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Introduction

On the Cultural Politics of Diversity

It is impossible today to assemble a collection like this without at some point engaging the issue of race and ethnicity in contemporary America. Like it or not, cultural diversity has become a flashpoint for American society as we move into the twenty-first century, and many critics would have us believe that it is *the* central social problem facing us at this point in our history.

Thus to pretend to offer a survey of recent multicultural literature either by presenting the plays to readers “objectively,” or by editorially sidestepping the political context which surrounds these dramas would probably seem naive to most people, and even fatuous and reactionary to many others. In short, it’s very difficult as an editor to present these dramas strictly as works of art without connecting that art to the political ramifications in the back of everyone’s mind as they read or see them. “Ars gratia artis” is a mantle only grudgingly draped over the shoulders of playwrights nowadays — if indeed it can exist any longer at all.

The editorial difficulty here is further compounded by the ambiguity of the terminology we would use in addressing the sociopolitical context surrounding these plays. What, in fact, do the terms “multicultural,” “intercultural,” or “multiethnic” mean? How do we accurately distinguish between “ethnicity,” “cultural diversity” or “cultural pluralism”? And who should be singled out as an “ethnic” playwright or excluded from the club? Of course *broad* distinctions readily spring to mind: Lorraine Hansberry is plainly an “ethnic” writer and David Mamet is not. *Ragtime* certainly deals with multicultural issues, at least in part, while *A Chorus Line* does not. But how far does this get us? Any college freshman could observe as much.

Once again, we’re forced to concede that the political debate which has raged in the United States since the nineteen-sixties has blurred the important semantic distinctions for us and infused the discussion at every level. Like shapeshifters, our critical terms dissolve in our hands even as we try to use them to pry deeper into the issues and gain the insight, clarity and perspective we all seek.

Finally, there is the question of motive. Modern communications theory has sensitized all of us — critics and editors, artists, audiences and institutions alike — to the biases inherent in any “editorial” process. Waving the banner of ethnocentrism over this very point, dramatist August Wilson would have *only* African-American theatres produce work by African-American writers; and his views are shared by many in the Hispanic and Asian-American communities towards their own plays which they regard as cultural artifacts. At the same time, it’s impossible to ignore how many artists of color have become disenchanted by Wilson’s claim — artistic director Ricardo Khan, for example, or the playwright Philip Kan Gotanda — feeling that such consignment to some

ethnic camp will result in ghettoizing valuable work that should instead speak to *all* races, especially to the culturally pluralistic society that the United States is fast becoming.

Despite such problems surrounding this anthology, there are some constants we should bear in mind as we approach the plays contained here. Setting aside for the moment the predictable tub-thumping rhetoric of partisans on both the left and the right, we might first observe that no single issue has ever stirred up so much controversy in the history of the American stage as has the current debate over “cultural diversity in the American theatre.” Neither the damage done to the careers of dramatic artists by Joe McCarthy and his supporters, nor the outrageous (and often illegal) antics of groups like the Living Theatre and San Francisco Mime Troupe during the wild and woolly sixties, nor even the current hullabaloo over government patronage of the arts ever produced such widespread and continuing argument at all levels of the art form.

Secondly, one needs to remember that in the field of dramatic writing, some of the most muscular, inventive and significant plays now being written in the United States – both literarily and theatrically considered – are addressing themselves to the issues of race and culture. And this is very unusual in the history of the American stage, that so many gifted playwrights are turning their attention to a single issue. Ethnic writers like Eduardo Machado and Luiz Valdez, David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda, Oyama, August Wilson, and Maria Irene Fornes seem very well established today, and many have already become theatrical household words. Other playwrights who are unaligned with a particular ethnic background have also written plays on ethnic issues for theatres across the country: Emily Mann, Alfred Uhry and David Rabe, to mention but a few.

As an editor I’ve tried to remain sensitive to what I prefer to call the “cultural politics of diversity” surrounding the writers in this book, without taking sides in the debate. I mean by this that I sympathize with writers who deal today with problems of racism or ethnicity, because they must work in a social climate that is politically charged, and at times restrictive. It’s difficult, that is, for a playwright to introduce any one of many ideas about race and ethnicity without feeling the eyes of audiences, critics, other playwrights, etc. trained on their play and conscious of the “social stakes” that are involved.

As an editor, however, it’s not my place to seek to resolve that issue here any more than the writers I’ve selected have sought to do so in any single one of their plays. To fairly present these dramas to readers I’ve tried to select as broad a cross-section as possible, and to further regard each of them as cultural documents in the most general – dare I even say “anthropological” – sense of that word. As a result, I feel the writers in this collection “hold the mirror up to nature”; and I choose to let their plays speak for them, as I sincerely believe they, too, wish to do.

I’ve tried to assemble the present collection in the belief that new American plays dealing with ethnic issues can be a vigorous source of

insight into our culture. By and large the authors included here are also emerging, although one or two may already be familiar to dedicated theatergoers. And it is these new, often marginalized voices on the issues of race and culture that this anthology seeks to capture and publicize.

About the Collection

In choosing the material for this anthology directed towards young actors and audiences, I've tried to focus upon plays that I feel are the most worthwhile in terms of their dramaturgy, scenic potential, and their treatment of issues. I've seen many of them in performance; others I've located in the script collections of producing theatres and playwrights' labs such as New Dramatists in New York, the Audrey Skirball-Kenis Theatre in Southern California, and others. Some scripts have come to me from agents and playwrights whom I've contacted about the needs of the book; and of course the "Plays in Process" series lately published by the Theatre Communications Group has been invaluable because it summarized and highlighted plays of all kinds produced by our nation's professional theatres. But in addition to my own judgment of the artistic quality residing in a particular script, several other criteria have influenced my decisions on whether or not to include a given play in this collection.

