her identity as a woman. The characters in these plays are women, they are dealing with issues relevant to women, but that alone does not make her plays feminist, nor does she believe her gender should dictate the types of plays she writes. As she told Scott Cummings in 1985, “I am a feminist in that I am very concerned and I suffer when women are treated in a discriminatory manner [. . .] but I never thought I should do certain work because I am a woman” (65). As we have seen in the textbook analysis above, *Fefu and her Friends* continues to be

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same article cited by Milly S. Barranger in her textbook *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* (1991) and referenced above.

referred to as a representative work in the feminist canon, but that was never Fornes's goal or intention.

*Fefu and her Friends* marked a drastic change in Fornes's writing style which would be seen in most of her future works. In addition, many of the plays Fornes wrote after *Fefu* would continue to support those scholars who viewed Fornes as a feminist playwright. Her next play, *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* (1979), was inspired by a diary written by a New England housekeeper which Fornes found in an antique shop. Also in 1979, Fornes wrote *Eyes on the Harem* about the 600-year history of the Ottoman Empire and the role of women within a royal Harem. This was followed by *A Visit* (1981), an absurdist play in which the female characters wore over-sized porcelain breasts and the men pranced around the stage wearing porcelain phalluses (Cummings 60, 87-92). Fornes was very aware of how these plays were being received by feminist theatre-goers. In a 1985 article published in *American Theatre* titled, "Creative Danger," and reprinted in *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes* (1999), Fornes acknowledged that many women come to see her plays "assuming they would see feminist art" (232). As with *Fefu and her Friends*, however, Fornes did not intend for these plays to be viewed or read as pieces of feminist art.

In response to critics and scholars who saw her as a feminist playwright, Fornes references her next play, *The Danube* (1982), in her article "Creative Danger":

If I think of it, it seems natural that I would write with a woman's perspective, but I am not aware that I am doing any such thing. I don't sit down to write to make a point *about women* if the central character of my play is a woman, any more than I intend to make a point *about men* when I write a play like *The Danube*, where the central character is a young man. *The Danube*, in fact, is a play about the end of the world. (230, original emphasis)

Set in a café Budapest circa 1938, *The Danube* is the story of Paul Green, an American businessman who befriends a man named Mr. Sandor and his daughter, Eve. Paul and Eve eventually marry and are very happy together, until they are both diagnosed with a bizarre illness that has spread across Budapest. Paul decides to move back to America with Eve and although they are both sad to say goodbye to Eve's father and the city, they know they have no other choice (Cummings 97). Like *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* – which was inspired by the diary Fornes found in an antique store – *The Danube* was inspired by another “found” object. Fornes discovered several Hungarian language records during one of her many trips to antique shops in Greenwich Village. The dialogue on the records was meant to teach English to Hungarians and included basic phrases such as the weather, ordering food at a restaurant, etc. Each scene in *The Danube* begins with a recorded phrase from the language records first played in English and then Hungarian with a blank space in between in which the actors would repeat the phrase (Kent 159). Fornes's response to those critics who refer to her as a feminist playwright is clear, but is there any evidence of her identity as a Cuban American which makes its way into *The Danube*? The action takes place in Hungary, just prior to World War II, but it does examine a relationship between an American and a non-American. Is it possible that Fornes was attempting to examine themes related to the mixing of ethnicities and/or cultures? In a 1996 interview with Fornes scholar Una Chaudhuri states that it is her belief that *The Danube* is “one of the greatest intercultural plays ever written in this country.” She assumes that, because Fornes is an immigrant, issues such as “cultural dialogue, cultural conflict, [and] cultural interchange” must have been extremely important to Fornes and that is why she chose to explore those issues in *The Danube* (113). Fornes's response to Chaudhuri is very telling:

I never thought of it that way. I thought of the play as being about the destruction of things that are lovely and ancestral . . . That they are from different parts of the world gives the play color, but it's not relevant to the main thought of the play, which is that a young and simple couple cannot lead a normal, simple life because the world around them is falling apart. It could have been a boy from Alabama and a girl from Nebraska. (113)

Again, Fornes is focused on telling compelling stories through her plays. The fact that she uses “found” objects as inspiration should illustrate more than anything that she is not attempting to make any political or social commentary with her plays; she doesn't set out to make a statement, that is never her goal.

Two years later, Fornes would write another play that, on its surface, appears to be directly related to her experience as a Cuban American. *Sarita* (1984) focuses on the life of a teenaged Cuban American named Sarita who lives with her mother in the South Bronx from 1939 to 1947. During the course of the play Sarita has a relationship with Julio who takes advantage of her and treats her poorly. Sarita becomes extremely depressed and just as she is about to commit suicide by jumping off the Empire State Building she is saved by an American named Mark. The two quickly fall in love, but she cannot escape the grips of Julio who constantly begs Sarita for money and sex. As the play reaches its climax, Sarita kills Julio. She loses her sanity after the murder and is eventually placed in a mental institution at the conclusion of the play (Kent 164-165). The question, with regards to identity-based categorization, is does this play represent Fornes as a Cuban American or, like *The Danube*, is the ethnic background of the central character ultimately irrelevant to the themes Fornes is exploring? In a 1991 article for *Bilingual Review*, titled “The Search for Identity in the Theatre of Three Cuban American Female



Dramatists,” author Maida Watson views *Sarita* as an example of Cuban exile theatre (despite the fact that Fornes immigrated to the United States long before Castro came to power). Watson suggests that through the character of Sarita, “Fornes will . . . make statement[s] about the status of Hispanic women” (n.pag.). The problem with this reading of the play is that it doesn’t ring true when compared with Fornes’s own words regarding the way she writes her plays and how she views her characters. In addition, Sarita’s own life experience as a Cuban immigrant has little to do with Fornes’s as Assunta Kent points out: “Fornes never lived in the barrio or neighborhood that was subject to systematic racial/ethnic discrimination [. . .] thus she does not necessarily share a worldview with [other] Cuban refugees” (33). It is certainly possible for a playwright to write a play containing characters with whom she doesn’t share a worldview. However, the fact that Fornes’s own experience as a Cuban American is so different from that of Sarita’s, and her own words regarding the somewhat random choice to place *The Danube* in Budapest to “color the play” suggests that, once again, rather than attempting to illustrate the Cuban American experience through this play, like August Wilson does with his ten-play cycle detailing the African American experience, she is simply telling the story of a specific individual who just happens to be Cuban American.

Fornes’s next play, *The Conduct of Life* (1985), has also been referred to by critics and scholars as both a feminist play and a Cuban American play. Like *Sarita*, the central characters are Latino/a and (like many of her early plays) the issue explored here is power struggles between men and women. *The Conduct of Life* takes place in an unnamed Latin American country and follows the life of a military officer named Orlando who dominates and occasionally terrorizes three women: his wife Leticia, their housekeeper Olimpia, and a homeless child named

Nena (Kent 170). In her article “Creative Danger,” Fornes responds to those critics who suggest that the play is *about* the oppression of Latin American women, she says:

To understand [. . .] *The Conduct of Life* [as being] about the subjugation of Latin American women is to limit the perception of [the play] to a single-minded perspective. It is submitting your theatergoing activity to an imaginary regime or discipline that has little to do with the plays. I would like to be offered the freedom to deal with themes other than gender. (231-232)

Fornes believes that the act of categorizing her as a feminist playwright and/or a Cuban American playwright limits the freedom she has to write the stories she wants to tell. But how does she view herself? How does she wish to be categorized? In her interview with Fornes, Una Chaudhuri addresses these questions directly. Fornes responded:

I am a Hispanic American . . . You are what you are. I am a minority because I am a Hispanic, I am a minority because I am an artist, and I am a minority because I am a woman, and being what I am is primary. But I may not be primarily writing about those things. As for tradition . . . I belong to the Off-Off-Broadway movement, which is the idea of doing art. And doing something that we loved doing. (112-113)

If textbooks were to follow Fornes’s own opinions regarding categorization, it seems obvious that the category she is most comfortable with regards to her work, is that of the Off-Off-Broadway playwright.

Before dismissing all identity-based categorization options for Fornes it is important to briefly address one additional possible identity category that, for the most part, critics, scholars, and textbook authors have ignored. In two of the plays Fornes wrote in the late 1980s and early

1990s she addresses themes relevant to gay and lesbian theatre. Is it possible, that because she is a lesbian she should perhaps be situated within this particular identity-based category? In 1990, Fornes wrote a four-part play titled *What of the Night?*, which, as described by Assunta Kent, “traces the increasingly deleterious effects of poverty and greed in America from the Great Depression to 1998” (179). The second of the four plays is titled *Springtime*. It is the story of a 29 year old woman named Rainbow and her German lover Greta. Greta has contracted tuberculosis and Rainbow is forced to steal in order to pay for her lover’s medication. Rainbow is caught by a man named Ray who blackmails Rainbow, forcing her to work for him. In Ray’s only scene onstage, Rainbow walks in on Greta and Ray in the bedroom the two women share. *Springtime* concludes with Rainbow silently leaving the home she shared with her former lover (Cummings 142).

Fornes’s 1993 play, *Enter the Night*, also addresses themes relevant to her sexuality. *Enter the Night* is the story of a nurse named Tressa, a friend named Paula who is a married farmer, and Jack, a stage manager who has recently lost his lover to AIDS. During the rather absurd action of the play the three characters cross-dress while reenacting scenes from the silent film *Broken Blossoms*. Bonnie Marranca says the cross-dressing scenes “elaborate the mysteries of spirit and flesh, race and gender, performance and fashion in scenes that are alternatively innocent or psychologically provocative, but surprisingly touching” (57). The play premiered at the New City Theatre in 1993 and made its New York debut in 1999 as part of the Signature Theatre’s season devoted to the works of Maria Irene Fornes (Cummings 147).

Both of these “night” plays contain homosexual characters and themes related to sexuality. *Enter the Night* could, or perhaps should, be considered an AIDS play, a subgenre of gay and lesbian theatre found in many of the textbooks analyzed for this project. If textbook authors

place Fornes in the Hispanic theatre category because she is Cuban American and some of her plays address issues relevant to Hispanics, and also place her in the feminist theatre category because of her gender and because some of her plays can be read as feminist, should she also be placed in the Gay and Lesbian Theatre category because she is a lesbian and several of her plays contain homosexual characters and address themes related to sexuality? In a 1999 interview with Don Shewey in the gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate*, Fornes responds to any possible classification within the gay and lesbian category. She says, "Being gay is not like being of another species. If you're gay, you're a person. What interests me is the mental and organic life of an individual. I'm writing about how people deal with things as an individual, not as a member of a type" (n.pag.) Fornes does not wish to be placed in any category related to her identity, because in her writing she's not interested in type, she's focused on the individual and presenting the specific story of those individuals on the stage.

Fornes's final play, *Letters from Cuba* (2000), uses letters she and her brother, Rafael, wrote to each other during the last half of the twentieth century while she was in New York and Rafael was in Cuba to form the text of the play (Cummings 165). Like all of her work, it is focused on the individual. Cummings notes that "the play makes no direct reference to Castro or the cold War politics separating Cuba and the United States" instead it is the story of a pair of siblings seen together on stage but existing in entirely different worlds. Shortly after the play premiered Fornes began showing signs of dementia and within a few years she was unable to care for herself. She currently lives in upstate New York in an extended care facility (Cummings 164, xvi).

Is Maria Irene Fornes a Cuban American or feminist or lesbian playwright, or is she a playwright who happens to be Cuban American, feminist, and lesbian? Her body of work

suggests that perhaps she is all three. However, her creative process demonstrates that she does not write with a political statement related to her identity in mind. At times she has used randomly chosen notecards to inspire her writing; other times she finds inspiration in “found” objects. The stories she tells may address identity in one form or another, but any political statement is implied through the action of her dramas not explicitly tied to the plot. In addition, her own statements regarding identity-based categorization illustrate that she has no desire to be viewed within any of these categories. As Assunta Kent notes, Fornes “does not write simply as a representative of her gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, or class because she observed that these categories are intertwined, with different aspects salient in different situations . . . if Fornes were to embrace any identity label, it would be that of playwright/director” (34). Fornes is a member of the identity categories in which she has been placed by scholars, critics, and textbook authors, but as she has said time and time again, those categories alone should not define her or her work.

### **What This Means for Fornes and Identity-Based Categorization**

Maria Irene Fornes is clearly aware of her place in theatre textbooks. “I remember one of my plays was published in a college textbook,” she told Ross Wetzsteon, “at the end they had a series of questions for the students – you know ‘what does Fornes symbolize by this . . . I didn’t have any idea . . . I had to send to the publisher for the teacher’s manual so I could find out what the answers were” (37). She has also been wary of her placement in textbooks and the impact scholarship is having on the reception and interpretation of her work from early on in her career. In a 1977 interview with Maria Delgado, she said, “Young people in college read essays and literary criticism on my work that distorts their viewing of the work, and I doubt that they will

ever see it any differently” (252). The same can be said of identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks used as a tool to introduce Fornes and her work to college students. If a student’s initial contact with Fornes is within one, or perhaps two, identity-based categories they are not receiving anything resembling the full picture of Fornes and her work. If we must categorize her, there are so many different categories that she could be included in that would offer something for the undergraduate theatre student to grasp on to: Off-off Broadway Producer, Director, Playwright, Woman, Teacher, Lesbian, Cuban American, the list is almost endless. Why limit Fornes by only referring to one or two of these possible categories? Why limit the students’ understanding of this prolific playwright by only mentioning one or two of these labels? Maria Irene Fornes is a playwright whose work defies classification. Why categorize her at all?

