

**Mediating Acts of War/Staging Crises  
of Sensibility: David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*,  
Eve Ensler's *Necessary Targets*, and Sam Shepard's  
*The God of Hell***

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The article focuses on the efforts of three outstanding contemporary American dramatists to address identified parameters of socio-political and cultural crises brought about by the diverse, yet intricately related, historical instances of the Vietnam War, the Bosnia-Herzegovina War, and the war on terror. In *Sticks and Bones* (1971), David Rabe discerns multiple layers of trauma on the face of a Vietnam veteran and thus finds chance to question the impossibility of gaining access to a healing process within the boundaries of a topos that proves even more disorienting than the battlefield itself. In *Necessary Targets* (2001), Eve Ensler, responding creatively to peculiarities spawned by the Bosnia-Herzegovina War and its aftermath, tackles adequately the question whether trauma is translatable. In addition, she examines the issue of positioning one's own stance towards the other's suffering, exploring modes in which the targeted people may help the observer become aware of her own crisis of self-placement. In *The God of Hell* (2004), Sam Shepard directs his efforts at capturing in stage images the feeling of bewilderment prevalent in post-9/11 America, where the appropriation of the national by a newly-conceived type of order is attempted via directed attacks on the people's understanding. In all three cases, attention is given to the artists' desire to shake audiences out of the familiarity of widely-shared and firmly-established representations of crises, highlighting that what should be seen and studied as the most serious facet of "crisis" is the very failure the subject encounters in attaining a thorough understanding of the moment itself.

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In the course of human history, responses to acts of war and reactions to instances of widespread and multileveled conflicts have long been recognized as valid attempts of self-definition and self-placement on a public/ national as well as private/ individual level. In sharp contrast to any precedent, the postmodern moment is ultimately defined by the intense difficulty, if not the very impossibility, the subject encounters in safeguarding a viable position and attaining a thorough understanding of its grounding whenever the enveloping context becomes dominated by large-scale confrontations. Fredric Jameson accurately notes that the waning of historicity at present follows a constantly accelerating rhythm that renders the subject “incapable of fashioning representations of ... current experience” (205), remaining thus suspended in a terrain determined by the supremacy of the “simulacrum ... what Sartre would have called the *de-realization* of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality” (Jameson 215, emphasis in original). Focusing in particular on the collective reception and interpretation of war enterprises, it is important to notice that this mode of “de-realization” evolves rapidly to the extent that authors and thinkers like Jean Baudrillard feel compelled to articulate statements of the type “the Gulf War did not take place” as it appears in his book with the same title. It is the very same context that allows an indulgence in approaching and reading the use of the Patriot missiles in the Gulf War as a manifestation of “the internal dynamics of the American sublime” (Wilson 228). Offering an intriguing insight into the peculiarities of this milieu, playwright Eve Ensler, in her book *Insecure at Last: Losing It in Our Security-Obsessed World* (2006), writes on post-9/11 America and examines the particular fashion in which each feeling, each notion and idea, each rhetoric becomes inextricably bound to and synonymous with its exact opposite.

Clearly indicative of the thorough and far-reaching implications of the mutations informing the current socio-political context is the fact that no easy answer can be given to Ensler’s direct and simple, yet disarming, question: “[W]ith all this focus on security, why do I feel so much more insecure?” (qtd. in Schnall 1). In postmodernity, the subject is faced with a condition in which efforts of establishing a vision, endeavors of dealing with specific dilemmas materialize in such a hostile environment that often lead to moments of even greater confusion and states of intensified bewilderment. Just like the movement of Capitalism which, according to Jameson, “must be seen as discontinuous but expansive,” each current crisis of self-placement and self-definition “mutates into a larger sphere of activity and a wider field

of penetration, of control, investment, and transformation” (257). In the 2000s, the war on terror and the rhetoric developed around it offer concrete examples of this phenomenon. Purposefully programmed acts of addressing the threat of terrorism while, peculiarly enough, investing in it served to introduce a considerable part of the collective American mind into particularly precarious zones of self-reflection. In Thomas L. Friedman’s words, “this exploitation of 9/11 ... created a wedge between America and the rest of the world, between America and its historical identity, and between the president and common sense” (“Addicted to 9/11”). This deliberate sidestepping of common sense authorized in a bizarre mode more than just carefully administered and minutely directed attacks on the people’s understanding of major events and pivotal issues. As Friedman accurately observes, this particular crisis of sensibility has spawned an entire series of different types of crises (“Addicted to 9/11”).

