

# The pervasive theme of disillusionment in post-world war ii theater



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The landscape of American theater changed after World War II: playwrights felt the need to experiment with both content and style in order to best express their dissatisfaction with contemporary society. Unlike their modernist forbears, the post-World War II American playwrights sought to enliven the theater with experimental styles and types of characters that had not been previously represented on the stage. August Wilson, for example, wrote exclusively about the African-American experience, and ensured that many of his plays had entirely African-American casts. In the same vein, Mart Crowley explored themes of identity and self-hate in the gay community in his 1968 play *The Boys in the Band*. Edward Albee, meanwhile, ends *The Zoo Story* (1959) with a shocking—and shockingly bloody—stabbing. While these playwrights were characterized by originality and innovation, there are common, unifying themes that run through the plays of this era. Most notably, Lanford Wilson’s *Lemon Sky*, David Rabe’s *Streamers*, and Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* convey a sense of alienation and disillusionment through separate, though equally revolutionary, methods.

Postmodernism—that hard-to-define and oftentimes harder to understand artistic movement—became popular around the same time. The word “postmodern” might be the most succinct aspect of the movement: thematically, at least, postmodernists built directly on modernism, which was most saliently concerned with alienation from the contemporary world (Saleem, 2014). The primary distinction between the two groups, then, is that postmodernists were more willing to play with form and execution. Whereas modernist playwrights—like Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, and Tennessee Williams—wrote linear narratives about heterosexual white

people, postmodernists more obviously broke traditional theatrical conventions. They accomplished this through the use of, among other things, “ irony, parody, sampling, mixing ‘ high’ and ‘ low’ (popular) cultural sources, horizontal vs. vertical analysis, and mixing historical and cultural sources and styles” (Irving, 2013). Infamously difficult to define, postmodernism is “ associated with an awareness of societal and cultural transitions after World War II and the rise of mass-mediated consumerist popular culture in the 1960s-1970s,” and all three of these plays—Lemon Sky, Streamers, and Top Girls—fall under this category (Irving, 2013).

These three plays, in fact, demonstrate the versatility of postmodernism. Lemon Sky rejects the traditional Aristotelian plot structure, which “ presupposes that action entirely occurs in a linear time within a particular time segment which has a beginning and end” (Krijanskaia, 2008). The characters in the play—some of whom are alive, some of whom are dead—exist in an ambiguous purgatory, reenacting events from ten years prior. This unreal world that Wilson offers falls perfectly in line with Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation self; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Lyotard, 1979).

Streamers, meanwhile, has a more corporeal view of the unrepresentable: blood. Rabe uses extreme, graphic violence—something rare to the theater when he first started writing—for the same reason that Wilson uses non-linearity: to present the unrepresentable, thereby stirring the audience into analysis. Rabe conveys his sense of disillusionment and frustration with contemporaneous societal structures by ending his traditionally-constructed play with a wholly unconventional blood bath that lasts an uncomfortably long length of time. According to Rabe, “ I was in fact taking the form and blowing it up. Two people are headed for a collision [...] and when they actually collide, violence erupts between them. The well-made play would end things there. But in Streamers this sergeant who has no idea what’s been going on[...] just happens by, and the violence swallows him up too [...] The violence has its own life once it’s loose” (Morphos, 2005). Finally, *Top Girls* might be the most overtly postmodern of the three. Sanja Bahun-Radunović writes that “ Postmodern theater approaches the revision of the concept of history through the questioning of teleological stories and linear patterns” (Bahun-Radunović, 2008). The entire first scene of *Top Girls* is historic revision: Marlene, the protagonist, hosts a dinner party for real and fictional women across centuries who have failed to attract mass recognition—such as Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, and Isabella Bird—telling the audience that her valuation of historical figures differs from the norm.

The postmodern construction of *Lemon Sky*—a play where the characters recreate events from twelve years in the past—is equally as important as its content. Indeed, they go hand in hand, and *Lemon Sky* is not experimentalism for the sake of experimentalism. Wilson’s fourth-wall

breaking narrative style mirrors the fractured nature of memory. It is almost as if his characters are still processing the events, working out what happened in real time. Significantly, Alan's first lines are directed at the audience, and suggest that he still has not come to terms with the way his father treated him: " I've been trying to tell this story, to get it down, for a long time, for a number of years, seven years at least—closer to ten" (Wilson, 1970). These lines also set the tone for the rest of the play, which is concerned more with emotional truth than fact-driven accuracy. For example, when Carol asks if Doug denied flirting with Penny, Alan says, " As best I recall" (Wilson, 1970). Because of *Lemon Sky's* style, the characters—not the plot—become the primary focus of the play.

That is not to say the plot is unimportant or standard. On the contrary, the postmodern aspects of *Lemon Sky* reinforce the plot's themes and give even more weight to the action. Carol's desperate struggle for her pills in act three, for example, is made all the more dramatic because the audience already knows she dies of a drug overdose. Going further, Alan's observations on identity and abandonment—" There is no such thing as a Native Californian," he says in act three—are given extra significance, because they have been festering for twelve years (Wilson, 1970). At the center of *Lemon Sky*, though, is an acute sense of disillusionment: when he arrives at his father's house as a seventeen year-old, Alan believes the cliché that California represents fresh starts; as a twenty-nine year-old, Alan recognizes the fact that real life is messy, and, ultimately, disappointing.

