

Technology and the Playwright

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Any literary or artistic enterprise that hopes to reflect or address contemporary society and its individuals must confront the influential force of technology, the application of science for practical ends. In theatre, technology has the potential to be both message and medium: a theme for dramatic treatment and a component of the presentation. A dramatist today has access to complex computerized lighting equipment with vivid effects, machinery that allows a truly kinetic playing space, relatively inexpensive video imaging, sophisticated electronic sound capability, and a variety of new construction materials and techniques. But how have contemporary playwrights responded to these new staging resources?

The tension in theatre between technology and literature has a long history, anticipated as early as *The Poetics* where Aristotle relegates spectacle to last place among the parts of tragedy because its powers of producing a tragic response lie beyond the control of the poet. Possibly the most famous manifestation of this debate was the struggle between the Jacobean playwright Ben Jonson and the deviser of court spectacles, Inigo Jones. The argument continues today with complaints about the degree to which commercial production, particularly musical theatre, has succumbed to a taste for expensive high-tech gadgetry in lieu of substantive writing.

Modern theatre practitioners do have a fascination for technology-witness publications like *Theatre Design and Technology* or *Theatre Crafts International*, the variety of producing organizations devoted to experimenting with emerging technology, and the frequency of spectacular staging effects in expensively produced commercial musicals. However, much of the creative technology in today's theatre is applied to restaging already completed scripts, re-envisioning productions with resources not available when the plays were written. For example, Mark Reaney, in 1995 at the University of Kansas, restaged Elmer Rice's 1923 expressionist play *The Adding Machine* with the audience, wearing polarized glasses, viewing live actors within a computer-generated "virtual reality" (Reaney). The New York based Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, in 2000, integrated traditional stage-bound techniques with the World Wide Web, in an adap-

tation of Alfred Jarry's 1898 work, *King Ubu* that combined live actors in a performance space with actors projected by means of video-conferencing, and "Digital Puppets" or "Distance Puppets" created by projecting digital or video images onto live actors dressed in costumes that provide a neutral surface for projected images.

With only a few exceptions, however, contemporary playwrights, apart from highly commercialized musicals, make little or no use of available technology. Even plays about science such as Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* or Tina Landau's *Space* seem to eschew any reliance on technology in their staging. Those writers who do utilize technology in their scripts often follow the lead of early twentieth-century expressionist playwrights Karel Capek and Georg Kaiser in using technical resources to demonstrate the negative impact of industrialization on modern society. What is the cause of the playwrights' apparent imperviousness to technically demanding stage effects?

Arnold Aronson, in a paper presented at the symposium, "Theatre – Space – Technology," in Helsinki, Finland in 1996, argued: "While commercial mainstream theatre may be in the midst of a modern era of spectacle, there is scant evidence that it is contributing in any tangible way to the development of drama" (Aronson 188). Aronson questioned the impact of technology on dramatic writing, contending that while playwrights may exploit new technology, particularly in periods of theatrical change, dramatic literature alters only in response to changes in cultural values. New technology may contribute to popular entertainment, but this affects only the surface, not the substance of experience. Technology may have an impact on drama, but indirectly: "Theatre—in fact, art in general—is shaped not by specific technological developments, but through transformations in consciousness and modes of perception which may, however, be significantly affected by technology" (192).

Aronson's argument is filled with biases toward a traditional aesthetic. "What is the point," he asked, "of trying to recreate 'virtual' imagery on a real, three dimensional stage?" (193). He measured influence by the creation of "new forms" of "dramatic literature" and rebutted an extreme antithetical position of his own manufacture, implied but never explicitly stated: "technology alone produces new forms of dramatic literature." Putting aside the question of the historical accuracy of his assessment, Aronson's thesis that technology is the proverbial egg rather than the chicken also begs the question, "Why does drama not respond to emerging technologies?" Are the causes endemic to theatre or accountable to specific conditions that can be changed?

Five factors seem to influence the limited impact of stage technology on the contemporary script: economic constraints, technophobia, the empowerment of Poor Theatre, traditions for educating playwrights, and the postmodern reformulation of "text." Some writers, as we shall see, either absorb or evade these factors, and demonstrate the possibility of a contemporary drama that embraces technology in its staging and conceptualization.