## CHAPTER FIVE: Marsha Norman

### Norman in Theatre Textbooks

Marsha Norman and her plays are introduced by theatre textbook authors in two main ways: 1) an identity-based category referencing the playwright's gender (either as a female/woman playwright, a feminist playwright, or a playwright whose works represent gender diversity); or 2) a non-identity based category which refers to the types of plays Norman writes (either realist, traditional, domestic dramas, or serious plays which tackle previously taboo subjects). Prior to the mid-1990s, when diversity in contemporary theatre became a common chapter or section within theatre textbooks, most authors have chosen to focus on *either* the identity-based category in which Norman falls or the non-identity based categories but rarely both. After the mid-1990s, most textbooks include references to *both* Norman's gender identity as well as aspects of her work that are not related to identity. This is promising; however, the identity-based categories in which Norman is often placed are somewhat confusing: some refer to her as a woman playwright, while others include her in a list of feminist playwrights. Do textbook authors consider these terms to be synonymous? Or does such labeling simply add to the list of negative ramifications of identity-based categorization? What follows is an analysis of the way(s) in which Marsha Norman and her plays have been introduced to theatre students over the past three decades.

Despite the fact that Norman's most successful play, *'night, Mother*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, premiered on Broadway in 1983, none of the textbooks examined for this study refer to Marsha Norman or her plays until Edwin Wilson's fourth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1988. In this edition, Wilson mentions Marsha Norman twice, both

times in relation to her play *'night, Mother*. The first comes in a chapter devoted to “Conventions of Dramatic Structure,” which notes that “there are numerous instances in which the action [of a play] takes place in a single room, a good example being *'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman” (145). This comment is included in all subsequent editions of Wilson’s textbook. The second reference to Norman is in the following chapter which discusses “Dramatic Structure.” In a photo caption, Norman’s *'night, Mother* is used as an example of climactic structure. Included in the caption is a brief synopsis of the play and a note that “the clock on the wall in the house follows actual time in the outside world” (161). Although it can easily be deduced by the undergraduate student, Wilson makes no direct reference to Norman’s gender in this edition. This is surprising given that within the next decade, Norman’s gender will become much more significant to textbook authors when discussing her work as a playwright.

Norman is also mentioned in the 1990 edition of Marvin Carlson and Yvonne Shafer’s textbook, *The Play’s the Thing: An Introduction to Theatre*. This time, however, she is referred to in relation to her gender. In a subsection on “Recent American Dramatists” in a chapter titled “The Challenging Modern Theatre,” the authors begin by discussing several prominent African American playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson. The authors then note, “Just as the movement to encourage black consciousness and expression during the 1960s was followed by attention to the social problems of women, so the growth of the black theatre movement was followed by similar growth in plays by women exploring the experiences of women.” They refer to plays by Notzake Shange and Caryl Churchill before noting that Norman’s Broadway production of *'night, Mother* “contributed importantly to this movement” (575-576). By including Norman in a list of other contemporary women playwrights and tying the theatrical success of female playwrights to that of African American playwrights, the authors



are pointing towards identity-based categorization which will become commonplace in just a few short years.

Milly Barranger's *Theatre: A Way of Seeing*, published in 1991, illustrates the shift from non-identity based categorization to identity-based categorization in the 1990s because she includes references to both in introducing Norman and her work. The first reference to Norman comes in a photo essay depicting successful "Women Playwrights." In the photo essay, which was discussed previously in relation to Maria Irene Fornes, Barranger provides a brief biography of Norman and includes a quote from a *New York Times* interview with critic Mel Gussow in which Norman "explain[s] the increasing number of women playwrights in the American theatre." The quote reads, "Until women could see themselves as active, they could not really write for the theater. We are central characters in our lives. That awareness had to come to a whole group of women before women could write about it" (88). While the biography and the above quotation do not explicitly refer to Norman as a feminist playwright, it does suggest that Norman is a playwright who is primarily concerned with exploring the lives of women in her plays. However, Barranger also mentions Norman within non-identity based categories. She is included in a list of playwrights whose work premiered in regional theatres; she is also listed as "part of a third postwar wave of American writers . . . [who] have tested the American character, family and dreams, and found them wanting" (179, 277). Finally, Norman is listed alongside Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, David Mamet, August Wilson and others who have "a strong current of realism and social protest" in their plays (307). The overall picture of Norman presented by Barranger is fairly accurate, if disjointed: a playwright who has strong ties to regional theatre and who often writes realistic plays depicting female characters. However,

Barranger's reference to plays of social protest and the implication that Norman is *only* interested in exploring female characters is, as we shall see, less precise.

Not all textbooks published in the early 1990s attempt to provide a full picture of Norman or her work. Oscar Brockett's sixth edition of *History of the Theatre*, published in 1991, only refers to Norman in relation to her gender. In a chapter devoted to "Theatre and Drama After 1968," Brockett says, "After 1968 women playwrights achieved greatly increased acceptance. Among the best known of these were Norman, [Maria Irene] Fornes, [Beth] Henley and [Wendy] Wasserstein." This is followed by a brief biography of Norman in which Brockett states that Norman "wrote primarily about existential dilemmas" (628). As we have seen throughout this discussion regarding identity-based categorization, the fact that Norman is only referred to in relation to her identity as a woman provides an incomplete picture of Norman for undergraduate theatre students.

There are also textbooks written in the early and mid-1990s which make no reference to Norman or her plays at all, such as Dennis Sporre's 1993 edition of *The Art of Theatre*. Others, like Kenneth Cameron and Patti Gillespie's fourth edition of *The Enjoyment of Theatre*, published in 1996, merely include Norman in a list of playwrights with rather vague descriptions. Norman, and her play *'night, Mother*, are first listed along with plays by Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, 1993), David Mamet (*Glengarry Glen Ross*, 1984), and Beth Henley (*Crimes of the Heart*, 1981) among others, which are described only as "serious plays" (377). This description is essentially meaningless because the authors provide no details about the plays or what makes them "serious," leaving the reader to assume that the plays are similar because there are no comic moments in any of these plays. In addition to this ambiguous description, the authors also include Norman in a list of "commercial plays of today" which examine "previously taboo

subjects.” Norman’s “taboo subject” is suicide which she addresses in her 1983 play, *‘night, Mother*. Finally, the authors note that contemporary American theatre “includes and awards prizes to plays by female playwrights in larger numbers than before” referring to the 1983 Pulitzer Prize won by Norman for *‘night, Mother* (387-388). Again, the reader is left with an incomplete picture of Norman and her plays: she writes “serious plays” which address “taboo subjects” and has benefited because women playwrights are given awards in “larger numbers than before.”

The 1998 edition of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience* introduces Marsha Norman in exactly the same way as previous editions; *‘night, Mother* is an example of a play which takes place in a single location and illustrates climactic structure. In addition, Wilson uses Norman’s 1977 play *Getting Out*, which presents a woman struggling to adapt to life outside of prison, as an example of one of the many different types of roles a contemporary actor might be asked to portray as well as an example of plays which address “human concerns” (3, 94). These examples – like the lists noted above – offer no substantive information to the reader about the playwright or her plays. However, this seventh edition of Wilson’s book is also the first of the textbooks discussed in this project to include an entire chapter dedicated to theatre of diversity. The section of this chapter devoted to Feminist Theatre begins by noting that feminist theatre as a movement began in the late 1960s and early 1970s “alongside the more general feminist movement, which stressed consciousness-raising to make people aware of the secondary position women had too often been forced to occupy.” Wilson notes that “feminist theater developed in several directions” including acknowledging female playwrights of previous eras such as Aphra Behn (1640-1689), Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), and Lillian Hellman (1905-1984), among others. Wilson continues by noting that:

In the post-World War II period consciousness of contemporary women playwrights increased. The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for women playwrights was inaugurated in 1979, and in the 1980s three women in quick succession (all previous winners of the Blackburn Prize) were awarded the Pulitzer Prize: Beth Henley (1952- ) for *Crimes of the Heart* (1981), Marsha Norman (1942 - ) [sic] for *'night, Mother* (1983), and Wendy Wasserstein (1950- ) for *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989). (249)

This quote is followed by a paragraph discussing “militancy and protest,” which, according to Wilson, is “another direction in which feminist theater developed” and a final paragraph which discusses feminist theatre which “took a decidedly lesbian point of view” (249-250). At this point, the reader is left with a confusing array of information. Feminist theatre, according to Wilson, began in the 1960s and 1970s and initially was interested in acknowledging female playwrights of the past, and then some female playwrights won the Susan Smith Blackburn prize and/or the Pulitzer Prize, while other female playwrights used their plays as a form of protest and still others wrote with a lesbian “point of view.” As if to clarify, Wilson ends the section devoted to feminist theatre by noting that this category “split into the divisions that have marked the feminist movement in general: liberal feminists, radical feminists, and lesbian-rights feminists. However, although some groups are definitely in one camp or another, for others there is considerable overlapping” (250). The fact that the three types of feminists are not clearly defined leads to additional confusion for the reader. Given the structure of this section, it is safe for the reader to assume that those playwrights who “took a decidedly lesbian point of view” are “lesbian-rights feminists” and those whose plays focus on “militancy and protest” are “radical feminists.” However, the link between “liberal feminists” and playwrights like Norman is a bit

more difficult to navigate. Is the reader to assume that because Norman won the Susan Smith Blackburn Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and because she is a woman that she should be considered a liberal feminist? That seems to be the implication.

In a subsection titled “Gender Diversity” in the chapter devoted to “Contemporary Theatre” in Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb’s third edition of *Living Theater: A History*, published in 2000, the authors chose to focus solely on Norman’s gender in introducing her to undergraduate readers. Norman’s *‘night, Mother* and *Getting Out* are listed as “representative works” of plays by “female playwrights [who] have questioned traditional gender roles and the place of women in American society” (475). The implication here is that Norman uses her plays as a cultural critique. Wilson and Goldfarb suggest that Norman’s purpose in writing these plays is to point to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. While the plays do present female characters who are struggling to find their place in society, Norman, as shall become clear in the following section, is not writing with a political purpose in mind.

Wilson’s eighth, ninth, and tenth editions of *The Theater Experience* (2001, 2004, and 2007 respectively) follow the same pattern established in the seventh edition (1998) with regards to including Norman within the subsection devoted to “Feminist Theatre.” However, the tenth edition also attempts to further define Norman and *‘night, Mother*, outside the confines of identity-based categorization. In a section illustrating the differences between realistic and nonrealistic theatre, Wilson includes a photo of the original Broadway production of Norman’s *‘night, Mother*. The caption provides a brief plot synopsis and notes that “the set, the costumes, and the dialogue all resemble real life” (36). In a section titled “Traditional and Avant Garde Theater” in the chapter devoted to “Contemporary American Theater,” Wilson refers to Norman in a list of playwrights writing at the end of the twentieth century who follow a traditional

structure in their plays. With these additions the reader has slightly more information with which to understand Norman: she is a feminist (ostensibly because she won the Susan Smith Blackburn Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize) playwright and she writes realistic plays which are traditional in structure. Again, these examples may be true to a degree, but they offer an extremely limited understanding of Norman and her plays to the reader.

Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy's tenth edition of *History of the Theatre* is essentially the same as the sixth edition discussed above, with one important addition. Brockett begins by again referring to Norman as one of the "best known" among "female playwrights [who] achieved greatly increased acceptance" after 1968. However, in the biography of Norman, Brockett refers to the librettos written by Norman for the musicals *The Secret Garden* (1991) and *Red Shoes* (1993) (525-526). This is significant because, of all the textbooks examined in this study, Brockett's is the only one to mention Norman's work in musical theatre. Even textbooks which have an entire chapter devoted to musical theatre as a genre, such as the last four editions of Edwin Wilson's *The Theatre Experience*, fail to mention Norman as either a librettist or lyricist. Norman's plays, especially *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother* appear to place her firmly within the feminist theatre category (at least in the minds of many of the authors of theatre textbooks) and adding a reference to any libretti which are adaptations from other sources (see also Norman's libretti for *The Color Purple* (2005) and *The Bridges of Madison County* (2014) discussed below) would only serve to confuse the Norman-as-feminist-playwright argument and thus is ignored completely by most textbook authors.

Stephanie Arnold, whose textbook *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre* (2011) uniquely presents the works of August Wilson to her readers, makes no mention whatsoever of Marsha Norman. Arnold ignores the work of Marsha Norman – like that of David Henry Hwang

and Maria Irene Fornes – in her introduction to theatre textbook. As noted in the previous chapter, the omission of Fornes is justified because she received limited mainstream success during her career and a textbook which examines the entirety of theatre history cannot possibly include every playwright. However, not including Hwang and Norman is a bit more difficult to rationalize. Both are Tony Award-winning playwrights with several successes on Broadway, Norman won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1983 and Hwang was a Pulitzer finalist. The exclusion of these playwrights is even more disappointing given the innovative and unique way Arnold introduced her readers to August Wilson.

Robert Barton and Annie McGregor's 2012 edition of *Theatre in Your Life* first introduces Norman to its readers through the lens of realism. Norman is included in a list of contemporary playwrights who were inspired by playwrights who adhered to the tenets of realism such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams (311). As we have seen, this is not a unique approach to presenting Marsha Norman or her works. It introduces the reader to Norman outside of any identity-based category. However, in the section on "Ethnic Theatre in America" in the chapter titled "Contemporary Voices," Barton and McGregor do refer to Norman as a member of an identity-based category. Unlike Edwin Wilson and others, however, there is no feminist theatre category. The authors include Norman in the "Women's Theatre" category. Ignoring the fact that gender is not an ethnicity and therefore should not be included within the "Ethnic Theatre in American" sub-section, the authors do avoid the confusion seen in Wilson's "Feminist Theatre" subsection when it comes to discussing Norman and her plays. The authors include Norman in a list of "writers who have achieved major success creating plays specifically focused on women" (383). Although the authors do not include any biographical information on Norman or her plays, the fact that the identity-based

category is the gender of the playwright is significant. Feminism is a theoretical lens, an attitude, a political ideology. It is not an identity. To include feminism with other identity-based categories such as race, ethnicity or sexuality is confusing. It leads the reader to the assumption that all female playwrights are feminist playwrights. As we have seen with Maria Irene Fornes, this is not necessarily the case. Although it may be confusing to the reader to include “Women Playwrights” in the sub-section on “Ethnic Theatre in America,” at least it does not lead the reader to make the inaccurate connection between being a female and being a feminist.