Part of this disillusionment derives from a misconception about the nature of the real world: he thought that his father would provide a welcoming

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household, but instead Alan ends the play alienated and isolated, ostracized from his family because of his homosexuality. Again, form meets content: homosexuality—still a contentious issue in 1960s America that was only beginning to be explored explicitly in the arts—is another example of presenting the unrepresentable. This same sense of alienation and isolation is present throughout the entirety of *Streamers*. Rabe's characters are mentally and geographically distanced from their families and friends, training for the Vietnam war in a Virginia army base. As a result, Carlyle, for example, is always on edge, stressed out and angry about defending a country that sees him—an African-American man—as a second-class citizen. This disconnection most saliently manifests itself, however, in a generational divide: Cokes and Rooney—older soldiers—romanticize the war, rhapsodizing about the former's conquests in Korea; the younger soldiers, however, are apprehensive about Vietnam, and would rather stay home. In this regard, Rabe is showing how the younger generation feels disconnected—and alienated from—the views of the older generation. In an interview with *BOMB Magazine*, Rabe said *Streamers* is about “the moral crises individuals encountered when faced with power struggles that were beyond their control, and often beyond their understanding” (Morphos, 2005). The younger soldiers feel like they were thrust into the war without consent or protection. On a metaphorical level, they resemble O'Flannigan, the parachuter who “went into the ground like a knife” after he “reache[d] up to two fistfuls of air, the chute twenty feet above him” (Rabe, 1979). The young soldiers have become disillusioned with the well-advertised notion that war is a heroic and patriotic act.

Rabe also uses Streamers to address issues of race and sexuality, sometimes with just one singular action. In act two, Richie, a white man, lifts “ his foot onto the bed; it touches, presses, Carlyle’s foot” (Rabe, 1979). This interracial, homosexually charged action was revolutionary in the contemporaneous theatrical landscape. Carlyle and Richie are frustrated with the restricting—and oftentimes constricting—societal expectations. This frustration manifests in extreme violence: Carlyle stabs both Billy and Rooney, letting their blood run out across the stage. This intense burst of violence would have shocked the audience and provoked a visceral reaction. Rabe uses violence to show how alienation—and, more specifically, the societal structures that cause this alienation—can have tangible, real world consequences, driving a person to revert to an animalistic state. He writes, “ violence is never conceptually or formally contained and limited to its appropriate, designated targets. In other words it is not rational. It is not mechanical” (Rabe, 1979).

Top Girls, meanwhile, looks at the feminist movement through a postmodern lens, showing the audience why they should be skeptical of the efficacy of a brand of feminism that encourages women to imitate men in the workforce. Further, Top Girls is a testament to how the condition of being a woman can still be isolating and alienating even in an ostensibly progressive society. According to Bahun-Radunović, “ The experimental strategies most often deployed to [a postmodern] end include the intertextual inclusion of archival and quasi-archival material; the introduction of long-term, supra-historical patterns which subtend and subvert the storyline; the presentation of historical events as fragmented, compressed, and disjunctive units” (Bahun-

Radunović, 2008). The surreal dinner party—featuring ostensibly empowered women from history who were able to succeed in an oppressively patriarchal society—sets the tone for the entire play. Marlene views these women as role models, but they could just as easily be viewed as cautionary tales, since each of them suffered violent tragedies. The dinner party guests were all wildly successful in their lifetimes—Marlene just received a promotion, Pope Joan became the first female pope, and Isabella Bird authored several books, for example—but were still, ultimately, forgotten and unrewarded. The key link between these characters is not that they have all seen success, but the fact that they all conformed to the patriarchy in order to achieve those successes: for example, Marlene mimics the clipped, profanity-laden style of speech stereotypical to high-power businessmen; Pope Joan dressed up as a man for the most significant portion of her life! The tragic fates of these characters suggest that feminism should strive toward the equality of the sexes, not an approximation of the male condition. Marlene is ultimately unhappy and alienated because she had to renounce her femininity in order to succeed.

The first act blatantly establishes the thesis of the play: women should not—and cannot—deny biology by parroting the way men operate in the workforce, thereby sacrificing their femininity in process. The final act of *Top Girls* injects politics into the narrative, displaying Marlene as a narcissistic Thatcherite who is out of touch with the working class. Churchill's play complicates the notion that all powerful women are representative successes of the feminist movement. Indeed, *Top Girls* functions as a mirror, displaying all the problems of second-wave feminism, which many people thought only



served to benefit affluent, caucasian women (Daniels, 2014). Feminism is billed as a welcoming, inclusive movement, but Churchill shows how it can function as the opposite, as a cannibalistic, overly competitive mindset. Marlene treats women like opponents, not allies. The final word of the play—spoken by a young, working class woman—summarizes the effect of the world Marlene has created: “ Frightening” (Churchill, 1982).

The best post-World War II American playwrights had singular voices and visions, representing action on the stage in distinct ways: Wilson uses an overtly postmodern sensibility to show how his characters have not come to terms with their emotions; Rabe uses violence to show how bottled up frustration can have tangible consequences; Churchill’s female-heavy cast shows why the feminist movement needs to be grounded in equality, not competition. Despite these stylistic differences, all three of these plays embody the disillusionment and alienation that playwrights felt characterized the second half of the twentieth century.