Economic Constraints

The high cost of some technology restricts its application in drama. For example, the impressionistic unit set used for the New York and London productions of Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* resulted when the Arizona Theatre Company, staging the play's first preview, was too financially strapped to use the originally conceived video screens projecting images of military machinery and scenes of destruction (*Theatre Crafts* 23, Oct. 1989, 20).

The Chelsea Center, which operated between 1965 and 1986, was, with The Wooster Group, one of America's most innovative theatres in using film and video in live performance, but in 1977 The Chelsea was forced by severe financial straits to revert to story theatre simplicity in its staging, a conversion to Poor Theatre demanded by economic necessity!

After financial difficulties that ensued from his American production of *Eisenstein on the Beach* in 1976, performance artist Robert Wilson developed most of his work in venues abroad, where he enjoyed the sponsorship of state supported theatres. Wilson estimated that the three performances of *CIVIL warS* for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics would require two and a half million dollars apart from performers' salaries, a figure that subsequently proved inadequate (Shyer 107). Even for someone operating with the level of support that Wilson enjoys, financial constraints limit the technical resources available to him. Tom Kamm, who assisted in the design of Wilson's projects from 1981 through *CIVIL warS*, reports that for Act II of *CIVIL warS*, "originally there was going to be a mechanical escalator which people could actually ride, then we devised a system of mechanical shutters that looked like an escalator, then a film of an escalator, and finally it was cut altogether" (qtd. in Shyer 173).

Companies that undertake technically demanding plays pay the price. Craig Lucas's video dependent *God's Heart*, as Trinity Rep artistic director Oskar Eustis noted, was the most expensive show of his season "by far" (qtd. in Istel 58).

The cost of elaborate technical requirements may make a new play unattractive to producers, a risk that most unestablished playwrights avoid.

Technophobia

The suspicion of technology, and to a lesser extent, science, constituted one of the major intellectual currents of the twentieth century and dominates the work of most contemporary playwrights who address the issue of the place of technology in today's culture. The source of anxiety changes as the technology develops. Worry about the impact of industrialization on the individual and on moral values, which had its early expression in the work of Victorian writers such as John Ruskin, was a dominant theme of expressionism between world wars. Fear about the consequences of atomic energy followed the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and broadened into a reaction against the perceived co-opting of much scientific development by the military-industrial complex. Science, purportedly espousing a positivist methodology that rejected any value

judgments was characterized as the antithesis of moral value. In the last several decades the technology associated with the electronic media, particularly film and television, has precipitated a similar reaction at odds with the dominant popularity of mass media. A series of intellectuals including Oswald Spengler, Thorstein Veblen, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, and Doris Lessing, among others, questioned the preeminence of technology in twentieth-century culture. Kirkpatrick Sale, in his *Rebels Against the Future: Lessons for the Computer Age*, describes those who feel highly threatened by modern technology as Techno-Luddites or Neo-Luddites, named after the early nineteenth-century machine bashers in England. The Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, who was convicted in the United States for sending murderous letter bombs, stated this anxiety about the destructive power of technology in his 1995 Manifesto, widely circulated after appearing in *The Washington Post* on September 19, 1995.

Feminist suspicion of technology as an instrument of male domination also contributes to some playwrights' hostile attitude. Juliet Webster in *Shaping Women's Work: Gender, Employment and Information Technology*, states that technologies, shaped by male power, embody patriarchal values and have become intimately related to masculine culture (24). Mark J. Brosnan, in his 1998 *Technophobia: The Psychological Impact of Information Technology*, documents studies that discover a correlation between gender and computerphobia, concluding that these links are largely the result of educational biases and acculturation. He observes, however, that, with the exclusion of women, the second industrial revolution is beginning to look very much like the first (170). Brosnan points out that technophobia may be pathologized as a deficiency in need of remediation or acknowledged as a legitimate and rational reaction to an imposing technology (173).