This current terrain, punctuated by infinitely multiplying crises that allow concentric as well as eccentric circles of violence to proliferate and expand continuously, presents artists, thinkers and writers with a variety of challenges. The present discussion focuses on three outstanding contemporary American dramatists and their attempts at offering innovative and idiosyncratic responses to moments of socio-political and cultural crises brought about by the Vietnam War, the Bosnia-Herzegovina War, and the war on terror, respectively. Historically unrelated and distant as these moments may be considered on one level, they have triggered crises sharing a number of alarmingly similar traits. The three playwrights approach these instances and proceed to foreground aspects so as to offer insights into manifestations of severe cases of sensibility crisis brought about by major conflicts. They are interested in interrogating the particulars of occasions of widespread and multifaceted tensions that keep intensifying, precisely because they succeed in outlining areas where acts of self-mapping prove consequentially inadequate and deficient.

In the first part, attention is given to David Rabe’s *Sticks and Bones* (1971), a play addressing directly the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the enterprise cast in Jameson’s terms as the “first terrible postmodernist war” (223). The playwright handles facets and thorny issues of this multileveled and ultimately disorienting experience that could not be contained within any types of “traditional ... narrative paradigms” (Jameson 223) and brought the American nation for the first time in such a direct and acutely painful conflict with its own self. What constituted for the collective American mind an ill-defined, long-lasting involvement of purposefully obscure goals,

materializing in a far-away land, succeeded in introducing an intense and violent home friction, epitomized in the traumatic reception of veterans. At the same moment, the very rhetoric of American democracy entered a phase of crisis as the nation ended up being charged with an atrocious case of genocide; the very term “democracy” could no longer be readily linked and applied to this seriously redefined “narrative of American global politics” (Nadel 96). Inevitably, this instance of serious compromising the image of American democracy underwent worldwide acquired the traits of an expansive crisis that brought an entire socio-cultural context face to face with the dire predicament of remaining unable to account for its own workings. In *Sticks and Bones*, a highly acclaimed and widely produced piece of work,<sup>1</sup> Rabe’s alarming insight into this mostly controversial chapter of recent history and particularly haunting experience for the collective American mind is decisively informed by the playwright’s own first hand experience of the war and its implications.<sup>2</sup> In his careful approach of this traumatic instance of homecoming, Rabe finds chance to question the (im)possibility of gaining access to a healing process within the boundaries of a topos that proves even more disorienting than the battlefield itself. In addition, the playwright foregrounds the complications of establishing a level of social interaction where traumatic experiences can be adequately mediated and communicated.

In the second part, taking a decisive leap of at least two decades forward, the discussion revolves around cases of trauma associated with the events of the 1990s, Balkan crisis and “the controversial NATO intervention” (Habermas qtd. in Borradori 38) in the area. It is important to stress that the

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1. *Sticks and Bones* (1971) won the Tony Award for Best Play of the 1971-72 season and got widely produced in the U.S. and Europe, stirring a lot of discussion and controversy both at home and abroad. The 1972-73 Moscow production of the play, directed by Andrzej Wajda, caused David Rabe’s vehement reaction when the playwright found out that his work had been distorted and appropriated as a means to an anti-American Soviet propaganda. In March 1973, Rabe wrote a letter, addressed to the Soviets and printed in *The New York Times*, stressing his utter disappointment with the fact that the Soviets had failed to acknowledge the universal quality of his interrogations and that they had deliberately refused to “see themselves” in the play (Information available from Kolin, *David Rabe: A Stage History* 29-43). Against a climate of severe censorship exercised by the military regime in power in Greece during the period of the late sixties and early seventies, a Greek production of the play was presented at Vouyouklaki-Papamichael theater in Athens in November 1972.
  2. Rabe served in the Vietnam War for eleven months, from February 1966 to January 1967 (Kolin 9).

end of the Cold War brought the U.S. and its rhetoric of global politics always on a course where the establishment of its hegemony paradoxically intertwined with a process of undermining, disappearance, and dissemination of its very own image. Thus, the Gulf War in the early nineties serves as a case epitomizing this oscillation between hegemonic reaffirmation and disappearance.<sup>3</sup> In relation to the Bosnia-Herzegovina War, this process of undermining is connected with the fact that distinctions between the role of the arbiter of order and that of the intensifier of chaos were rather blurred, since it remained unclear and debatable how helpful the U.S. and its allies proved in this Balkan “family” tragedy. This indeterminate and critical standpoint of agents who approach traumatized terrains and spheres of experience attracted Ensler’s attention and triggered her explorations in the case of *Necessary Targets* (2001). Similar to what holds true for Rabe, the playwright’s own first hand experience also proved decisive in shaping this play. Ensler’s visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993 and her immediate contact with women refugees led to interrogations concerning war trauma.<sup>4</sup> The playwright handles the question whether trauma is translatable and how easily it may lend itself to stereotypical casting and sensationalized mediation of selves/texts. She also examines the issue of positioning one’s own stance towards the other’s suffering, focusing on why and how the targeted people help the observer become aware of her own crisis of self-placement.