This project is concerned with how playwrights discussed in this analysis feel about the identity-based categories into which authors of introductory textbooks often place them. Like Fornes’s inclusion in a discussion of environmental theatre, there is little debate that most of Norman’s work can be considered realism and is an example of traditional dramatic structure. But does Norman view her work as feminist? Does she consider herself a feminist playwright? Is she more comfortable with being included in a list of contemporary women playwrights or being labeled as a woman playwright? Does she write with a political statement in mind as Wilson implies? What does she see as the goals or purpose of her plays? By examining the works of Marsha Norman and her views on identity-based categorization in the following section a clearer picture of how theatre textbooks should introduce and address Norman and her works will emerge.

### **MARSHA NORMAN: Feminist and/or a Woman Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be a Feminist and/or a Woman?**

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Tony Awards and the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, Marsha Norman has won the Gassner Playwriting Medallion, the *Newsday* Oppenheim Award, and a special citation from the American Theatre Critics Association. She has also been selected



as playwright-in-residence at the Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, in addition to receiving grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation (Betsko 324). Although the textbooks discussed above mostly refer only to her plays *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*, she has written numerous plays, the lyrics and/or libretto to four Broadway musicals, several television shows and films, as well as one novel. While the central characters in her work are often women, to classify her based on her gender is, like all identity-based categorization, incomplete. As Elizabeth Stone notes in a July 1983 article for the magazine *Ms.*, Norman views her role as a writer as “giving voice to those who generally go unheard.” She told Stone, “I grieve so for people who do not have the power of language, and what I want to be able to do in my work is to make my language available to them” (57-58). Although the voice she gives is often to a female character, the goal of making her language available to those who do not have the power of language is the same regardless of the gender of her central characters.

Marsha Norman was born in 1947 in Louisville, Kentucky. Her parents, Billie and Bertha Williams, had four children; Marsha was the oldest. Her parents were fundamentalist Christians and raised their children in a strict household (Harriott 129). She had few friends growing up because most of the children in her neighborhood were not deemed “good enough” by her mother to play with the Williams’ children (Craig 167). She told Elizabeth Stone in 1983 that her mother “had a very serious code about what you could and could not say. You particularly could not say anything that was in the least angry or that had any conflict in it at all” (57). To escape the loneliness of her home life Norman played piano, read, and wrote short stories (Savran 178). She also found solace in what she would later refer to as her “adopted matriarchy.” She told author Carolyn Casey Craig in 2004 that her Great Aunt Bubbie, “loved

me and took me in . . . she was my savior early on.” Another woman who influenced Marsha during her childhood was a high school English teacher, Martha Ellison, who, according to Craig “awakened Marsha to her own writing talents and the work of Lillian Hellman” (166-167). Despite her strict upbringing, Norman is grateful for some of the rules imposed by her mother. She told David Savran:

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a house where television was forbidden and . . . movies were taboo. So I lived in a world of books, which was wonderful.

Mother, quite simply, did not know the dangers of books because she didn’t read.

So, inadvertently she put me in touch with the most dangerous things of all. (180)

Her mother also introduced her to the theatre. “She had never been to the theater before that and hasn’t really been much since,” Norman told Esther Harriott in 1988, “but she did take me, when I was 12, up the stairs to this tiny loft-like theater that was the beginning of Actors Theatre in Louisville.” These early trips with her mother to what would become one of the nation’s foremost regional theatres had a profound impact on Norman. “When I got ready to write,” she told Harriott, “I knew that I wanted to write for the theater. It would have been so much harder, had there not been a world-class theater in my town” (148).

After graduating high school, Norman attended Agnes Scott College in a small town outside of Atlanta, majoring in philosophy. While in college she worked as a volunteer at a pediatric burn unit in a hospital in Atlanta and continued to see as much theatre as possible. Upon graduating, she returned to Louisville, married high school teacher, Michael Norman, and began working with troubled youth at Central State Hospital, which she described to Mel Gussow as “a desperately unhappy situation, full of visible pain” (A22). In 1973, Norman left her job at Central State Hospital and began working at a school for gifted children in Louisville.

In 1974, she and Michael Norman divorced, although she kept his last name. Shortly thereafter she was hired to write a weekly children's supplement in the *Louisville Times* called, "The Jelly Bean Journal." She also began to work on her first piece for the theatre: a children's musical about famous American inventors (Harriott 129-130). She sent a copy of the completed libretto to Jon Jory, artistic director of Actors Theatre of Louisville. Jory didn't care for the script, but saw innate talent in Norman. As she explained to David Savran,

Jon Jory called me in and offered to commission a play from me. I was to go around with a tape recorder and interview people in the community about busing and then we'd put it all together in some kind of show . . . but I didn't want to write about busing . . . Jon urged me to go back and try to find some moment when I had been frightened physically, in real danger. (181)

Norman followed Jory's advice and remembered a particularly troubled young girl from her days working at Central State Hospital. "This was a kid who was so violent and vicious that people would get bruises when she walked into a room," she told Gussow. "They were thrilled when she ran away, I had kept up with her over the years – she was in Federal prison for murder" (A22). Using the memory of this young girl as inspiration, Norman set to work on what would become her first produced play, *Getting Out* (1977). Jory staged it at the 1977 Festival of New Plays. After the success of the initial production, it was presented at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and eventually moved to an Off-Broadway theatre in New York where it ran for eight months and won an Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Play (Harriott 130).

*Getting Out* is the story of Arlene Holsclaw who has recently been released from prison after serving a sentence for murder. During the course of the play, Arlene struggles to change her life, while her younger self, Arlie, who appears on stage at the same time, reenacts Arlene's

childhood memories (Harriott 130-131). In her contribution to the *Cambridge Guide to American Women Playwrights* (1999), titled “Contemporary playwrights/Traditional forms,” scholar Laurin Porter calls *Getting Out* “the most feminist of Norman’s plays. Not only does it focus on a woman’s struggle for self-determination in the face of powerful patriarchal forces; it documents the social construction of gender” (203). But Norman doesn’t necessarily see the play in this way. She told David Savran that the play “is about an attempted reconciliation between an earlier, violent self and a current passive, withdrawn self. It seemed to me,” said Norman, “that the theatre was the place to examine that isolation which was the primary quality of my life” (181). In other words, Norman wasn’t attempting to comment on the “social construction of gender” as Porter suggests, rather she was exploring the nature of isolation which she herself experienced as a child.

After the Off-Broadway production of *Getting Out* closed, Norman returned to Louisville where she met Dann Byck, a Louisville businessman and one of the founders of the Actors Theatre of Louisville. The two were married in 1978. The same year she received a National Endowment for the Arts playwright-in-residence grant which she used at Actors Theatre of Louisville and set to work on her next play: *Third and Oak* (Harriott 130). *Third and Oak* is actually two one-act plays – *The Laundromat* and *The Pool Hall* – which are connected by an additional scene when the plays are performed together. *The Pool Hall* is a comic dialogue between an African American pool hall owner and a disc jockey. It is described by Esther Harriott as “more of an actors’ vehicle than a drama” (135). *The Laundromat* presents a chance meeting at a Laundromat (located on the corner of Third and Oak in Louisville) between DeeDee (whose husband has been cheating on her) and Alberta (who is washing the clothes of her recently deceased husband). As the play begins both women lie about their reason for doing the

laundry late at night, but as the play progresses the women connect and reveal their excruciating realities (Craig 169).

Norman wrote her next play while still the playwright-in-residence at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Norman describes *Circus Valentine* (1979) as a play “about a small family circus that plays parking lots. An aging trapeze artist goes up to try a triple somersault in order to save this small circus, falls and dies” (qtd. in Brustein “conversations” 186). The play was not well received by the critics in Louisville and has never been performed after its initial run at Actors Theatre of Louisville (Harriott 160).

Norman’s next play, *The Holdup* was produced as a workshop at Actors Theatre of Louisville and then given a full production at the Actors Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco in 1983. Like *The Pool Hall*, *The Holdup*’s central character is a man. Norman used stories told by her grandfather, who she describes as “one of the great story-tellers of the world,” as inspiration for the play which is set in Mexico in 1914 (qtd. in Harriott 160). It is the comic story of two brothers, (Archie and Henry Tucker) who meet a man known only as The Outlaw who is searching for his estranged girlfriend Lily. Henry, who considers himself an expert on the Old West, attempts to goad The Outlaw into divulging his real name. The Outlaw refuses and kills Henry in a brief gun battle. Eventually, The Outlaw finds Lily and the play ends with the two lovers making plans for their life together (Cooperman 96). The play is atypical of Norman’s work; not only because it has a male central character and is an overt comedy, but also because it examines the mythology of the Old West. “Each character,” says scholar Robert Cooperman, “either symbolizes a mythological icon himself, or defines his existence in terms of the mythology of the Old West” (100). Like *Circus Valentine*, the critical response to *The Holdup* was mostly negative. Norman was aware of the issues with the play and was not

surprised by the reaction of the critics. “What people thought was . . . ‘this is the queen of tragedy, what is *she* doing writing this?’” she explained to Carolyn Casey Craig in 2004 (169, original emphasis). In 1985, two years after the San Francisco production, she pulled the licensing rights for all future productions of *The Holdup*. She relayed to Robert Brustein, “I have felt all along that there’s something wrong with [*The Holdup*] at the conception level that I could not fix . . . this play will not be done, I don’t care who wants to do it. I don’t want anybody to walk into a theater and have that play be their first experience with my work” (186).

Following two critical failures, Norman was looking for something different. She was hired to write the libretto for a musical called *Orphan Train*. Norman and her husband Dann Byck moved to New York but Norman was fired from the musical project shortly after their arrival due to artistic differences (*Signature Video* n.p.). Alone, unemployed, and frustrated with her recent lack of success Norman decided to sit down and write a play for herself. She told Craig, “I didn’t care if anybody ever saw it . . . I just had to get this straight for me” (169). The play, *‘night, Mother*, would become Norman’s greatest success. Norman spent four months writing the play and after several readings at the Circle Repertory Company in New York, Norman and her husband sought out a regional theatre to co-produce the play. Robert Brustein, then artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was immediately taken with the play and agreed to produce it (Gussow A22). After a very successful run at the American Repertory Theatre, the play immediately moved to Broadway, opening in March 1983, running for eleven months, and garnering four Tony Award nominations in addition to the Pulitzer Prize and Susan Smith Blackburn Award (ibdb.com *‘night, Mother*).

*‘night, Mother* is the story of Jessie Cates who announces to her mother, Thelma, that she has decided to commit suicide. Over the course of the ninety-minute play, Jessie prepares her

mother for her impending death. Norman described the play to Mel Gussow this way: “Jessie thinks she cannot have any of the other things she wants from her life, so what she will have is control and she will have the courage to take that control” (A22). Craig notes that Norman’s own childhood and relationship with her mother allowed her to “produce exquisite sympathy for a character whose break from family becomes a matter of life and death” (9). The play, and its positive critical response and awards, established Norman as one of the top playwrights of the last half of the twentieth century.

Reaction among scholars was less universal. Some, like Laurin Porter, view Norman as a feminist playwright who used this play to examine female empowerment (205). Others, most notably scholar Jill Dolan, disagree. In her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), Dolan devotes an entire chapter to Norman’s *‘night, Mother* and its feminist categorization. Dolan first takes issue with the fact that a play about a woman committing suicide would be lauded by critics and honored with awards such as the Pulitzer Prize. She believes that, in bestowing a Pulitzer Prize to a play with this subject matter, the Pulitzer Prize committee is issuing a “not-so-subtle message” regarding female playwrights. She refers to it as “a form of anti-feminist backlash” (35). With regards to the content of the play itself Dolan says, “If feminist plays are defined as those that show women in the painful, difficult process of becoming full human beings, how can a play in which suicide is assumed from the first moments be a thorough consideration of women?” (35). In addition, Dolan says that the structure of *‘night, Mother* is “like most traditional American dramas” and that the “play’s unwillingness to discuss Jessie’s dilemma in terms of a wider social context make it weak as a political statement” (35-36). Writing in *The Performance Journal* in 1983, scholar Collete Brooks agreed with Dolan, especially with regards to the dramatic structure of Norman’s play. “For all intents and

purposes,” says Brooks, “*’night, Mother* was written in 1949 by Arthur Miller,” referring, of course, to Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Norman doesn’t argue with the traditional structure accusations, however, she has responded to the issue of using her play to make a political statement. She never intended to make any kind of feminist statement with the play and she believes that her play was universally well received because, as she told David Savran in 1988,

*’night, Mother* came along at the exact moment when a play about two women, written by a woman, could be seen as a “human play.” You don’t go to see it because you’re a woman. You don’t stay away because you’re a man. But it proves that what happens to women is important, that the mother-daughter relationship is as deserving of attention as the father-son. (191)

Robert Brustein agreed with Norman’s assertion that the play has universal appeal. In a review of the ART production originally published in *The New Republic* and titled “Don’t Read This Review!,” Brustein first acknowledges his conflict of interest in writing a review of a play he produced but then goes on to state that “nothing reinforces one’s faith in the power and importance of the theater more than the emergence of an authentic universal playwright – not a woman playwright, mind you . . . but one who speaks to the concerns and experiences of all humankind” (162).

The success of *’night, Mother* supports the assertion that it is a play with universal appeal. *’night, Mother* has been produced in theatres all over the world since the end of its original Broadway run in February 1984. It also had a brief Broadway revival in 2004 starring Edie Falco and Brenda Blethyn (ibdb.com *’night, Mother*). The play continues to have resonance; in a February 6, 2014, article on *Playbill.com* it was announced that talk show host



Oprah Winfrey will be making her Broadway debut opposite Tony winner Audra McDonald in a second Broadway revival of the play, directed by George C. Wolfe, and scheduled to open during the 2015-2016 season (Gioia n.pag.).