Poor Theatre

Jerzy Grotowski, the highly influential director of the Polish Laboratory Theatre from 1959 until 1976, was an outspoken antagonist to the incorporation of increased technology in the theatre. Grotowski, in an article published in Polish in 1965 and in English in 1967, articulated a contrast between a "Rich Theatre," dominated by lavish staging devices, and an actor-centered "Poor Theatre," stripped of most modern scenic, lighting, costume, and sound resources:

By multiplying assimilated elements, the Rich Theatre tries to escape the impasse presented by movies and television. Since film and TV excel in the area of mechanical functions (montage, instantaneous change of place, etc.), the Rich Theatre countered with a blatantly compensatory call for "total theatre." The integration of borrowed mechanisms (movie screens onstage, for example) means a sophisticated technical plant, permitting great mobility and dynamism. [...] No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical re-

sources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. (19)

With Poor Theatre, Grotowski advocates a niche that justifies the continuation of theatre as a unique art form:

The theatre must recognize its own limitations. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique. [...] There is only one element of which film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism. (41)

The playwright holds no more central position in Grotowski's theatre than in the theatre of spectacle. Only the actor and the audience are essential to this Poor Theatre. Grotowski notes that in the evolution of theatre, the text was one of the last elements added (32). Although his productions at the Polish Laboratory Theatre were based on scripts, he approached the texts as vehicles for allowing actors to transcend themselves and discover what is hidden.

Peter Brook was the best known of directors to come under the influence of Grotowski, who became the guru of alternative theatre, but Grotowski provided theoretical legitimacy to late twentieth-century resistance to theatre's developing technology.

The Education of Playwrights

Does anything in the education of playwrights explain the de-emphasis of theatre technology? Certainly the route of development taken by dramatists varies tremendously, but a large proportion emerges from formal playwriting offerings in the nation's universities. Students bring already developed attitudes to these programs, and the impact of training varies, but the climate of ideas in these courses may give clues concerning prevalent attitudes toward theatre technology. Given the difficulty of systematically surveying playwriting instruction, playwriting texts may offer some insight into course content and prevalent attitudes.

Playwriting books, regardless of their level of sophistication, universally avoid discussing technological resources available to the playwright. Indeed, most ignore issues of setting or staging altogether. Bernard Grebanier, in his classic 1961 text, *Playwriting*, perhaps most explicitly expresses contempt for staging resources when he cautions, "the temptation has been to succumb to the mechanical resources of the theatre, with a consequent impoverishment of the lines themselves" (302).

Sam Smiley in his 1971 text, *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*, comes nearest to a consideration of physical staging because he adopts Aristotle's six-part

division of drama with the consequent need to consider "spectacle," which he defines simply as "the representation of a play"(221). While he encourages the novice playwright to visualize set, lighting, and costume, his discussion focuses largely on visual metaphors that "stimulate the imagination" (208), rather than on any way in which staging resources can be incorporated into the play's structure.

Most playwriting texts demonstrate at least vestiges of Aristotle's taxonomy, but only Smiley goes beyond discussion of plot, character, theme, and language. All privilege verbal language to the extent of virtually ignoring any other means of communication. Grebanier, for example, transmutes music and spectacle into a chapter on "Other Techniques" that devolves into a summary of the history of theatre architecture and theatrical "isms." William Packard, in the 1987 *The Art of the Playwright*, consigns all of two pages to design elements and only in a chapter devoted to production *after the completion of the script*.

Playwriting courses, per se, are not the only exposure that students receive in programs of study. Several American playwriting teachers replied to my query about the place of technology in their instruction. Mark Bly, who heads the graduate playwriting program at Yale, requires his playwriting students to take design courses and reports that all would employ more complex stage effects, except for budget restraints. More typical is the experience of Louis Catron, who taught playwriting at the College of William and Mary, and authored several playwriting texts. Catron indicates that for rudimentary instruction, time is not adequate to move beyond issues of plot, characterization, and dialogue writing. Like Catron, Roger Hall, the author of the popular *Writing Your First Play*, teaches in an undergraduate program at James Madison University and believes that he, like other beginning playwriting instructors, is concerned primarily with basic and traditional dramatic writing elements. He thinks that work using an array of technical devices is "idiosyncratic," the kind of thing that writers might develop after learning the basics, "more a product of production than writing" (Hall 7/10/02).

