

American beauty is a film that has many theatrical qualities essay sample

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Sam Mendes has tried hard not to make 'American Beauty' a theatrical piece. He states this when he is interviewed by a reporter from Time magazine. Sam Mendes has only ever worked in theatre and has won a 'Toni' award (an award for theatre). He is very well known for all his work in the theatre, so making a film, for the big screen was quite a big step into the unknown for someone with very little experience with movie-making.

Although Sam Mendes denies making 'American Beauty' a theatrical piece, his background means that some theatrical techniques have been used in the film.

There are many hints that theatrical techniques have been used during the making of 'American Beauty'. Most of them are evident in the film; others are not. The ones that aren't evident in the film are the ones that were used prior to filming. 'American Beauty' was originally written for the stage, not the cinema by its writer, Alan Ball. He had targeted Sam Mendes as the director right from the beginning. Had 'American Beauty' been a theatrical piece, it would not have been as successful as it was on screen, because there are many scenes that would not have had as big an effect as they did in the cinema.

There was the 'bag scene', which would have been difficult to stage. In the film, this scene has quite a big effect because of its beauty. Most people would not have seen this as beautiful, but it's the beauty of its freedom and then the irony of the wind controlling the direction the bag flies in. This scene could not have been staged in theatre, because the beauty of this

scene is that the bag was filmed in its natural environment. On stage, a giant fan could not have created the effect that the force of wind did in the film.

Scenes of Ricky using his camera wouldn't show what he was seeing through it. Theatre wouldn't be able to show what Ricky was seeing from his point of view. On film, this is easily done and shown.

As 'American Beauty' was Sam Mendes' first ever film, he chose some actors who had worked in theatre before, such as Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening. Kevin Spacey has won a 'Toni' award before and Annette Bening has only been nominated for one. Sam Mendes probably wanted such actors and actresses, because he has only ever worked with theatrical actors and actresses. He may have wanted to work with people who had just as much experience as he did in filmmaking.

As with all plays, there needs to be certain amount of time for a rehearsal and improvisation period where the play is rehearsed and improvised from beginning to end. This is what Sam Mendes did with 'American Beauty'. He set aside 2 weeks as a rehearsal and improvisation period, but Sam Mendes admits that he rehearsed for 2 weeks, because of theatre,

'I think theatre experience taught me that we have to have rehearsals,'

There are still slight indications of theatrical techniques that have been used within the film.

One of the main indications of theatre in 'American Beauty' is the use of camera angles. There are many different camera angles that have been used

in the film, but the camera angle that is used the most is the wide-angle shot. The wide-angle shot is similar to the way that an audience in the theatre would see it. This is another theatrical approach. The aim of the use of the wide-angle shot is to focus upon the relationships and reactions of all the characters present in a scene. In the theatre, the audience always see the actors/actresses from a wide-angle. In 'American Beauty', the wide-angle shot was used mostly for the dinner scenes in Lester's house.

Another shot was used along with the wide angle shot, a push-in. the camera pushes into a scene; it pushes the audience into the scene, into the setting. Push-ins are often mistaken to be the same as a zoom-in. A push-in makes the audience feel as if they're part of the film, part of the scene, whereas a zoom-in makes the audience feel as if they're still in their seat, but they're just closing in on the characters. In 'American Beauty', push-ins were used more than zoom-ins or the steady-cam was (except scenes with Ricky). Sam Mendes tried to avoid using zoom-ins on actors. One of the few times a zoom-in was used in 'American Beauty', was when Jane's friend, Angela was cheerleading. During that scene, the audience feels as if they're being pulled into the film, but are still conscious that they're sitting in their seat.

Sam Mendes focuses on actors for a longer time than usual in the film. This is so that a character's reactions can be determined after an event or an occasion.

Few special effects have been used on the characters. Even throughout the film, there is a lack of special effects. The only time that special effects have

been used is on Angela, when rose petals explode from her cheerleading top. In another scene, when Lester's dreaming and are rose petals falling, it seems that special effects have been used, but in fact, it was just a camera, which slows down the frame rate per minute and rose petals are falling at a normal rate.