Norman's next play, *Traveler in the Dark* (1984), marked a significant shift for the playwright. Like *The Hold Up* and *The Pool Hall*, the play's protagonist is a man but this time the subject matter is a modern crisis of faith. Sam, a noted surgeon, loses his faith in God after the death of his mother and instead turns to science. His foundation is rocked again when he is unable to save his nurse who dies of cancer (Hinson 110). Of the play, Norman said, "It was a real trip through all of that religious background that I have and a real opportunity to battle out those issues of traditional spirituality and religious dogma" (*Signature Video*). In a 1987 interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Norman said of the play: "I'm very happy with the work we did. It's a complex piece, and a real step for me in terms of risk. I wrote the play to find out whether it was possible to write a sympathetic smart person for the American stage" (326). Norman's reasoning behind writing the play is significant, especially in relation to identity-based categorization, because she doesn't say that the play was a "step for [her] in terms of risk" because she chose to focus on a male character or set out to distance herself from the feminist playwright debate. Instead, she chose to write a play which allowed her to investigate her own views on religion and challenged herself to create a character who was both smart and sympathetic. The reviews of both the American Repertory Theatre production in 1984 and the Mark Taper Forum production in 1985 were universally negative and a planned Broadway production never materialized (Harriott 130). "It was very shocking to me," Norman told Harriott in a 1988 interview, "in the reception of *Traveler in the Dark* that, in fact, everything I wrote was now going to be compared to '*night, Mother*'. I was surprised at the hostility of the

critics to the play” (154). The critical response to the play led Norman into a period of soul-searching in which she would not write for the theatre for four years.

She did not, however, stop writing. After divorcing her second husband, Norman began writing her first novel. Titled *The Fortune Teller*, the suspense novel is about a fortune teller named Fay Morgan who gives psychic readings to support herself while raising her daughter. Norman describes the novel as a story “about how we inevitably lose our children,” an issue that would hold special significance to Norman during this break from the theatre (qtd. in Craig 171). In 1987, she married Tim Dykma and gave birth to her first child, a son named Angus.

The break from playwriting was relatively short-lived, however, when she returned to the Actors Theatre of Louisville stage in 1988 with her newest play, *Sarah and Abraham*. The play, like *Traveler in the Dark*, has religious undertones. It is the story of a company of actors who rehearse and perform the biblical story of Sarah and Abraham. Norman explores the parallels between the lives of the contemporary artists – including a love triangle between married actors Kitty and Cliff and the play’s director, Jack – with the biblical story of Sarah and Abraham. According to Carolyn Casey Craig, the response to *Sarah and Abraham* was positive, however, Norman was unable to find a producer to commit to bringing the show to New York after its initial production. Norman again felt as if she was in competition with the success of *‘night, Mother* until she was approached by designer, producer, and friend Heidi Landesman to work on an entirely new project (Craig 172).

Landesman asked Norman to join her in adapting Frances Burnett’s novel *The Secret Garden* into a stage musical. Norman leapt at the idea because, as she explained to Linda Ginter Brown in 1993, “It was all I ever wanted to do, to write musicals” (165). Lucy Simon, sister of pop-singer Carly Simon, was hired to write the music and director Susan Schulman came on

board to guide the production. The musical had a staged reading at Skidmore College in 1989 and a full production at the Virginia Stage Company in Norfolk, Virginia before arriving on Broadway in 1991. According to Lisa Tyler, “the play was believed to be the first Broadway production generated by an all-female creative team” (135). The reviews were mixed, but the production won a Tony Award for Norman for Best Book of a Musical as well as Tony Awards for Best Scenic Design and Best Featured Actress in a Musical (Tyler 135).

*The Secret Garden* is a musical about a young orphaned girl named Mary who is taken to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven, and his son, Colin. During the course of the musical, Mary is given new perspective on life by her experiences in a secret garden on the Craven estate. Although Norman may seem like an odd choice to write a musical, given the subject matter of her most successful plays, she says she connected immediately with the plight of the young girl at the center of the story. “People said you can’t do a musical about a ten year old girl, who cares what happens to ten year old girls,” Norman said in an interview included in the *Signature: Contemporary Southern Writers, Marsha Norman* documentary released in 1995, “but I was a ten year old girl and I know it’s very important what happens to ten year old girls.” Like her plays, she was not trying to make any kind of political statement regarding the role of women or a young girl’s place in a patriarchal society when adapting the novel into a musical. Rather, like *Getting Out*, she was using this tale of a troubled girl to explore her own experience as an isolated young girl growing up in Louisville, Kentucky.

Inspired by the success of *The Secret Garden*, Norman returned again to the Actors Theatre of Louisville after being commissioned by the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels to write a play for Kentucky’s bicentennial in 1992. *D. Boone*, later renamed *Loving Daniel Boone*, takes place at a history museum in Kentucky. After a staff member, Flo, finds a time portal in

the museum she travels back in time and falls in love with the real Daniel Boone. In some ways the play follows similar themes explored in her early work. Flo wants to escape her reality in much the same way Jessie does in *'night, Mother*. The biggest difference here is that Flo returns to the present day and falls in love with a custodian at the museum as the play concludes (Bell 98). The play does follow a female protagonist, but it does not attempt to make any social commentary about the role of women in society; it is a play about an individual woman who flees from her own life only to discover that happiness can only be found in returning to the very life from which she attempted to escape.

In 1993, Norman returned to musical theatre only to experience the biggest flop of her career. *Red Shoes* (music by Jule Styne, book and lyrics by Marsha Norman) is an adaptation of a 1948 British film of the same title. It is the story of a young ballet dancer forced to choose between her love for dance and her love for her husband. As detailed in the *Signature: Contemporary Southern Writers – Marsha Norman* documentary, the creative process was quite tumultuous. Original director, Susan Schulman was fired before rehearsals started and Norman spent most of the process arguing with the producers over the ending of the musical. The musical opened on December 16, 1993, and closed three days later, with an estimated loss of close to eight million dollars (*Signature Video* n.pag.).

As she has done throughout her career, Norman returned to Actors Theatre of Louisville after *The Red Shoes* closed on Broadway where her next play, *Trudy Blue*, was included as part of the Humana Festival of New American Plays. *Trudy Blue* depicts a female novelist who has been misdiagnosed and told she only has a few years to live. During the course of the play Trudy is forced to face the realities of her life and her relationships with her family. As we have seen throughout her career, Norman uses her own life experience as inspiration for the character.

Five years prior to writing the play Norman had also been misdiagnosed and forced to confront her own mortality (Craig 173). After a successful off-Broadway production of *Trudy Blue* Norman returned to musical theatre, penning the book for the musical adaptation of Alice Walker's classic novel, *The Color Purple*. The musical ran for almost 1000 performances, closing in 2008, and earned Norman another Tony Award nomination for Best Book of a Musical (ibdb.com "*The Color Purple*").

For most of the last twenty years Norman has found a balance between writing new plays, including *The Last Dance* (2003), about a female poet who abandons her lover to focus on her work, and musicals, including her most recent work, a musical adaptation of Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* with composer/lyricist Jason Robert Brown, which premiered on Broadway to mostly favorable reviews on February 20, 2014 (Craig 173, Evans 44).

When one examines Norman's body of work as a whole, a few things emerge in relation to the ways in which she is introduced to undergraduate theatre students via theatre textbooks. First, her most commercially successful artistic ventures have come in the libretti and lyrics she has written for Broadway musicals, however, only one of the textbooks examined for this study make any reference to Norman's work in musical theatre. Textbook authors are doing a disservice to their readers by not including these works in their discussions of Norman. With regards to identity-based categorization, however, it is less clear exactly how Norman would like to be labeled. Is she a feminist playwright? Is she a woman playwright? Or would she prefer to simply be known as a playwright?

Norman understands and appreciates the work done by female playwrights who came before her. She has a great deal of respect for playwrights like Lillian Hellman and Ntozake

Shange because, as she explained to Esther Harriott, “I did not have to come in and break the doors down to write about a woman who’s just gotten out of prison. The doors were open” (155). She also understands the inherent differences between men and women and the difficulty of convincing the theatre-going public that female characters are worthwhile subjects for dramatic exploration. In the Introduction to *Women Writing Plays: Three Decades of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize*, Norman writes:

We do not yet have a theater where the problems of a female central character are seen as universal. A female character has a better chance of being admired if she is required to “fight” in the play, thus exhibiting a more universal (“male”) behavior. A female character accepting a loss, going through a life passage, responding to or easing the pain of another, risks being described as passive . . . Unfortunately, some of the greatest qualities often seen in real women – endurance, intelligence, compassion, tolerance, and strength – are very hard to dramatize . . . Our task now is not to write about ourselves . . . It is to convey our inner lives in ways that are exciting to watch. We must find and tell the stories that *show* who we are. (5-6, original emphasis)

Although this sounds like a call to action for “women playwrights,” Norman is not comfortable with the gender label being attached to her profession. In a 2009 article for *American Theatre*, Norman states that one of the difficulties plays by women have had in achieving mainstream success is that “we keep sticking the qualifying word ‘women’s’ in front of them. So I propose that we stop saying the words ‘women’s plays.’ We should, if we have to, simply say ‘plays by women,’ or just ‘plays’” (80).

If she would prefer not to have her plays labeled as women's plays, does she believe her plays to be examples of feminist theatre? As mentioned previously, there is some debate among feminist scholars as to whether or not Norman's plays should be considered feminist plays. It is true that not all of her plays have a central female figure (most notably *The Hold Up*, and *Traveler in the Dark*), but as women's studies professor Laurin Porter points out, Norman's plays which do center around women contain essentially the same theme: "taking control, choosing an identity rather than accepting one ready-made. As such, they challenge the patriarchal values and reveal the social construction of gender" (201). But those scholars, such as Jill Dolan, who assert that Norman is not a feminist writer point to her often strict adherence to Aristotle's unities of time, place, and action. *'night, Mother*, the play most often mentioned by theatre textbooks when labeling Norman as a feminist playwright, is a perfect example of this: the play takes place in a single location, follows a singular plotline, and occurs within a twenty-four hour period (in fact it occurs within a much shorter time period). Norman admits to following Western traditional forms in her work. She told David Savran that she considers her plays "wildly traditional. I'm a purist about structure" (182). She also acknowledges the effect ancient Western drama has had on her work. "If you're talking about serious influence on my work, I think you have to go back to the Greeks," she told John DiGaetani in a 1991 interview (245). Does Norman consider herself a feminist? In several interviews examined for this study Norman is directly asked this question by the interviewer and without exception Norman avoids directly answering the question. For example, in a 1987 interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Norman explains her relationship with the feminist movement. She says, "I have been involved with women's political organizations . . . But I can't go to meetings. I am valuable because of my work, not because I go to meetings. I have found that I'm not a valuable

organizational person, but I am certainly there when those organizations need me” (341). Norman acknowledges the role her work plays in giving voice to women, and she is somewhat passively involved with feminist organizations, but she never directly refers to herself as a feminist or a feminist playwright.

So how does Norman view her work and the role it plays in society? Is there any political element at all in her work? Norman explained the role she sees her work playing to Robert Brustein in a 1985 interview:

I feel that my responsibility to my work *is* a political responsibility . . . It’s very important to me that no eight-grade girl in Kentucky is going to have the problem I did growing up in Kentucky and thinking writers never come from there. It’s not going to take anybody as long as it took me. I’m going to say in whatever way I can, “come on. We need you.” (191, original emphasis)

In other words, if there *is* a political message to be found in the works of Marsha Norman it’s not about challenging a patriarchal society or the social construction of gender. It is much more simple than that. Her work, in part, serves to illustrate to others that it is possible for a woman to be a playwright, to tell *her* story, and to achieve commercial success.

### **What this Means for Norman and Identity-Based Categorization**

Of the five playwrights analyzed for this study, Marsha Norman has the most complicated relationship with identity-based categorization. She has called for the removal of the label “women” when discussing plays written by women, but she doesn’t deny the influence other women have had on her work and ultimately views her work as sending a message to young women that their gender should not hold them back from pursuing their goals. If we are



to follow her own views on the subject, textbook authors should not categorize her within a subsection on women's theatre. However, she is most often categorized in theatre textbooks within a subsection devoted to feminist theatre. There are three problems with this label. First, despite the fact that feminist theatre is included in chapters or sections which discuss diversity in contemporary American theatre, feminism is not an identity indicator in the same way that race, ethnicity, or sexuality are. Obviously, it is possible to identify as female and *not* be a feminist (an issue textbooks completely ignore). Second, the feminist nature of her plays, especially *'night, Mother*, are debated by feminist scholars. Should a textbook author categorize her as a feminist playwright when even feminist scholars can't agree as to whether or not she should be included in this category? Finally, her own relationship with feminism is somewhat complicated. She doesn't write social commentary plays (even if scholars read social commentary into the plays) and although she is involved with various women's organizations she appears hesitant to refer to herself as a feminist.

These issues point to the very problem with identity-based categorization. First, authors have chosen to ignore Norman's work in musical theatre in favor of saving a discussion of Norman and her work within the diversity sections of their textbooks, thereby presenting an incomplete picture of Norman and her work. Second, the truth is that one's identity is complicated and personal. No one falls into a single identity category. There is no denying Norman's gender, but she doesn't want the reductive title of "woman playwright" placed on her. Textbook authors should respect this wish. There is also no denying that some of her plays could be considered feminist plays. However, Norman doesn't write with a feminist ideology in mind and she hesitates to label herself as a feminist. By placing Norman in the categories of women playwrights or feminist playwrights textbook authors are presenting a picture of Norman that is

not entirely factual and limits the ability of undergraduate theatre students to fully understand her and her plays.