The last part centers around a historical moment emerging as a point of ultimate suspension since 9/11 served to usher in a phase for America uniquely defined by the fact that all “familiar points of reference seem[ed] to have been pulverized” (Borradori 2). Departing markedly from that experience of a decade earlier where “[t]he Patriot missile helped fuse and socialize ordinary citizens into spectators beholding, in awe and terror, that

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3. In his insightful reading of Sam Shepard’s *States of Shock* (1991)—a play reflecting the artist’s reaction to the Gulf War—Johan Callens traces the effective mode in which the playwright explores this link between the acts the U.S. completes in reaffirming its hegemony and the condition of disappearance reached via a procedure of dissemination: “Ultimately the self and America as traditionally conceived have disappeared. The one has been abolished, the other globally disseminated” (181).
  4. In the Introduction to the 2003 Villard edition of the play, Eve Ensler informs her reader: “In 1993, I went to former Yugoslavia to interview Bosnian women war refugees. ... [The play] is based on the stories of the women I met and heard in Bosnia. It was their community, their holding on to love, their insane humanity in the face of catastrophe, their staggering refusal to have or seek revenge that fueled me and ultimately moved me to write this play” (*Necessary Targets* xii, xiv).

postmodern hero of the technological sublime—the ‘cyborg soldier’ and his/her weaponry of defense” (Wilson 224), in the early 2000s, the subject was faced with a condition where no safe distance was granted, and thus awe and terror acquired new and unprecedented dimensions. In the most recent of the three plays discussed here, *The God of Hell* (2004), Sam Shepard aims at capturing in stage images the feeling of bewilderment prevalent in post-9/11 America, where the appropriation of the national by a newly-conceived type of order is attempted via directed attacks on the people’s understanding. Coming to grips with this state of diffuse instability, uniquely informed by the very notion of terror, is approached as both a private and communal experience. The playwright interrogates the legitimacy of this new policy of containment, along the parameters of which distinctions between friends and enemies, patriots and traitors, the invaded ones and the invaders are difficult to be drawn.

It is important to note that the three ventures traced here constitute by no means realizations of approaches that could be compared or linked to those of a social scientist, a political analyst or a historian. What proves of undoubted value is the sensitivity and versatility of individual artists who follow patiently and proceed to address carefully collective anxieties, worries, fears, courageously probing into complicated and multileveled crisis-related issues. In addition, what demands attention is the fact that the three dramatists discussed here rely on the exceptional nature of drama as an art form, and invest in the versatile semiotics of theater practice in their distinct efforts to explore areas where questions of self-placement/displacement constitute the central points of interest. The desire to probe into questions of adequate self-placement and the willingness to address the pressing need of recognizing meaningful centers for personal and familial reference decisively inform Rabe’s work in the first play discussed here.

### **Traumatizing/Traumatized Visions of Homecoming**

In *Sticks and Bones*, Rabe approaches critically the trauma of (re)placing one’s own presence in a supposedly hospitable yet deeply hostile familial terrain. The playwright highlights carefully the fact that this instance of displacement is closely related to the difficulty the family context faces in assessing and coming to terms with the very content matter of private as well as public experiences it becomes exposed to. Framing the play within a slide-show, commented on by a set of four offstage family voices—two adults and two children—, Rabe manages to foreground, early on, the question of accounting for visuals and arriving at conclusions

regarding their significance. The act of dealing with family imagery and ascribing meaning to recent family past is an issue accommodated on stage by means of the opening slides. In addition, the very same images serve to introduce the audience to a particularly prominent and extensive pattern throughout the play, since their aesthetics are uniquely informed by an intriguing shift from the element of nostalgia to the inexplicable and the grotesque. Thus, it is not just that the figure of a priest in a gym suit, who stands among the family members holding a basketball, is cast by the offstage voices as peculiarly amusing, but more importantly the very first image of the main character, David, is met with the short and inconclusive descriptive statement, "somebody sick" (96).