Another theatrical technique is the fact that the camera is held on the actors for longer time than usual in cinema and Sam Mendes actually admits to doing this,

' I hold a shot for more than five seconds'

Some of the camerawork used in ' American Beauty' is very much like a theatrical technique, because push-ins have been used to draw the audience closer to the action; wide-angle shots have been used which seems as if the audience is sitting in the theatre. There is also the fact that there is a lack of special effects and special effects are hardly ever used in theatre. These are the reasons why the camerawork used in ' American Beauty' seem very theatrical.

Props, scenery and settings are very important factors to ' American Beauty'. ' American Beauty' was a low budget film; and because of that, the settings were dull, as well as simple. The props weren't too bright or colourful, because the audience is supposed to focus on the characters. But, there are spots of brightness (mainly red) such as a bunch of red flowers on the table or a red fridge magnet. The red stands out, because all the other colours are either brown, black, white or dark blue. In ' American Beauty', red is like a

signature for the film; it's what the film is recognised by. Red is associated with the film, especially the red rose petals. It's also a part of the end of the film, when Lester is shot in the head, all the blood splatters onto the white tiled wall. All that red blood stands out, because red is recognition for 'American Beauty'.

In some of the scenes, there aren't very many props in the setting, because the film was made on a low budget and also because Sam Mendes wants the audience to focus on the characters and their facial and bodily expressions. In the theatre, facial and bodily expressions would not have been seen as well as they can on film.

The settings in the film recur in every other scene. The most popular setting is in the front yard in front of Lester's house. Another setting that recurs is the dinner table and there is also Ricky's room, where Ricky films Jane. All these are theatrical techniques, such as the props and settings and the limited use of the environment. To change the background setting in the theatre is difficult and having a variety of scenes costs money. The technique of using recurring settings is also a theatrical technique, because theatres cannot afford time and money to create new settings. But, in a theatre, the audience can tell if the setting is going to change, because the lights on stage die down and one setting moves in while another moves out.

One of the main reasons why the settings and props are limited and simple is because of the low budget. Due to a limited amount of money, Sam Mendes could only use simplistic props and settings and even then, there could only

be 8 or 9 settings. The limitations and the recurred use of the props and settings makes 'American Beauty' seem a theatrical piece.

'American Beauty' doesn't have a lot of dialogue, but there are a lot of narrative and facial expressions, which are greatly evident in the film. There are certain scenes which have no dialogue whatsoever, such as the scene where Ricky comes home from school and sits between his parents on the sofa. There is no dialogue in that scene at all, just the sounds of laughter coming from the TV. But the facial expressions of all the characters speak for themselves. In the non-dialogue scenes, music is normally played. This does occur in theatre some of the time. Music is a sort of a fill-in where there is no dialogue. Music also creates a mood for the scene it's being played in. For theatre, music might play an important part, especially in a place where it's difficult to create a mood through facial expressions, so music adds a mood to make scene feel more realistic. The characters and the relationships between them are what make the film, rather than a series of significant events.

Another theatrical technique which is evident throughout the whole film is the structure of the film. The film, like a play, is divided in 3 acts. Each act is divided by the narration of Kevin Spacey's voice. The first act is the longest and progresses gradually by introducing each main character, their personalities and their lives. It also introduces the storyline. This is what happens in the theatre. The second act is slightly shorter and it has an increased pace. In the second act, the plotline slowly develops and characters' personalities develop along with the plot. The third act is the

shortest and it's the turning point in which the storyline comes to a resolution and an end. The pace to this act is faster still, which ends with a bang (literally!).

Due to the fact that 'American Beauty' is separated into 3 acts, it also makes it seem a theatrical piece. There is also the fact that Sam Mendes stuck firmly to the original text and changed very little about the script, which makes 'American Beauty' seem more theatrical, because it was originally intended for theatre. All the theatrical techniques evident in the film seem as if Sam Mendes intended to mix theatre with cinema, even though he denies this fact.