## CHAPTER SIX: Tony Kushner

### Kushner in Theatre Textbooks

The ways textbook authors have introduced playwright Tony Kushner to their readers and the amount of space devoted to discussing Kushner and his work has changed very little over the past twenty years. For the most part, authors of theatre textbooks include Kushner in the category of gay and lesbian theatre. Kushner is homosexual and his most successful play, the two-part epic *Angels in America* (1993), contains many homosexual characters and examines issues relevant to homosexuals near the end of the twentieth century, especially that of the AIDS epidemic. Because of this many of the references to Kushner in the textbooks analyzed for this study include Kushner in a sub-category of gay and lesbian theatre: the AIDS plays. There are a few textbooks that approach Kushner and his work from other angles, but because his most successful play deals with the AIDS epidemic (among *many* other issues and themes) and because Kushner is homosexual he has been primarily categorized as a gay playwright by theatre textbook authors and his work is presented as part of this category. What follows is a brief overview of the various ways the authors of the textbooks considered for this project present Tony Kushner and his work to undergraduate theatre students.

The first mention of Kushner in the textbooks used for this study comes in the 1994 edition of Edwin Wilson's *The Theater Experience*. In this sixth edition of Wilson's textbook a new subsection of "Alternative Theaters" is included which is referred to as "Multiethnic and Multicultural Theaters." Near the end of this section Wilson acknowledges that several of the plays which fall within sub-categories of multiethnic and multicultural theatres (i.e. theatres devoted to plays by African Americans, Asian Americans, Women, Hispanics, Native

Americans, and Gays and Lesbians) have found success on Broadway. As Wilson notes, “productions from groups with a *special perspective* have often entered the mainstream of American theater” (64, emphasis added). Included among these “mainstream” successes are several plays by August Wilson, and David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988). Edwin Wilson also refers to several plays which fall into the category of gay and lesbian theatre which have found more widespread success, including *Torch Song Trilogy* (1981) by Harvey Fierstein, as well as the musicals *La Cage aux Folles* (1983) and *Falsettos* (1992). Wilson ends the section on mainstream successes of multiethnic and multicultural plays by noting that “*Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, a Broadway play by Tony Kushner that won the Pulitzer Prize, has both political and homosexual components” (64). The section is somewhat odd because no suggestion is given as to why these plays were successful to a mainstream audience, but it is laudable that Wilson includes Kushner’s play in this list less than a year after it premiered on Broadway. Wilson references *Angels in America* again a few pages later in a caption to a photo of the Broadway production within a section devoted to “The Influence of the Critics.” The wording of the caption is significant especially since it appears in the sixth edition prior to the creation of a chapter devoted to diversity in theatre which appears in the seventh edition, published four years later. The caption reads in part: “The play *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner is a 3½ hour presentation that represents the first half of a 7-hour work. The play is set in the 1980s and deals with three sets of characters facing problems experienced by homosexuals; it also addresses the American political climate of the time” (67). The caption then goes on to discuss the positive response by critics to the London and Los Angeles productions which opened prior to the Broadway production. The wording of this quote is significant because it acknowledges that the play deals with issues related to both

politics and homosexuality, thus including Kushner in the category of gay and lesbian theatre but also recognizing that the play examines other issues as well.

Other textbooks written in the mid-1990s, such as Kenneth M. Cameron and Patti P. Gillespie's fourth edition of *The Enjoyment of Theatre* (published in 1996), make no reference whatsoever to homosexuality in Kushner's *Angels in America*. In a subsection addressing "serious plays" within the chapter devoted to contemporary theatre titled "Changing World, Eclectic Theatre," the authors note that "in the early years of the 1990s, the outstanding drama was the multi-part *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, which won prestigious prizes in both 1993 and 1994" (377). This quote is illustrative of the difficulty with introducing plays and playwrights to undergraduate theatre students by simply listing them based on their similarities. The above statement is essentially meaningless. The authors provide no information as to what makes Kushner's play "serious" and there is no explanation given as to why the play is "the outstanding drama" of the early 1990s (not to mention the fact that they don't name the "prestigious awards.").

With the addition of an entire chapter devoted to "Theatre of Diversity" in Edwin Wilson's seventh edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1998, one would hope that this "outstanding drama" of the early 1990s would be given at least slightly more attention and explanation. Unfortunately, this expectation is not fulfilled. Wilson does reference *Angels in America* in a brief discussion of the importance of the imagination of the audience, noting that in the play the character Harper creates an imaginary friend of sorts who takes her on a trip to the Antarctic and that Part One (*Millennium Approaches*) ends with an angel crashing through the ceiling of Prior Walter's apartment (26-27). However, Kushner is only mentioned two other times in the text. The first comes in the same reference to mainstream successes of multiethnic

and multicultural theatre, now called “Crossover Theater,” as found in the sixth edition (and repeated in all subsequent editions of *The Theater Experience*) (63). The second comes within the newly created chapter on diversity in contemporary theatre. In the subsection devoted to gay and lesbian theatre, Wilson notes that in the 1990s many plays by gay playwrights examine gay issues more directly than in previous decades. Wilson writes that “in these dramas, not only is the lifestyle of gays and lesbians presented forthrightly but frequently a gay or lesbian agenda is also put forward. In addition to a general concern for gay and lesbian issues,” says Wilson, “there was a sense of urgency engendered by the AIDS crisis.” Wilson follows this with a list of plays that, presumably, address the AIDS crisis dramatically, including Kushner’s *Angels in America* (251-252). This reference to *Angels* as a play dealing with the AIDS crisis will continue in all subsequent editions of Wilson’s *The Theater Experience*. While it is true that Kushner’s play examines the AIDS crisis from various angles, the categorization of this play within gay and lesbian theatre and then further defining it as an AIDS play ignores all of the other issues and themes this epic play addresses, not to mention the numerous issues and themes Kushner had examined by 1998 in his other plays.

In addition to the references to Kushner noted above, the tenth edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 2007, includes a new section devoted to “Political Theatre” in a chapter called “Contemporary American Theatre” (“Theatre of Diversity” is no longer a separate chapter but now appears as a section within this chapter). Wilson begins the section on political theatre by noting that many of the plays and playwrights discussed in the theatre of diversity section are political in nature. Wilson follows this with a brief discussion of plays which served as political responses to the presidency of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq, including *Laura and Her Killer Bushie*, by Tony Kushner, about an encounter between Laura Bush and an Angel who tells

her about the death of Iraqi children at American hands” (373). Wilson is referring to a short play by Kushner which has subsequently been re-titled *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (2003). This new section, which is included in the 11<sup>th</sup> edition (2009) but removed from the 12<sup>th</sup> edition (2011), and its brief discussion of Kushner’s work beyond *Angels in America* is helpful in aiding the undergraduate theatre student in understanding Kushner as more than a gay playwright who writes plays about gay issues, especially the AIDS crisis. However, it remains incomplete. Wilson is to be commended for adding this additional lens with which to examine Kushner, but by continuing to categorize contemporary playwrights in this way the vision presented by this textbook of Tony Kushner to the undergraduate student is inadequate because it only partially examines Tony Kushner and his plays.

Not all textbooks provide such a limited view of Kushner and his works. A chapter titled “Contemporary Theatre,” in Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy’s tenth edition of *History of the Theatre*, published in 2008, includes a brief biography of several prominent contemporary playwrights. The biographies are written without judgment with respect to sexual or racial identity. The section devoted to Kushner reads:

Tony Kushner was the most praised American dramatist of the 1990s, almost entirely for *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1991-1993) [. . .] this epic play, which required more than six hours to perform, was not only about the AIDS crisis in the 1980s but also about the moral crisis in the United States as concern for self leads to rejection of the needs of others, even loved ones [. . .] Others of Kushner’s plays include *Slavs* (1994) and *Henry Box Brown, or the Mirror of Slavery* (1998); *Homebody/Kabul* (2001), another epic play, concerns Islam and a daughter’s search for her missing mother in both London

and Afghanistan. In 2002 Kushner completed the book and lyrics for the musical *Caroline, or Change*, following it up with *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* (2003) a short play in which First Lady Laura Bush addresses the ghosts of Iraqi children killed in the war. (546)

By not categorizing him as a gay playwright or a political playwright but briefly describing several of his more noteworthy works, the authors are not placing a label on Kushner or his plays and therefore the undergraduate theatre student is allowed to come to his or her own conclusions about Kushner and his plays.

Stephanie Arnold, who creatively introduced her readers to August Wilson but chose to exclude Hwang, Fornes, and Norman from her fifth edition of *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre* (2011) presents Kushner and his works to undergraduate students in a unique manner. Arnold notes Kushner's membership in several identity categories but does not use those categories to fundamentally define Kushner or his plays. In a chapter titled "Expressing a Worldview Through Theatricalism," an entire section is devoted specifically to Kushner and his work. Arnold begins by providing background information on Kushner, noting that "although he was raised in a close-knit and supportive Jewish family, life was a struggle for a politically concerned teenager coming to terms with his identity as a gay man" (283). This single sentence introduces us to Kushner as a member of the Jewish faith, a politically minded individual, and a homosexual. However, because he is being presented as "Tony Kushner: The Playwright" rather than "Tony Kushner: The Jewish, or Political, or Homosexual Playwright," the author, like Brockett and Hildy above, allows the reader to gain knowledge about Kushner without the limiting hyphenates primarily based on identity; a labeling found in most of the textbooks previously discussed. The biography of Kushner continues by referencing the



influence of Bertolt Brecht on the playwright and Kushner's vision of a "theatre that would address the social inequalities that he saw damaging the fabric of American life" (283). Again, the implication here is that Kushner and his plays are politically minded, but because Arnold is presenting Kushner without the aid of the "Political Theatre" sub-section title, he is not being presented as *only*, or even *primarily*, a political playwright. Kushner's most successful work, which most textbooks introduce as an AIDS play, is here introduced as "one of the most celebrated plays of the 1990s and, for some, one of the most important plays of the twentieth century" (283). Arnold continues to describe the play as one which "draws on elements of expressionism, absurdism, and epic theatre, as well as realism . . . Kushner juxtaposes realistic and theatricalized elements to create his vision of life in the United States in the late twentieth century" (284). By presenting the work in this way Arnold allows the reader to begin to envision the play outside of any identity-based categorization. The first real reference to the identity of the playwright in relation to *Angels in America* comes after Arnold has already established the eclectic nature of the structure and content of the play. Arnold then describes the play as one which "examines American life in the 1980s from a gay male point of view that is heavily influenced by the AIDS epidemic" (284). The argument could be made that Arnold is, in effect, stating that *Angels in America* is a gay play, written by a gay playwright, and its subject matter makes it an AIDS play. However, because she has already stated that the play is much more than any one of these categories she has avoided placing the play, or Kushner, solely within an identity-based category. The following three pages detail the similarities and differences between the works of Kushner with those of August Wilson and Wakako Yamauchi. Again, the argument could be made that by comparing these three playwrights, all of whom are often defined by a primary identity indicator which places them as members of traditionally

marginalized groups (sexuality for Kushner and race for Wilson and Yamauchi), Arnold is continuing the tradition of categorizing the playwrights based on their identity (she's just more subtle about it than those discussed above). However, Arnold never directly notes the categories in which these playwrights are often included (Wilson is not introduced here as "African American playwright August Wilson" and, likewise, Yamauchi is not presented as an "Asian American playwright"). Instead, Arnold focuses the discussion on the identity of the characters in the plays written by these three playwrights. She notes that all three are "concerned with the impact of historical and sociological issues on [their] characters' lives" (286). Of the textbooks examined in this study, Arnold's *The Creative Spirit* is by far the most effective in presenting Kushner as a playwright who may be influenced by the identity categories of which he is a member but those identities do not necessarily define him.

Unfortunately, this movement towards presenting Kushner as a playwright outside of his identity begun by Brockett, Hildy, and Arnold has by no means been universally accepted by other theatre textbook authors. Robert Barton and Annie McGregor's 2012 edition of *Theatre in Your Life* returns to the established pattern of introducing Kushner to their readers primarily based on the identity of the playwright. In the section devoted to gay and lesbian theatre within the chapter titled "Ethnic Theatre in America," the authors state "some would place Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes"), as an AIDS play, though it deals with so many other issues so eloquently that it is the choice of many as the single best play of the 1990s" (385). Barton and McGregor do acknowledge that Kushner's most successful play deals with multiple issues, but because both Kushner and the play are presented to the reader within the section devoted to gay and lesbian theatre and because the "other issues" addressed in the play are never defined, it is likely that the student reading this section will view

Kushner as a gay playwright rather than a playwright who deals with numerous issues in his plays.

As we have seen, Kushner is primarily presented to the readers of undergraduate theatre textbooks as a playwright who writes plays which are mostly categorized as being a part of gay and lesbian theatre. Despite the fact that his most successful play, *Angels in America*, and most of his other work, addresses issues which are not related to his sexuality, he is still being categorized in this manner by most of the theatre textbooks analyzed for this project. There are textbooks which acknowledge the political nature of much of Kushner's work, but are these references sufficient? Does Kushner examine issues in his plays which are neither political nor related to homosexuality? I return again to the primary question of this project: how does Kushner himself wish to be categorized? Is he comfortable being categorized as a gay playwright whose most successful work should be primarily viewed as an AIDS play? Does he view the political nature of much of his work as the defining element of his plays? What about his upbringing in the Jewish faith? Should he be categorized based on this aspect of his identity? What follows is a detailed analysis of Kushner's own views on categorization as well as additional possibilities several scholars have suggested with regards to studying the plays of Tony Kushner.