Postmodern Reformulation of the Idea of Text

The activities of contemporary performance artists call into question traditional concepts of a text as an independent, free-standing entity separable from its staging. A number of such artists, principally Robert Wilson, George Coates, working on the West Coast, and Canadian Robert Lepage have developed a new technology based concept of "script" that dethrones the conventional pre-eminence of the spoken word.

Even though the work of each has a distinct "look," all disdain the traditional verbally based performance. Wilson's work is the most widely known of the three and may be taken as representative of a "technoscript." No technical aspect of Wilson's productions can be considered gratuitous because the visual effect is what the production is about, its *raison d'être*. Wilson's technically de-

manding productions defy traditional categorization, bridging dance, theatre, opera, and multi-media installations, so he often describes them simply as “operas,” i.e. works.

In spite of his evocation of spectacle, Wilson also shares the anti-scientific bias of many playwrights. His best-known work, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) is something of a modern *Dr. Faustus* with Einstein as the scholar whose hunger for knowledge leads not just to his own but potentially to the destruction of everyone.

In the early years of his work, up to *Einstein*, Wilson relied largely on volunteer performers and technicians; so productions were characterized more by technical invention than sophistication. Wilson used flown units with standard rigging procedures, and otherwise used fairly conventional construction methods. For instance, Wilson wanted giant cat legs to walk across the stage near the end of *The King of Spain* (1969) so he used an overhead catwalk and eight operators. Laurence Shyer described the highly spectacular *CIVIL warS* as “a kind of apotheosis of nineteenth-century stagecraft with all its flying machines, traps, scrimms, artificial mists, fire and water effects and engines of transformation” (170).

Wilson relies heavily on sound effects and has had a particularly productive working relationship with German sound designer Hans-Peter Kuhn. Kuhn uses computerized digital-audio samplers and sequencers both to produce bizarre noises and to distort the actors’ voices. By means of playback and looping, Kuhn draws out speech or juxtaposes live speech against its recorded double, generating counterpoint and dialogue from a single voice. Body mikes are standard in Wilson’s productions, but the voice of an actor speaking on stage may seem to move from place to place in the auditorium or may disintegrate into an abstract sound or noise. *The Golden Windows*, produced for the municipal theatre of Munich in 1982, used a “floating sound collage” that spatially deployed its fragmented text throughout the theatre space (Rockwell 28). The effect of Wilson’s deconstruction of the voice is to disassociate the conventional tie between voice and character.

Wilson, who tried unsuccessfully to have one of his productions copyrighted as a “visual book,” has a complex set of interactions with the notion of a text. In spite of his productions’ reliance on elaborate visual symbols, often supported by high technology, they still have texts, which Wilson occasionally publishes. These pastiches, rewritten from a rich variety of sources, often interact with a text-based sound track that uses wordplay, word fragments, choral effects, and scrambled syntax to reconfigure words into sound poems. The published texts demand a variety of typographical and visual innovations to communicate the way in which the word interacts with Wilson’s visual and aural symbols. The entire notion of text broadens to encompass more than traditional typography.

Wilson’s *Deafman Gance*, which premiered at the University of Iowa in 1970, was inspired by his encounter with a deaf-mute child. In an effort to focus on visual communication, the production used no words. Wilson’s initial

“scripts” consisted largely of stage directions. Words were as likely to appear as graphic images on the scenery as in published editions of the productions. However, beginning with *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in 1974, Wilson began writing something more recognizable as a script, albeit still deconstructing language, using a pastiche from a variety of sources: found language, bits of overheard conversation, dialogue taken from the media, snatches lifted from literary works. Arthur Holmberg suggests that Wilson was now influenced by an autistic savant, Christopher Knowles, “who plays with language like a jigsaw puzzle, arranging and rearranging the pieces into unexpected patters and patterns according to sounds, visual architecture, and mathematical formulas” (Holmberg, 9). Wilson and Knowles co-authored several scripts from 1974 and Wilson did a number by himself such as *I Was Sitting On My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating* (1977), *Death Destruction and Detroit* (1979), *Edison* (1979). Beginning in 1984, Wilson began working with the German playwright Heiner Müller, who provided a more literary based text.