My first guideline in the selection process has been that of currency: I've tried to locate scripts written or first produced within the past fifteen years. In fact, most of the plays included here are even more recent. I've done this because I feel that dramas written about the experience of cultural pluralism in the United States are now entering a new stage by displaying significantly different features and concerns than those written between 1950-1980. Prior to the eighties, ethnic playwrights tended to speak primarily to audiences of their own ethnic persuasion, to concentrate heavily upon domestic situations in their plays, and to rely on a realistic production style which has been, of course, a staple of American drama for many decades. Such authors as Lorraine Hansberry, Wakako Yamauchi or Joseph Walker, for example, typify this phase of ethnic writing.

But more recent plays by Suzan Lori-Parks, Migdalia Cruz or Rick Shiomi, for example, are markedly different in their dramaturgy, thematic concerns and scenic potential. These authors boldly attack white mainstream society's interpretation of American history, or grapple with contemporary forms of American pop culture threatening their cultural identities, as they illuminate their particular ethnic concerns. Also, their work demonstrates very eclectic theatrical influences from Shakespeare to Brecht, from multimedia stagings to modern performance art. And it is this more recent work, closer to our own time, that I'm attempting to highlight.

A second important measure in my selection procedure is that of production: each play here has been "tested" in the crucible of public presentation. In most cases, the dramas have had more than one staging,

a process that I believe helps writers to refine their work and editors to validate the quality of what they read. Naturally any editor will have to rely mainly on his or her personal impressions of worth in scripts they peruse; and for each of the plays I've selected, I've rejected ten or twelve others. In doing so, however, I've often found useful the opinions of producers, directors and audiences — those most directly connected with a play's worth in actual performance.

Certainly a third criterion of selection has been a play's suitability for young people. None of the plays represented here were written specifically for young audiences; and by "young" I mean that I've tried to remain sensitive to the needs of theatre students, readers or audiences from middle school through college. I know, for example, that K-12 teachers nationwide have a great need for good, up-to-date writing on themes relating to cultural diversity. Such material is useful in literature and oral interpretation classes, and in forensics or dramatics activities as our schools continue to reflect the increasing cultural pluralism of American society-at-large. I know, too, that theatre producers are strengthening their efforts to bring to the stage works that appeal to more diverse audiences; and plays that can challenge the talents of designers, directors and actors. Finally, as a university professor, I continue to discover more and more benefits from including ethnic material in my curricula, theatre programming and training work. Hence, each of these plays contains a significant number of roles capable of being played by young actors, and especially actors-of-color; and each demonstrates what I feel to be a high quality of writing that is likely to be useful for literary, forensics or theatrical applications with young people.

Finally, a word must be said regarding the umbrella criterion of "ethnic diversity." Readers will note that I've broadly organized these works into "Hispanic," "Asian" and "African-American" categories. This is because many people approaching ethnic writing for the first time seem to understand it only in these general terms. But it should be noted that in each category I've tried to include plays from ethnic subgroups that constitute that broader category. Thus in the section entitled "Plays of Hispanic-American Experience," the reader will find a play dealing with Mexican culture (*The Migrant Farmworker's Son*), Central or South American culture (*Night Train to Bolina*), and Puerto-Rican culture (*Maricela de la Luz Lights the World*). I've tried to follow the same approach in selecting plays for the Asian-American and, to a lesser extent, the African-American categories.

Another more delicate point, however, must be raised with regard to the "ethnic diversity" found in this anthology. Not all these authors are writers-of-color, in the way we customarily understand that term. In fact, two of them are Caucasian playwrights. Certainly lived experience — in terms of gender, religion, race, occupation, etc. — offers many advantages to an author who would write of that subject. But without engaging in a long debate on this issue of whether or not one must have personally experienced ethnic problems in order to write about them, let me defer to

the opinion of the South African playwright Athol Fugard. He points out that we *must* grant a playwright the artistic ability to create characters widely different from his or her own background, or else forget about playing the dramatic game altogether. Shakespeare did not have to be an African in order to create a stunning portrait of white racism in the first act of *Othello*. Nor does David Henry Hwang have to be a Frenchman to write insightfully of European power-broking diplomats in *M. Butterfly*; nor David Rabe a Vietnamese in order to create compelling Asian characters in *Sticks and Bones*. In making my decisions for inclusion, I've tried to take account of the heartbeats more than just the color of an artist's skin.

A Reminder About Intellectual Property

In all the anthologies I edit, I feel compelled to remind readers that the plays in the collection are intended for reading *only*. When it comes to performing them, producing them in public readings, or adapting them in any way via the electronic media for other audiences—educational, amateur, or professional—then permission *must* be obtained and royalties paid to the agent or author.

Perhaps this “caution” needs to be restated in this age of the Internet where so much is available online or otherwise reproducible at little or no charge. Readers must remind themselves that plays — like other unique, cultural artifacts — are not equivalent to the “factoids” we slug through and manipulate by the thousands every day. They are the intellectual property of human beings who have spent many years earning, and who therefore deserve, proper acknowledgment and compensation for producing and distributing them to the public.

Bear in mind that I'm attempting in this book to highlight and promote the work of a handful of uniquely talented and very highly motivated artists whose worth, importance and cultural value in our society is already deeply discounted, frequently ridiculed, and even despised. Their plays are their honest work, their “products.” Pay for them. Credits appear at the end of this volume; call or write for permission. These artists are not unreasonable in what they expect from us.