### **TONY KUSHNER: Gay Playwright or Playwright Who Happens to be Gay?**

As noted above, theatre textbooks primarily introduce Tony Kushner to readers through his two-part epic play, *Angels in America* and rightly so as the play rocketed Kushner to global prominence in the early 1990s. Part One, *Millennium Approaches*, premiered on Broadway in May 1993, winning four Tony Awards, including Best Play as well as the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for

Drama. Part Two, *Perestroika*, opened in November 1993, and won three Tony Awards, including Best Play, as well as a second Tony for Stephen Spinella who played Prior Walter in both parts (the first time any actor has won two Tony awards for playing the same role). Both parts of Kushner's play investigate and examine an almost endless list of issues and subjects, including homosexuality, the AIDS epidemic, Judaism, Mormonism, politics (both left and right-wing), the national healthcare system, and the role of the family at the end of the twentieth century (among many others). In his other plays, Kushner tackles such subjects as Nazism, the Taliban, the Civil Rights Movement, Reaganism, and the rise of Capitalism. It seems odd that a playwright who addresses such a wide range of issues in his plays would be primarily categorized in theatre textbooks based on his identity as a homosexual man and his most successful play within a section solely devoted to gay and lesbian theatre. Robert Vorlicky suggests that "Kushner's voice crosses boundaries of intersecting, marginalized cultures as his subject position fluidly moves among a range of identities, all of which *are* Tony Kushner" (5, original emphasis). In other words, Kushner *is* a gay playwright, but his plays and his identity as a playwright do not begin and end with his sexuality.

Tony Kushner was born into a Jewish household in July 1956, in New York City. His parents, William and Sylvia, were both trained musicians and named their middle child after the singer Tony Bennett (Fisher, *Living Past Hope* 14). Sometime around his first birthday the entire Kushner family moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, which Kushner describes as "the culture of 'genteel' post-integration bayou-country racism" (Kushner, *Thinking About* 50). In 1974, Kushner moved back to New York to pursue a degree in Medieval Studies at Columbia University. According to James Fisher, "Kushner grappled intensely with his sexual orientation" during his time at Columbia, "seeking therapy to find a so-called cure for his homosexuality,

before facing it in various ways” (*Living Past Hope* 15). After graduating from Columbia, Kushner pursued a graduate degree in directing from New York University where he co-founded the theatre company 3P Productions (the three P’s were politics, poetry and popcorn) (Myers 232).

Kushner’s first job after graduate school was as the assistant director of the St. Louis Repertory Theatre. After two years in St. Louis, he came back to New York and served as the artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop from 1987 to 1988 (Fisher, *Living Past Hope* 19). In addition to his Tony Awards and Pulitzer Prize, Kushner received the Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) in 2002, as well as a Cultural Achievement Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture in 2000 (Taft-Kaufman 38). In 2003, Kushner and his partner Mark Harris, an editor for *Entertainment Weekly*, became the first gay couple to have their commitment ceremony listed in the *New York Times* “Vows” section. In 2008, they were legally married in Provincetown, Massachusetts (Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner* 38).

Kushner’s first major play was *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) which makes a parallel between the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany and the Reagan administration in the 1980s. After *Angels in America*, Kushner presented his next play *Slavs! Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1995) which, according to James Fischer, “mixes broad farce (men in drag play old babushkas, for example) and elements of fantasy with a tragic tale of a mute child dying from the effects of Chernobyl” (*Understanding Tony Kushner* 58). In 2001, he premiered *Homebody/Kabul* which looks at the relationship between Afghanistan and the West. In the play, written prior to the events of 9/11, a character presciently predicts that the Taliban are coming to New York. *Homebody/Kabul* was quickly followed by the Public Theatre’s

production of the musical *Caroline, or Change*, for which he wrote the libretto and lyrics. *Caroline, or Change* is a mostly autobiographical musical using the Civil Rights movement as a backdrop to examine the relationship between a Jewish boy and his African-American housekeeper in Louisiana in the early 1960s. Kushner's 2003 one-act play, *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Happy*, confronts the Bush administration's decision to revise the focus of the war on terror from Afghanistan to Iraq. In 2005, Kushner co-wrote the screenplay to Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, about an Israeli-sponsored retaliation against the Palestinian group responsible for attacking Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympics, and in 2012 he wrote the screenplay to Spielberg's biopic *Lincoln*. His most recent work, *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism, with a Key to the Scriptures*, recounts the decision of a retired longshoreman and communist, Gus Marcantonio, to kill himself and the reaction of this decision by his sister and three children. According to a review by Jeremy McCarter in *Newsweek*, "over more than three hours of stage time, we watch family members argue with their spouses, lovers and siblings about Gus and each other but also (this being a Tony Kushner play) about Marxism, Christian Science, labor history and real estate" (67).

This partial list (he has also written translations of works by Brecht and Corneille, as well as several one-acts and even a children's play) reveals the eclectic nature of Kushner's work. Kushner says, "I think that the most exciting kind of theatre is theatre that's about lots and lots of different things and has a really broad perspective" (qtd. in Taft-Kaufman 50). This "broad perspective" makes classifying Kushner as a playwright all the more difficult and problematic for the authors of theatre textbooks. The textbooks examined for this study have categorized Kushner as either a gay playwright or as a playwright who is categorized under the heading of gay and lesbian theatre as well as political theatre. The textbooks used for this project do not

categorize plays or playwrights based on the religious affiliation of the playwright or religious themes within the play; however, there is a third category which Kushner is often grouped by some scholars: that of a Jewish playwright. Does Kushner embrace or reject any of the categories in which he has been placed? Do his plays fit universally in any of these categories? Or is there another category that might better explain Kushner and his plays?

In a 1998 interview with Michael Cunningham, Kushner was directly asked if he takes issue with being referred to as a gay playwright, Kushner responded by saying “no, I want to be thought of as a gay writer. What worries me is that when I write plays that don’t have gay people in them, I want to be thought of as a gay writer as much because I still think it’s coming from a gay sensibility” (42). Kushner’s sexuality informs his playwriting and he takes pride in his role as a gay playwright. “I’m gay,” he says in an article he wrote for the *Kenyon Review*, “and I identify myself most strongly within the homosexual community and as a gay theater artist. I see the work I do as part of a movement of people who are similarly identified, and who, I have begun to suspect, are making the next chapter in the history of American gay theatre” (31). Kushner sees himself in a long line of homosexual artists and credits those who have come before him for paving the way. “I’m part of a progress that’s been made,” he tells Michael Lowenthal, “Tennessee [Williams] wasn’t out, but he sort of outed sexuality in general without outing himself, which would have been virtually impossible [at the time]. Gay men and lesbians have always been in the forefront of causing American society to confront sexuality” (153). Unfortunately, our society isn’t always ready or willing to confront sexuality. As James Fisher notes, “Kushner’s ‘queerness,’ which is as much a part of his playwriting as is Chekhov’s Russian-ness, has contributed to controversy in theaters around the country where the *Angels* plays have been performed . . . Critics have claimed that the frankness of *Angels* promotes moral

decline” (*Living Past Hope* 66). *Angels in America* directly addresses issues related to homosexuality during the AIDS crisis and many of his other plays examine the past by “queering” history. An excellent example of this can be seen in his 2003 short play *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*, referenced above, in which former First Lady Laura Bush is forced to confront the death of Iraqi children ostensibly murdered by her husband, President George W. Bush. However, theatre textbooks do not use the term queer and certainly don’t consider presenting fictionalized history in the same category as gay and lesbian theatre. It is clear that Kushner embraces the categorization of gay playwright, but to define him as solely a gay playwright feels inadequate given the vast subject matter he addresses in his plays. Are there other aspects of Kushner’s background which might assist in categorizing Kushner as a playwright?

Raised in a Jewish home, Kushner now considers himself a “genuine agnostic” (qtd. in Rose 49). However, he does acknowledge that his Jewish background has greatly influenced his playwriting. In an interview with Adam Mars Jones prior to the London premiere of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Kushner explained, “Judaism isn’t what this play is about, but I’m Jewish and it took me by surprise that it wound up all over the play” (26). Speaking with Bruce McLeod, Kushner goes a step further, referring to *Angels in America* as a “Jewish fag play” (81). Kushner understands the parallels between anti-Semitism and homophobia, and these similarities manifest themselves within *Angels in America*. But his plays that don’t directly address homosexuality, most notably *A Bright Room Called Day* (which uses the Holocaust as a point of reference) and *Caroline, or Change* (which examines Jewish and African-American relationships) are influenced by his knowledge and experience as a Jew. However, like



categorizing him as a gay playwright, calling him a Jewish playwright feels problematic. As scholar Ellen Kaplan notes:

To say that Kushner is a gay playwright or a Jewish playwright diminishes him; he is both, but it is more truthful to say that he *is* neither . . . being Jewish and gay are frames of reference, central but not definitive. They are strands in the tapestry of his work; overlapping and informing each other, still leaving *spaces between* in the weave. (331, original emphasis)

Is it possible that these “spaces between” could be used to definitively define Kushner? If so, what exactly are the “spaces between”?

Could these “spaces” be filled by Kushner’s political views and ideology? Homosexuality and Judaism are very personal subjects for Kushner, and as is often said, the personal is the political. Maybe when all is said and done the central issues to all of his plays are political, whether they are the political struggles of homosexuals during the AIDS crisis or the political history of Jewish people throughout the world, or the political policies of our government which define our moment in history. Kushner refers to his parents as “New Deal Democrats” and clearly this liberal political ideology has influenced his playwriting (qtd. in Kinzer 193). “I’m just completely a political animal,” he tells Kim Myers. “I don’t think of things without thinking of them politically . . . the political is simply the striving for a better life, striving for a decent life . . . so what else can you do as a playwright, but write about politics” (236). As such, he says, “I am committed to do work that participates as fully as possible in the struggle of the oppressed for power, in the desperate need for economic democracy, for socialism, for feminism, for environmentalism, for an end to bigotry of all kinds, for the building of a better world” (Kushner, “Notes About Political Theatre” 26). All of Kushner’s plays deal

with politics in one form or another, and usually quite overtly because he believes that “people are tired of plays where you can’t tell who the characters might have voted for in the last election” (qtd. in Kinzer 191). Perhaps then the correct category for Kushner is, as we have seen in several editions of Edwin Wilson’s *The Theater Experience*, that of a political playwright.

If this is true, if Kushner should be presented in theatre textbooks as a purely political playwright, then we need to fully understand his politics and the ways in which the political enters his plays. Are his plays simply liberal political propaganda? Kushner says no. He is simply presenting his vision of the world; he is asking tough questions about our society and the role government has played in perpetuating the oppression of traditionally marginalized people. He is also acutely aware of the difficulty of presenting his plays as “political theatre.” If he is to consider himself a political playwright, he knows he must work hard to address political issues while simultaneously presenting a compelling evening at the theatre because he believes that “when people see a family psychodrama that doesn’t work, they say ‘this play didn’t work.’ When they see a play about unionism in the 1980s that doesn’t work, they will say ‘I hate political theater’” (Kushner, “Notes About Political Theatre” 29). However, he doesn’t see himself as a protégé of Augusto Boal; he doesn’t believe that theatre is a rehearsal for revolution. In fact, he doesn’t see his role as a playwright as attempting to convince his audience to change their political ideology. He considers his plays as a part of the tradition of psychological narrative realism and, as he noted in a roundtable discussion at Northwestern University moderated by Professor Craig Kinzer, “this kind of theater works in the way that dreams work.” He says his plays make a deal with the audience that they aren’t going to be yelled at by the characters or told what they are doing is wrong or what they should do differently. Instead, “you’re going to be left alone, and you can be in this kind of semi-trance with a bunch of other

people who will be sharing a vision that you're watching . . . and then it's up to you to decide whether you forget the dream when you wake up . . . or whether you remember it" (qtd. in Kinzer 207). Kushner's plays may confront issues he has with our society, our government, and our world, but he is not interested in forcing change through his plays:

I don't actually believe that people do change that way in the theater. I've gotten letters from people who have said that the play [*Angels in America*] made them rethink some fundamental positions. But I feel that those people are actually being very generous and kind toward me because they like the play, and that in point of fact a whole host of social forces are working on them, and the play happened to be the thing where they had their little epiphany . . . No playwright exists, not even Shakespeare, who could make Bob Dole into a smart or an honest or a decent man. (qtd. in Kinzer 194)

Humility and humor aside, Kushner sees his work as a series of serious questions posed to the audience through the characters, but he doesn't view his purpose as providing a synthesized answer to those questions. He is not propagandizing; he is merely presenting the problems he sees in our society to his audience. His characters, like Kushner himself, see the world through a political lens. Tony Kushner is a gay playwright *and* a Jewish playwright who addresses sociopolitical issues and is therefore *also* a political playwright.

Before we confidently place Kushner in theatre textbooks within the category of political playwrights, shoulder to shoulder with Clifford Odets and Bertolt Brecht, perhaps there is a new category in which Kushner can reside. In his 1997 article in the *Kenyon Review*, "Notes About Political Theatre," Kushner looks to Charles Ludlam, founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company as well as LGBT activist group Queer Nation's slogan "we're here, we're queer, we're

fabulous, get used to it” to name the type of theatre he produces. “Theatre of the Fabulous,” as he calls it (with tongue firmly planted in cheek), is not a rejection of Ludlam and his theatre of the ridiculous, but the next logical step. “Fabulous,” he says, is “part of a new queer politics, carnival and camp, aggressively fruity, celebratory, and tough as a street-wise drag queen” (30). As Kushner describes it, “theatre of the fabulous,” like his plays, center around the “rapturous embrace of difference, the discovering of self not in that which has rejected you but in that which makes you unlike, and disliked, and Other” (32). If Kushner is a gay playwright who deals with issues beyond homosexuality, and a Jewish playwright who often uses his Jewish identity as a frame of reference, and a political playwright who focuses on political issues but doesn’t set out to deliberately change his audience’s political ideology, perhaps we should simply follow Kushner’s lead and refer to him as a “fabulous playwright.”

The truth is that Kushner does not defy categorization, he straddles it. He *is* a gay playwright, he *is* a Jewish playwright, he *is* a political playwright (and few would deny that he *is* fabulous). It is his background as a gay man, a Jew, and a liberal that has influenced him and can be seen through his characters and the plots he creates. As Robert Vorlicky notes, Kushner occupies a kind of “poet-laureate” position for many of the disenfranchised – for those who experience their lives as voiceless or marginalized . . . and while many in the American audience might not agree with Kushner’s politics and views, he is nonetheless embraced by many Americans as one who is allowed, or invited, *in* to speak *out* on a diverse range of issues in a variety of forms. (4-5, original emphasis)

Kushner embraces all of the categories in which he has been placed. He does not shy away from his past or what he believes in. He is a playwright with strong convictions and deeply held

opinions of the world in which we live. His plays cover a myriad range of subjects but they are all informed by Tony Kushner's homosexuality, his Jewish upbringing, and his politics.