'American Beauty' would not have been as effective in the theatre as it was in the cinema, for a lot of reasons. The bag scene in the film would have been difficult to stage, because it wouldn't have been in its natural environment, and therefore less effective if it was to be represented as the most beautiful thing in the world by Ricky. It would also have been difficult to stage, because it would have to be absolutely perfect. Plays are staged live in front of an audience, so getting something as difficult as a bag to fly in the way that the director wants it to would be very difficult. Even Sam Mendes himself admits that,

'It took me a long time to film the plastic bag and then I had to get the cut of the scene right.'

This is one of the reasons why 'American Beauty' would not have been suitable as a play and cutting the bag scene out of the film would have made

the scene with Ricky pointless if it's meant to be the most beautiful thing. Any other alternative would have been ineffective, because the most beautiful thing should be something which is happy in its natural environment.

Another scene which would not have had as great an effect in the theatre as it did in the cinema was the scene with Ricky's camcorder, because, in the theatre, the audience would not be able to see what Ricky was seeing through his camcorder.

The rose petal scenes would have to be cut out in theatre, because they wouldn't be able to fall at a slow rate and create a dreamy and relaxed atmosphere like they did in the film.

Sam Mendes probably found it easier to reach a wider audience through cinema, but this may not have been the only reason why he turned 'American Beauty' into a film. He may have turned 'American Beauty' into a film, because he wanted to shock a wider range of people rather than those who just go to the theatre. There are shocking issues raised in the film, which Sam Mendes wanted to address to cinema goers that these issues don't just exist in the past or that some of them actually do exist. Sam Mendes also wants this film to warm the hearts of mainstream audiences, because these audiences are normally underestimated.

Even if 'American Beauty' hadn't been made as a film and had stayed in the theatre, then it would still not have seemed suitable as a theatrical piece, because of the characters, their relationships and their personalities.

Although Sam Mendes denies making 'American Beauty' a theatrical piece, there are still slight indications of theatrical techniques used within the film. The viewer isn't concentrating on these techniques, because they're too engrossed in the film. But if watched carefully, without paying any attention to the film, the theatrical techniques become obvious immediately.

Sam Mendes may have not used theatrical qualities in 'American Beauty' intentionally, because he was acting on past experience from his theatrical background. Most of the theatrical qualities in 'American Beauty' may have been used unintentionally, such as working with actors who have mainly been involved in theatre more than films or rehearsing with a 2 week rehearsal and improvisation period, because he has so much experience with theatre. Other theatrical techniques might have been used deliberately, such as changing very little to the script of 'American Beauty', even though he denies mixing movie with theatre.

Sam Mendes was very successful in his directing when it came to making the film. The film won many awards and great acclaim. But how successful was he in hiding the theatrical approaches used in the film? Not very successful, otherwise the theatrical wouldn't be so obvious within the film, such as using wide-angle shots and using a limited selection of props and settings, too.

Looking at 'American Beauty' from a subjective point of view, it seems as if Sam Mendes used theatrical techniques deliberately in the film, because he didn't make any changes to the original script, he used actors who had worked in theatre, he used 3 separate 'Acts', and he used wide-angle shots

and push-ins. Although there are other techniques, which seem as if Sam Mendes didn't intentionally use (such as the 2 week rehearsal period may not have been used intentionally, because Sam Mendes was acting on his past experience), it still doesn't rule out the fact that they could have been used intentionally, because this opinion is coming from a subjective point of view. Sam Mendes also might have used theatrical techniques in 'American Beauty', because he didn't want to seem (to film critics) that he was trying hard to attract the mainstream audience of cinema-goers.

From an objective point of view, Sam Mendes didn't intentionally use theatrical techniques, mainly because he may have wanted to succeed as a first time director and please the mainstream audience with a low budget film which is driven by the characters and their relationships, not special effects and certain events.

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