Wilson’s productions, to some extent, intentionally disjoin text and spectacle:

Usually in theatre the visual repeats the verbal. The visual takes second place to language. I don’t think that way. For me the visual is not an afterthought, not an illustration of the text. It has equal importance. If it tells the same story as the words, why look? The visual must be so compelling that a deaf man would sit through the performance fascinated. Once in a while I let the visual align with the verbal, but usually not. Most directors begin by analyzing a text, and the visual follows from that interpretation. This naive use of the visual code bores me. I always start with a visual form. (qtd. in Holmberg 53)

For Wilson, the spectacle and the text are identical, inseparable. “My texts are not meant to tell a story, they are constructed like actual musical scores. All the gestures of the characters are numbered, all the rhythms of the lights and of the actions are calculated to the second, as in a score in which light, sound, and action converge” (qtd. in Quadri 36).

If Wilson’s work is highly visual but relatively low-tech, the work of George Coates is technically much more complex, and without the elephantine pacing of Wilson, bombards the audience with a richer array of visual images. Coates set out to reject playwright-oriented theatre, Aristotelian notions, and character centered work. He evolves his productions, which are better described as musical theatre spectacles than plays, from long rehearsal periods, beginning with only a vague notion of themes to be explored and without a text or musical score.

Coates’s first major production, *Blake*, titled for the address of the theatre, was presented in 1977. Early work was built around transformation exercises using props and the athleticism of performers. Only gradually did he discover ways to technically embellish his productions, but the effect was cumulative. Once developed, a particular piece of stage machinery was likely to reappear in

subsequent productions. The very existence of a technical resource stimulated discovery of its uses more than the creation of technical solutions for thematic or script problems. In some cases, the accidental discovery of a piece of equipment would lead to its use in productions; the case, for example, of a large gyroscope that appeared in the eighties.

For *The Way of How* (1981) and *Are/Are* (1982), composer Paul Dresher brought a newly developed tape processing system to the company. This four-channel recorder with three playback heads located at various points allowed Dresher to record loops at various durations, and then lay down subsequent tracks on top of the first, either pre-recorded or live. Musicians or speakers could thus build upon the sound of their own musical or vocal instruments, creating a layered effect.

This begged the question of what was being said aside from the technology, what substantive content Coates's production offered. Reviewing *The Way of How*, John Howell hit a recurring note among reviewers of Coates's subsequent work when he complained that Coates "flirts with meaning but settles for effects" (Howell). His productions are more sensory than conceptual. Dialogue for *Are/Are* included stream of consciousness mumbling, nonsensical rejoinders, and patter songs built on lists.

Seehear (1983) was the motivation for the creation of a staging device that became one of Coates's hallmarks for the next decade, a large shuttered blind that could open to reveal action upstage of it or close to provide a projection surface, working somewhat like a stage scrim (Gordy 134-35). He was also fascinated by the use of gravity boots, a device that enabled an actor seemingly to walk on the ceiling. With *The Doing Knot* (1985) he first used video-beam and Panni projectors. In *Rare Area* (1985) Coates moved actors inexplicably through space with the use of a "high tech" bungee cord. This production also used 16 mm film loops scratched by hand to create shimmering, wriggling lights on an actress's body.

In May 1991 Coates staged *Invisible Site* for a SIGGRAPH (Special Interest Group for GRAPHics) computer conference, a trade show that attracted 30,000 computer experts. Ultimately nineteen computer companies donated support for this production, including equipment (Gordy 134-35). Coates, who up to this time had made relatively little use of computer technology, now began to rely heavily on computer-generated material. Coates's web page note for his production of *20/20*, which opened in 1997, states:

Over the past several years I have worked to develop a stagecraft that enables live performers to inhabit illusionary 3-dimensional stage sets. The audience wears polarized glasses that allow stereographic projected stage imagery to create illusions of volumetric space. These projected 'soft sets' require special semi-transparent screens and lighting and the projected imagery is scaled to fit the performers' actions serving as a theatrical infrastructure that supports all forms of multi-

media; scrolling text, data animations, and film.
(www.georgecoates.org)

Coates has continued to experiment in his San Francisco theatre, most recently using web-based interactive devices.