### **What this Means for Kushner and Identity-Based Categorization**

Analyzing both the ways in which Kushner has been presented in theatre textbooks as well as Kushner's own views on categorization seems to lead to more questions than answers. He wants to be categorized as a gay playwright because he feels his sexuality influences his work even when he's not dealing with explicitly homosexual subject matter in his plays. He also acknowledges the role his Jewish upbringing plays in his work. His plays are political in nature and political playwright might be a fitting category for his work. However, the only textbooks examined for this study to utilize political theatre as a category are the later editions of Edwin Wilson's *The Theater Experience*, and Wilson primarily uses this category to emphasize the reality that many multicultural and multiethnic plays are political in nature. The truth is that many playwrights throughout history have written plays that are political to one degree or another and to lump all of them into a single category of Political Theatre will not aid in an undergraduate's understanding of these individuals or their plays. "Theatre of the Fabulous," as he calls it, is also an excellent category which could easily encompass the myriad of ideas and themes he addresses in his plays. However, clearly this is not an established category and creating an entirely new genre simply to describe Kushner and his plays is not likely to be embraced by theatre textbook authors, or the academy at large. Kushner desires for his plays to be examined through multiple lenses and the fact that most of the textbooks only present Kushner and his plays through a single, or sometimes double, lens is problematic. The textbooks

are not presenting the full picture of Kushner and his plays to undergraduate students because they are relying on categories to define the playwright and his plays.

## CONCLUSION

In an effort to simplify how students in an introduction to theatre course are introduced to contemporary American playwrights, textbook authors have largely ignored the opinions of the playwrights regarding identity-based categorization. They also have overlooked the reductionism inherent in labeling a playwright based on his or her identity and have presented incomplete pictures of these playwrights and their work. They have not done so because they are indolent. There are numerous benefits to identity-based categorization. However, it is my opinion that the disadvantages of introducing diversity in this manner far outweigh the conveniences. The conclusion of this study will attempt to answer three questions regarding identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks: 1) what is the value of this kind of categorization for students and educators?; 2) what are the downsides of identity-based categorization?; and 3) what is an alternative method for presenting contemporary American playwrights in theatre textbooks which honors the opinions of the playwrights *and* introduces the playwrights and their work to students in a more holistic manner? Answering these questions will help readers to comprehend more fully the pros and cons of identity-based categorization as well as help them to visualize a new method for presenting the diversity of contemporary American playwrights and their work to twenty-first century undergraduate students.

### **The Benefits of Identity-Based Categorization**

In creating sections or chapters devoted to contemporary American theatre which emphasize the diversity of theatre created over the past fifty years, textbook authors are suggesting that this diversity (of both the creators of contemporary drama and the plays written

during this period) makes contemporary American theatre unique. The textbook is a tool which, in this case, is used to transmit this information about the present state of theatre. Its purpose is to introduce the student to the subject matter which is then expanded upon by the instructor. Therefore, in some ways, it makes sense that textbook authors would choose to present the material as simply as possible. Simple presentation makes it easier for the student to understand the material and allows instructors to flesh out the information in the manner they deem appropriate. By pointing to diversity as a unique quality of contemporary American theatre and then introducing students to sub-sections which illustrate the diversity of contemporary American drama, textbook authors allow the student to learn about this period of theatre and provide a clear starting point for instructors to expand students' understanding of contemporary American theatre through classroom lectures, discussion, and additional assigned reading such as plays written by the playwrights introduced in the textbook.

There is an additional benefit to identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks that, in some ways, is more significant than the ease of understanding and opportunities for the instructors noted above. Prior to the rise of multicultural education initiatives, most textbooks examined theatre from the perspective of a singular identity. The playwrights discussed were generally male Caucasians and although the themes examined by these playwrights were often deemed universal by academics, the plays rarely included viewpoints from diverse cultural backgrounds. Textbooks that included sections devoted to the diversity of contemporary American theatre accomplished two things. First, they provided some background information which revealed that traditionally underrepresented groups were producing theatre prior to the contemporary period. For example, the sub-section devoted to African American theatre in Edwin Wilson's seventh edition of *The Theater Experience*, published in 1998, begins with a six-



paragraph introduction in which Wilson references nineteenth century African American theatres such as the African Grove Theatre, the actor Ira Aldridge, and early twentieth century African American artists such as Bert Williams and George Walker (236-237). Secondly, by providing historical context and noting the importance of diversity in contemporary American theatre these textbooks introduced different cultures and backgrounds, *and* illustrated to students who are members of these groups that there is a theatrical voice which represents them.

All of the playwrights discussed in this study used their success to affirm people in their identity-group. August Wilson wrote his ten-play cycle to allow African Americans to view their culture and history in a more positive light. Although he may not have fully embraced the title, David Henry Hwang became *the* Asian American theatrical spokesman after the success of *M. Butterfly*, illustrating to younger generations of Asian Americans that their perspective was significant. Maria Irene Fornes spent much of her career teaching up-and-coming Hispanic playwrights and, by including a discussion of her work, textbook authors are noting the importance of this mentorship to contemporary theatre. Marsha Norman is hesitant to refer to herself as a feminist, but she does take pride in the fact that her success illustrates to young women that they can be playwrights and that their voices do matter. Tony Kushner embraces numerous identity indicators but his inclusion in theatre textbooks as a part of gay and lesbian theatre illustrates that issues relevant to the homosexual community as represented in dramatic literature do matter. The importance of acknowledging and celebrating the theatrical voices of traditionally underrepresented groups cannot be understated. It *is* what makes contemporary theatre unique. For the first time in our history, the worldview presented in mainstream theatres are not *only* those of straight white men. By introducing the diversity of contemporary playwrights, textbooks authors are pointing to this reality. They are introducing all students to

aspects of our society which they may not be aware of and illustrating that the views, ideas, and artistry of people from diverse backgrounds are significant and do matter.

Introducing diversity to students through theatre textbooks was especially important in the mid-1990s because previously most minority groups had been essentially ignored in the study of theatre. However, because of the importance placed on a multicultural education over the past-twenty years, the value of a multicultural perspective has changed. America is a more diverse nation than it was even ten years ago. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 24.7% of the U.S. population self-identifies as a race other than White (these include those who identify as Black or African American, Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino), as opposed to 22.4% of respondents to the 2000 U.S. Census. Between 2000 and 2010 the U.S. population increased by slightly more than twenty-seven million people, 47.8%, or almost half of them are people who identify as members of a race other than White. The Hispanic population alone grew from 12.5% in 2000 to 16.3% in 2010, representing a 43% increase. In addition, Americans are more likely to be biracial or multiracial than in the past: 2.9% percent of Americans identified with two or more races in 2010, as opposed to 2.4% in 2000, representing a 32% increase (Humes, et. al. 4). Moreover, college aged students have grown up in a society where individuals from diverse backgrounds hold significant leadership positions (Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, etc.) and where noted celebrities openly express their same sex attraction (Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Neil Patrick Harris, etc.); multiculturalism and a focus on diversity has been a significant component of their entire educational experience. Because they have been exposed to diversity both in the classroom (studying works by and about traditionally underrepresented groups from elementary school onward) and in their daily lives (they live in a more diverse world than previous generations), a

greater number of college aged students understand and appreciate the importance of diversity in our world. It is not simply a buzzword; it is a part of their lives. This is not to suggest that we live in a post-racial world or that homophobia, sexism and racism no longer exist, but I would argue that a greater number of college students understand that identity is fluid, that we all have multiple identities, *and* that the ways in which an individual self-identifies can shift depending on the context. If this is true, if the generation currently attending colleges and universities are more diverse, have grown up in a more diverse world, and have a more nuanced understanding of diversity and identity, then the approach to discussing diversity established in the mid-1990s by theatre textbooks is outdated and needs to adjust in order to best serve theatre students.

### **The Disadvantages of Identity-Based Categorization**

The textbook is a tool for both the student and the instructor. Creating categories of any kind does make the use of the textbook-as-tool easier for all involved. However, the act of categorizing playwrights and their work based on the identity of the playwright can actually make understanding playwrights and their work more difficult in several ways. First, it limits the students' understanding of the playwright. Second, it can lead to a false assumption about a playwright or his or her work. Third, it doesn't take into consideration the hybridity of identity. Finally, it doesn't challenge students to understand how one's cultural background can impact different people in different ways.

As has become abundantly clear during this study, the act of labeling playwrights and their work based on the identity of the playwright limits the students' understanding because it presents an incomplete picture of the artist and his or her work. For example, Marsha Norman is labeled as either a feminist or included in the category of women's theatre by many theatre

textbook authors. She is placed in this category primarily due to the subject matter of two of her most successful plays, *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*. However, as noted in Chapter Five, only one of the textbooks examined in this study make any reference to her work as a lyricist and librettist for several Broadway musicals, despite the fact that most of these textbooks include an entire chapter devoted to discussing the development and importance of musical theatre. Because textbook authors have made the choice to examine contemporary American theatre through the lens of identity, it is easier to ignore this important component of Norman's career. In other words, textbook authors have presented an incomplete picture of Norman for the reader and thus are limiting the students' understanding of her and her work.

The act of labeling a playwright or particular plays based on the identity of the playwright is reductive and essentializes the playwright and his or her work. Tony Kushner is primarily discussed in the context of gay and lesbian theatre. Although much of his work contains gay or lesbian characters or examines themes related in some way to his own worldview as a gay man, it does a disservice to both the student and Kushner only to examine his work through the lens of his identity as a homosexual. What are the consequences of essentializing a playwright such as Kushner in an introduction to theatre course? One could argue that a primary purpose of the introduction to theatre course is to cultivate future theatre audiences. If so, the act of identity-based categorization could negatively impact achievement of this goal. While college-aged students may have a more nuanced understanding of diversity it does not mean that they are universally accepting of all racial, sexual, and gender differences. Consider the following hypothetical: You are a heterosexual nineteen-year-old college student with limited knowledge of or experience with theatre. You take an introduction to theatre course in which you are introduced to a gay playwright named Tony Kushner. You know he's gay because his

name is included in a list of gay and lesbian playwrights in your textbook. You know that he writes works which are examples of gay and lesbian theatre because his play *Angels in America* is referenced in the section of your textbook devoted to this identity-based category. You are not gay and therefore assume, because your only knowledge of Kushner is via the textbook you are required to read, that Kushner's works have no relevance to you or your life. Further suppose that you are a huge fan of musical theatre and a history buff who is especially interested in the Civil Rights Movement. Several years after you complete your undergraduate education you see an advertisement for a production of Kushner's musical *Caroline, or Change* which is opening at your local theatre. The ad states that this is a musical, but you falsely assume that because it's written by Tony Kushner it must deal with themes related to homosexuality, which you have no interest in and therefore elect not to attend this production. This hypothetical is not so far-fetched. The incomplete understanding provided by identity-based categories leads to false assumptions about a playwright and the work produced by that playwright.

Identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks also ignores the reality that art, at its core, is the expression of one's individuality. Our sense of self and the way we view our world does not come from a single component of our identity. Each of us has multiple identities and each component of our identity impacts us in unique ways. Maria Irene Fornes is labeled by theatre textbooks as either a feminist playwright or a Hispanic playwright (or sometimes both). These categories completely ignore the fact that she is also a lesbian. Categorizing Fornes based on her gender and/or race, but ignoring her sexuality suggests that this component of her identity is irrelevant to the work she creates and the way she views the world.

In addition, the act of identity-based categorization does not challenge students to understand how gender, race, and sexuality can impact different people in different ways at

different times during their lives. David Henry Hwang is Asian American. However, he was raised in a mixed-race neighborhood and didn't consider his ethnicity to be an important component of his identity until he was in college. When he began what he calls his isolationist/nationalist phase his view of his identity shifted. He only wanted to work with other Asian artists and his plays were only concerned with themes related to his identity as an Asian American. As he matured, his view of his identity shifted again. He is married to a Caucasian woman, his children are biracial, and today he is much more interested in the fluidity of identity. Much of his work interrogates and occasionally rejects the idea of race as a social construct in the twenty-first century. In an article titled "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall suggests that "perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact . . . we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (392). Identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks allow no room for the student to consider the possibility that identity is "in process" rather it leads the reader to the assumption that identity is static and un-changing.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by pointing to diversity as the most salient feature of contemporary American theatre, the textbooks are, perhaps unintentionally, shifting the focus from the play to the subject of diversity itself. Textbook authors refer to the importance of the plays discussed in the identity categories *because* of the identity category they represent not because the plays themselves are well-written or relevant, or speak of the human condition in a unique manner. What is often lost in the presentation of theatre pieces that address diverse cultures and backgrounds is critical examination of the plays themselves. Joni L. Jones, Associate Professor of Performance Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, discusses her

own experience with this very issue in an article dealing with pedagogical difficulties in the teaching of African American theatre history. Jones says,

While I may want the students to see the ways in which race factors into the dramas we read, I cannot rely on this being their only form of participation with the work. I must be certain to offer them strategies for critiquing the structure of the plays, the development of the characters, and the theatrical and narrative conventions of the period in which the play was written. In this way, they may participate due to pleasure rather than identification. (198)

Not only does the creation of identity-based categories in theatre textbooks limit the students' understanding of the playwright, lead students to make false assumptions about the plays, ignore both the reality that each individual's sense of self is composed of multiple identity indicators and that one's identity is fluid, but it also creates a learning environment in which students become focused on identifying the "type" of play rather than studying the dramaturgical structure, character development, and artistic expression of the playwright through his or her work.

### **A Possible Alternative to Identity-Based Categorization**

In the last three editions of *The Theatre Experience*, Edwin Wilson added a paragraph to the opening of the section devoted to diversity in theatre which points to the missing component in all of the textbooks discussed in this study. I have included a significant excerpt of this paragraph from the twelfth edition of *The Theatre Experience* (2011) because it lays out the central focus of this project. With regards to categorizing playwrights based on race, gender and sexuality, Wilson says:

It should be noted that while many theatre artists wish to write from a specific ethnic or gender viewpoint, there are others who happen to be members of a minority group or a specific gender group, or who espouse feminism or a political outlook, but who do not want to be identified solely, or even primarily, on that basis. For instance, there are playwrights who happen to be Hispanic or African American, but they want to be known as playwrights, without ethnic identification. Also, there are people who are gay or lesbian, or who are strong feminists, but they want to be regarded chiefly or even exclusively as dramatists, not gay dramatists, lesbian dramatists, or female dramatists. (350)

By pointing out the fact that some playwrights do not wish to be categorized based on their identity, Wilson is acknowledging what has been missing from the entire conversation surrounding diversity in theatre textbooks: the voice of the playwright. Unfortunately, he does not name any playwrights who do or do not embrace the categorization of their plays based on their identity. The chapters devoted to individual playwrights in this project illustrate, to varying degrees, that Wilson's statement is true. This fact, coupled with the additional disadvantages of identity-based categorization in theatre textbooks noted above, demonstrates the need for a new approach to introducing contemporary American theatre to students via textbooks.

As noted in the Introduction, prior to the emphasis placed on multicultural education in the mid-1990s, playwrights and their work were introduced in two ways: either they were discussed in relation to the era in which they wrote their plays (Ancient Greece, Elizabethan England, Post-World War II America, etc.) or they were categorized based on the genre of the plays they wrote (realism, symbolism, Theatre of the Absurd, etc.). The creation of identity-based genres in the mid-1990s was necessary because textbook authors (and academics in



general) were motivated to find a way to clearly illustrate the fact that diversity was a significant component of contemporary American theatre. Categorizing playwrights and their plays based on identity was the simplest way to make this clear to the reader. Most twenty-first century students understand the role diversity plays in contemporary society. There is a way to introduce these playwrights and their plays to students in a clear, easy-to-understand manner while acknowledging the important role diversity plays in contemporary American theatre. Textbook authors still can provide background information and chart the evolution of theatrical movements such as African American theatre or gay and lesbian theatre. However, this alternative method will only be truly effective as an educational tool if the identity-based modifiers and sub-categories are removed from the discussion. I propose that rather than introduce contemporary American playwrights in a chapter or section titled “Theatre of Diversity” (or some variation thereof), textbook authors should instead introduce contemporary American playwrights *as* contemporary American playwrights in a chapter or section simply titled “Contemporary American Theatre.”

As noted, what makes contemporary American theatre unique is the diversity of the playwrights who have achieved mainstream success and the diverse subject matter contained in their plays. Therefore, it is essential that any chapter devoted to contemporary American theatre include a discussion of diversity in its introduction. Depending on the structure of the textbook, this introduction should include a brief history of theatre movements by traditionally underrepresented groups. For example, after noting the significant role diversity plays in contemporary American theatre, the author could note that although diversity is a salient aspect of theatre produced during this period, it by no means is the first time audiences have had the opportunity to view or read plays written by members of minority groups. This could be

followed by an historical overview of African American theatre, gay and lesbian theatre, feminist theatre, etc. By including references to the history of these theatrical movements the author will be able to maintain a multicultural pedagogical perspective but, more importantly, it will allow the student to understand that diverse voices in the theatre are not a new phenomenon.

Following the introduction, the focus of the chapter should be on the playwrights. The alternative method to presenting diversity in theatre textbooks which I am proposing is a playwright-centered approach. Rather than divide the chapter into subsections based on identity categories, I recommend that the chapter be separated into sub-sections based on the playwrights themselves. For example, the chapter could begin with a sub-section simply titled “August Wilson.” The section devoted to August Wilson would briefly detail his biography, his mixed-race background, self-education, and early experiences in the theatre. This would be followed by a discussion of his ten-play cycle chronicling the African American experience in the twentieth century. Included here should be a reference to Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand” speech in 1996 before the Theatre Communications Group. This would allow the instructor to have an in-class discussion on Wilson’s separatist ideas (and subsequent softening) as well as his views on theatre funding and color-blind casting. The section on Wilson should also reference the tension between the African American and European aesthetic found throughout his body of work. This will allow the textbook to maintain its focus on the dramatic literature and provide an opportunity to discuss post-colonial subjectivity both in the text and in class discussions.

This section could be followed by a section devoted to David Henry Hwang. Again, it would begin with a brief biography of Hwang which would allow the reader to understand his cultural heritage and his early views on identity. After providing descriptions of his most significant works the section should focus on Hwang’s own belief in the fluidity of identity.

Hwang's work as a whole explores different aspects of identity as a social construct and by providing a more complete examination of his work the students will be able to more clearly understand how Hwang interrogates various aspects of identity in contemporary culture even when his plays don't directly address the politics of identity.

It is very easy to understand why authors have chosen to label Maria Irene Fornes as both a feminist and Hispanic playwright. After all, she was one of the co-founders of New York Theatre Strategy which had a mission of producing works created by and for women and she worked regularly with the Hispanic theatre company INTAR, especially as a mentor to young Hispanic playwrights. But clearly her work is about more than simply her identity as a Hispanic woman. By providing a biographical overview of her life and work this section will allow the reader to understand the ways in which her race, gender, and sexuality impacted her work. In addition, it will also acknowledge the importance she had in the off-off-Broadway theatre community, her exploration of environmental theatre in *Fefu and her Friends*, and her unique and creative modes of inspiration when writing her plays, such as the use of index cards with words or phrases and the use of found objects as inspiration.

A biographical section devoted to Marsha Norman would include the important role The Actors Theatre of Louisville played throughout her career, her noteworthy successes with *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother* as well as the debate regarding her role as a feminist playwright, including her own views on the feminist modifier so often attached to her name. In order to provide a comprehensive image of Norman for the readers it should also include reference to her work in musical theatre as both librettist and lyricist. By not front-loading her identity as a female playwright, allowing the section detailing her life and career to include a reference to the debate surrounding the feminist moniker attached to her work, and including her work as a

musical theatre artist in the discussion of Marsha Norman, this new approach will allow the students to come to their own conclusions regarding Norman and her plays *and* opens up many more opportunities for the instructor to lead a discussion about Norman from numerous angles.

Tony Kushner embraces the category of a gay playwright. He acknowledges the influence his experience as a gay man has had on his work. However, he also points to various other identities, including his Jewish upbringing and his political ideology as being equally important to him and his work. Because he straddles several identities, the current approach to introducing him and his work is insufficient. The section devoted to Tony Kushner must also acknowledge the multiple identities which have impacted Kushner and his work. In some ways, the approach to Kushner might be the easiest because his most successful play, *Angels in America*, examines multiple issues all of which represent his identity in one way or another. By maintaining focus on Kushner's plays, the section can provide biographical information about Kushner's life and his views on identity without losing sight of the dramatic literature which he created.

The sub-sections of this newly created chapter need not follow any codified system with regard to the order in which the playwrights are presented. I have laid out the chapter above based on the order in which this study has examined these playwrights. The author could choose to create a more chronological structure by introducing the playwrights based on the date of their earliest mainstream success. In this case the chapter on contemporary American theatre would begin with Maria Irene Fornes – *Fefu and her Friends* (1977), followed by Marsha Norman – *'night, Mother* (1984), August Wilson – *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), David Henry Hwang – *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Tony Kushner – *Angels in America* (1993). It is important to note that one of the benefits of this alternative method for introducing contemporary American theatre is

that the chapter need not be restricted to playwrights who come from diverse backgrounds. In fact, the chapter *should* also include heterosexual, Caucasian, male playwrights such as David Mamet, Sam Shepard, etc. Sections devoted to these playwrights would follow the same pattern as those discussed above with a focus on their biographies and a discussion of their most significant works in relation to contemporary American theatre.

The alternative method I am proposing is a biography-based approach to theatre textbooks. By framing each section using the biographies of the playwrights, the students will gain a deeper knowledge of the playwright as an individual *and* a clearer understanding of how the playwright's race, sexuality, and/or gender influenced his or her work. In addition, the life of the playwright tells us something about the era in which the playwright lived. With this in mind, the entire textbook could easily be restructured to focus on the biographies of the artists as an episteme, or way of knowing, about both the era in which the playwright wrote and the type(s) of theatre produced during that era. For example, the biography of Shakespeare could be used to illustrate the class structure of sixteenth century England *and* the way class is depicted in Elizabethan theatre, especially through Shakespeare's own works.

The greatest benefit of this new approach to introducing theatre students to contemporary American theatre via the textbook is that the diversity of contemporary American theatre will become abundantly clear regardless of how the chapter is structured. By providing biographical context of the lives of contemporary American playwrights and more in-depth examination of their plays, the importance of diversity in late twentieth and early twenty-first century theatre will reveal itself. In this way, the textbook will continue to acknowledge the important role diversity plays in contemporary American theatre without essentializing the playwright or limiting the reader's understanding of the playwrights and their plays.

As discussed in Chapter One, revised editions of introductory textbooks are often the most financially lucrative aspects of the publishing process for both the publisher and the author. An additional benefit of this new approach to introducing contemporary American theatre in theatre textbooks is that the author has the ability to easily adjust the biography of the playwright based on newly produced work and remove or add a playwright as desired. This is significant for several reasons. First, unlike the current model where a playwright such as Marsha Norman is excluded from the discussion of musical theatre because she has been labeled as a feminist playwright in previous editions, the new model is much more adaptable because it doesn't rely on categorizations of any kind other than the era in which the playwright lived. Second, the author is no longer obligated to include a playwright whose work may be out of fashion simply because he or she is a representative member of a particular identity-based category. If a decade from now a playwright such as David Henry Hwang is rarely produced for whatever reason, the textbook author can remove Hwang from a future edition of the chapter devoted to contemporary American theatre without damaging the student's understanding of both the theatre of this era and the importance of diversity in contemporary theatre. Likewise, if an editor or a particularly influential scholar who is hired to review the textbook insists that a certain playwright should be included in the discussion of contemporary American theatre the author can easily add that playwright or replace one of the existing playwrights because the author is no longer tied to the identity-based sub-sections in the current model.

There is a potential downside to this new approach for theatre textbooks. In the world of textbook publishing space equals money. The changes I'm proposing would likely require more space to discuss each playwright, which would affect the publisher's bottom line, and would do so at the expense of introducing theatre students to other significant playwrights. The current

model of introducing as many playwrights as possible in as little space as possible involves listing playwrights who share certain commonalities. By removing the lists and focusing on the biographies of particular playwrights there will be playwrights who do not receive the attention they deserve. For example, the textbook chapter outlined above leaves out many significant playwrights such as Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, Luis Valdez, Suzan-Lori Parks, Terrence McNally, and many others. As noted above, the biographical sub-sections could easily be swapped out but it still means that many significant playwrights would not be mentioned at all. As pedagogy and textbook publishing evolves in the twenty-first century to include more technology in the classroom, one possible solution to this issue would be to publish this new textbook online. The value of an online textbook with a focus on artist biographies is that the author could create as many sub-sections as necessary which outline the biographies and works of significant playwrights. Instructors could then pick and choose those sub-sections (playwrights) they deem most relevant. In fact, the author could include biographical outlines of the lives and works of a vast array of artists, including designers, actors, producers, etc., in an online format of a theatre textbook structured in this manner. By exploiting the use of online textbooks as a mode of delivery authors can shift the way we talk about the diversity of contemporary American Theatre in general from the works of art produced on stages in New York and across the country to the artists, designers and technicians who are creating that art.

By making these minor changes to the way contemporary American theatre is introduced in theatre textbooks, authors will be able to maintain all of the benefits of the identity-based mode of instruction. The structure is simple for the reader to understand and the chapter can be easily used as a tool by the instructor; it will still introduce the diversity of contemporary theatre to the student and acknowledge the theatrical voices of artists from traditionally

underrepresented backgrounds. In addition, because the playwrights are no longer classified based on identity, the playwrights aren't being essentialized, they are not forced to become representatives of an identity-based category, and the knowledge conveyed in the sub-sections is much more comprehensive. This alternative approach will continue to stress the importance of diversity in contemporary American theatre but it will allow the voice of the playwright to be heard with regards to identity-based categorization. It will also allow the biography of the playwright to inform the readers' understanding of the playwright. Most importantly, it will allow the plays to speak for themselves.

Why is this suggested change in approach to introducing the diversity of contemporary American theatre to undergraduate students important? The shift from an identity-based approach to one more focused on the individual represents a natural progression of our understanding of and approach to diversity in our society. It began with the social movements of the 1960s which pointed to inequalities within our society. These movements spurred the growth of academic disciplines which both acknowledged diversity in our society and celebrated cultural differences. Although it took several decades, theatre textbooks began to acknowledge the diversity of contemporary American theatre in the mid-1990s by categorizing types of theatre based on the identity of the playwright. However, the progression seems to have stalled. The somewhat separatist notion that all playwrights and plays can fit neatly into identity-based categories needs to shift again if we, as a society, are going to move towards true equality where playwrights are judged by their artistic output rather than included in the discussion of contemporary theatre because of their cultural background. It is time to look towards the next step in this progression. This new approach represents an opportunity to engage with the diversity of our society as well as our own students in a more comprehensive manner. In



addition, this new discourse with regards to diversity can move beyond the world of theatre. Do textbook authors in other arts and humanities fields introduce diversity in the same manner as current theatre textbooks? Would these disciplines also benefit from a more individualistic approach? Future studies should investigate the manner in which other disciplines introduce diversity to undergraduate students. By acknowledging the differences in our society as well as focusing on the individual we have the opportunity to encourage the next generation to celebrate the individual and all of the factors (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, cultural upbringing, etc.) which impact their contributions to our society and culture.

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