Like Coates, Robert Lepage's experiments with techno-based staging innovations is enhanced by having his own facility. His Ex Machina company, in 1997, in a former fire station in Quebec City, opened "La Caserne," which included a recording and film studio, multi-media facilities, and a black box theatre.

Actor and director Lepage evolved, during the 1980s, a technology-based production style that attracted considerable international attention. In 1994 he formed the Ex Machina company, devoted to exploring a variety of staging innovations. Lepage's productions are collaborative and acknowledge no playwright, his programs crediting him for "concept and staging." Significantly, his 1999 production of *Zulu Time* credited a "Scientific Consultant."

One of the appeals of media for Lepage is its ability to allow him to cope with a larger playing space. "How do you maintain a sense of intimacy with a thousand people? You have to rely on technology to magnify you, to change the scale on which you work" (Charest 107).

Lepage describes his work as image-based and to the extent that his productions use language, they develop visual images out of a text. For example, Lepage explained how he used a "sybillants identifier" to analyze *Hamlet* speeches when preparing for his 1997 one man show *Elsinore*. The analysis led him to explore snake imagery and reflect on the way that modern technology can lead to new discoveries in a text (Eyre).

These three artists, while developing technology-oriented productions, found the traditional role of the playwright too restrictive and abandoned logocentric texts, fusing the roles of director and playwright into one.

Playwrights Who Do Incorporate Technology

Some playwrights have discovered ways to integrate technology into the structure of their plays. At the bargain basement level, Emily Mann, in several plays, including her Obie-winning *Still Life* (1980), *Execution of Justice* (1986), and *Greensboro* (1996), makes integral use of slide projections. Terry Johnson's *Hysteria* (1983), a farcical sendup of Freudianism, requires that the setting dissolve in Dalisque fashion and then return to its normal appearance after fifteen minutes.

Another group of plays, like Heathcote Williams's 1970 *AC/DC*, develops themes involving the disruptive influence of the media itself, and not surprisingly many incorporate their subject matter into the staging.

Howard Brenton's play *H.I.D. (Hess Is Dead)*, which explores the power of media to shape our perception of truth, is one of the most innovative experiments at integrating video into live performance. Throughout his career Bren-

ton has repeatedly experimented with new stage technologies. One of his earliest plays, *Scott of the Antarctic* (1971) was staged on an ice skating rink. *H.I.D.* produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1989, revolves around the attempts of a reporter, Larry Palmer, to unravel the details of the 1987 death of the Nazi Rudolf Hess at Spandau prison. Palmer visits Charity Luber, the widow of the chief investigator of a commission established to investigate Hess's purported suicide. Charity is the chief proponent of a conspiracy theory and offers videotapes, supposedly made by Istvan Luber, her husband, that reveal, in an enigmatic fashion, details of the investigation. The three academics who constitute the investigative committee have all died under suspicious circumstances, or as Charity characterizes it, "They went into the walls" (Brenton 25) – which, as we shall see, proves to be literally true in this production.

Brenton's script calls for environmental staging that mixes actors and audience in a tapestry-surrounded room that evokes a late seventeenth-century palace:

The audience should then 'sit about' in the room, in irregular groups. Between the chairs are television monitors on trolleys, which the audience can move for their own convenience. A central VTR machine, upon which the performers sometimes play video tapes, is also on a mobile trolley. There should be a sense that the whole space is 'bugged,' tense with multiple recording devices, audio and visual. (1)

Central to *H.I.D.* are five prerecorded video tapes, some presumably copied from security cameras, others made by Charity's husband, but we learn that Charity has been a television producer, so the tapes could possibly have been fabricated by Charity herself. The tapes present something of a documentary on Hess's life and on Istvan's investigation. Brenton has Palmer play tapes of conversations between the other two investigators, Nicole and Raymond, witnessed also by the audience, and then segues into a live performance of the scene that we have just seen on tape, only now with asides by the characters indicating how their thoughts differ from what each says.

Charity presents a final tape by Istvan who offers "proof" that the prisoner in Spandau was not Hess but an impostor, and that the report submitted by the investigative committee has been a public relations façade engineered by the Allied powers to put a proper face on history. A dying Luber intones, "We are morticians, we deliver history with an acceptable face. . . acceptable facts, which may or may not be true . . . but they are safe . . . to be taught on the Modern History exam syllabus" (Brenton 59-60).

Palmer rejects the conspiracy theory as Charity's own fabrication, but Brenton's final word on the matter depends more on a staging effect than any plot development. At the play's end Charity presses a remote control, and on the television monitors appear photographs of the demolition of Spandau Prison and Istvan's voice reciting a poem about the dust of the walls of Spandau:

We are in you
 and will rise again
 we are cancer, we are there

We will be
 revenged
 and rise again.

The screens go dead. In the room, the audience and playing area, a blackout. The tapestries become see-through as lights rise upon wall paintings of the horrors of history, the actors caught, frozen, in the designs. (67)

If the demolition of Spandau prison to make way for a shopping center succeeds in purging memory of the Nazi horror, then the brutality, seemingly forgotten, may recur.

In this production, the media are less a device for Brenton to tell a story than they are the theme of the story. Just as Charity's choreographed re-enactment of Hess's death transforms a gruesome reality into an aesthetic or perhaps even erotic event, photography, television, and radio can transform reality. Against a background of video images of Rudolf Hess's rise and fall, Palmer asks, "Do you think the pictures of Hitler and Co. will ever wear out?" Charity replies, "Istvan was afraid they'd change. Slowly. That even the negatives, in the archives, would become lies. *A pause, the montage on the tapes continuing.* What he was really afraid of was that they would become beautiful" (16).

Brenton employs a variety of devices to remind his audience, playfully at times, that his video images are unreliable fabrications: mechanical camera movements: electronic palimpsests of earlier recordings of television commercials and even of a bedroom scene between Charity and Istvan, interruptions, static and live "replay" of scenes to show that the camera records only surface appearances, not inner reactions or thoughts. Brenton strives not so much to exploit the theatrical possibilities of video as to expose its unreliability.

Other contemporary playwrights have used media in staging plays about the impact of the media on the lives of their characters. Eric Overmyer's *Native Speech* (1985), an indictment of the power of the media to create events, uses technically simple loudspeaker effects to create an underground radio station. Patrick Marber's *Closer*, first presented at the National Theatre in London in 1997 and on Broadway in 1999, uses a screen to project e-mail messages exchanged by two characters. The e-mail enables characters to exchange dialogue without one necessarily knowing the identity of the other but allows the audience to observe, knowing who the participants are. The e-mail serves principally as a plotting device but also sets up both the themes of erotomania and of lying. During initial rehearsals at the National's Cottesloe Theatre, actors were al-

lowed to type their e-mail messages live, but the process took too much time; so the messages were pre-recorded and cued by the sound operator with actors miming the typing (Dorbian 16-17).

Craig Lucas, in *God's Heart*, which premiered at the Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island in 1995, makes heavy use of video. On a practical level, Lucas discovered that writing video into the script allowed performers to speak to themselves. His primary thematic focus was an indictment of U.S. drug policy, but "the rest of America – the middle class – was as addicted to its own drugs, some of which are more destructive, to the soul than crack-cocaine. One of these, I feel, is television, which has bled the life out of many people" (qtd. in Istel 58).

Lucas returned to the use of electronic media in *The Dying Gaul*, produced in 1998. Here laptop computers and e-mail become major components in the plotting. While Lucas's story depends on the anonymity of e-mail exchanges, his script actually demands no special staging effects. He handles the e-mail exchanges by having the characters speak their messages while sitting in front of laptop computers, presumably typing what is being spoken.

In a 1996 article in *American Theatre*, Canadian playwright Beth Hearst asks if the writer as wordsmith will have a place in a more technologically oriented theatre of the twenty-first century.

Video interface, CD-ROM, image processing – each application opens up an almost unlimited range for dramatic expression, broadening the scope of what theatre can do. Each puts another theatrical language at the writer's disposal, new syntaxes and vocabularies that speak to (and from) the changing world around us. (5)

Even though a few playwrights successfully meld wordcraft and technocraft, Hearst's call to action goes largely unheeded. Playwrights must first be willing to embrace technology, and producers must be willing to provide the resources to stage these new scripts. Until this occurs playwrights will be keepers of an outmoded verbal order.

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