Act one opens once the slide-show gives its place abruptly to a setting highly defined by the properties of a primarily visual culture on a number of levels. Rabe presents his audience with a space bearing "the gloss of an advertisement," punctuated by a "glowing, murmuring" TV set and inhabited by characters with names intentionally borrowed from the popular sit-com series "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" (96). While it may be argued that this is the playwright's own version of a family sit-com, what is definitely more important in this case is the mode in which Rabe succeeds in bringing to the attention of his audience the fact that humorous TV figures and the general public occupy the same ground, often sharing exactly the same codes of social understanding. Against this background, intensely familiar to the audience in all these different ways, David is brought back from Vietnam to a home he finds particularly difficult to recognize not only because he is now blind but mostly because of the inability of his family to deal with the aftermath of his injury. David's literal blindness is interestingly juxtaposed to his younger brother's insistence on taking pictures, incessantly capturing shots of family life. Both cases foreground the difficulty of accurate self-placement along the lines of a family context: nothing less than an early yet functional indication of the fact that similar to family reality which cannot be adequately contained in any of Rick's shots, there is no room available to contain David now that he has been through the Vietnam War experience. Followed not only by his blindness but also by the spirit of a Vietnamese girl he got emotionally involved with, David is conscious that he occupies a totally foreign terrain. Openly and directly he returns to the sergeant who "delivered" him to his parents' place with the line: "you said 'home,' I don't think so" (102). Purposefully enough, Rabe underlines the bitterly ironic overtones in the words the Sergeant uses to address David's family: "I hope you people

understand” (103). This is precisely where the problem lies, since Rabe’s Ozzie and Harriet turn out to be peculiarly and tragically comic, for, just like their TV counterparts, they simply fail to understand. They cannot accommodate neither David’s physical presence nor the accounts of first hand experience that he has brought home from Vietnam and now attempts to introduce in the larger family frame. Throughout the first act, it becomes apparent that David constitutes a redefined version of subjectivity as well as textuality, aspiring to invade the familial context. David’s parents remain unable to account for what David has brought home as they inhabit a space defined by emptiness, what Jameson, in his study of late capitalist contexts, outlines as “voids [that] have been saturated and neutralized, not by new values, but by the visual culture of consumerism as such” (266).

One of the primary questions Rabe raises in the play revolves around the parameters along which one may accurately define the very notion of “being home.” Both David and his parents come face to face with the great difficulty of relating the very notion of home with a center, since their efforts at investing meaningfully in it prove pointless, and thus the characters remain far from reaching any type of equilibrium. On the one hand, it is only expected that David’s physical and emotional trauma carries a decisive impact on all of his attempts at establishing his vision of home anew. Yet the type of vision that proves totally inadequate and tragically limited is the one Ozzie and Harriet depend upon. What comes to the fore the moment their own vision intersects with David’s is the fact that this is a social terrain of a deep sensibility crisis. In simple terms, Ozzie and Harriet may often appear absurdly and darkly comic for being as clueless as they are, and yet what is highlighted is that they find themselves in a setting where no helping agent, no encompassing force may have ever facilitated their introduction to what they are now forced to experience. Thus, David’s severely reformed self/text cannot be welcomed due to the lack of receptive mechanisms characterizing the terrain in which his family is placed.

Closely related to the characters’ dire predicament of helplessness in accounting for the seriously redefined version of familial space is the issue of translating adequately and mediating purposefully traumatic experiences. Rabe, commenting on his personal experience of returning to his home country after his service in Vietnam, interestingly notes that “people were only interested in the debate on the war, not the war itself, or any evidence of it” (qtd. in Kolin 11). The playwright transcribes in concrete stage images this very instance of being exposed to the public’s reluctance to account for any type of palpable war evidence and succeeds in interrogating

the validity of understanding attained in this way. Thus, although David is vitally present in front of them, Ozzie and Harriet still manage to remain immune to all types of sensibility attacks administered towards them. It proves much easier for both of them to resort to ready-made categories and notions rather than reaching the core of what David presents them with. Apparently, Rabe is interested not only in drawing attention to a single isolated case of failure, but dramatizes the extensive crisis of sensibility permeating the specific socio-cultural setting. Harriet and Ozzie's diminishing and racist statements, articulated with the hope of displacing others, constitute dissonant replies to their acute difficulty of recognizing and defending centers of meaningful experience in their own lives. They both feel that all ready-made derogative terms and pejorative stereotypical refiguring available to them can help them deal with the disembodied female presence accompanying David home. In their own terms, David's dearest line of communication is narrowed down to phrases such as: "Some yellow ass" (114), "They eat the flesh of dogs" (108) and "You know what the Bible says about those people" (117). The reactions of the two parents epitomize the overall inability—not just of the two of them but of the entire enveloping socio-cultural context—to accept what has just recently become part of the family narrative.

In *Sticks and Bones*, the main character's great difficulty in accommodating his own presence within the parameters of the familial context is matched and interrelated to an equally frustrating act of stabilizing his newly established vision. David resorts to what he terms his "home movies" (124) in a directed effort of exposing his family to this new subjectivity informed not just by his blindness and emotional involvement with Zung, but the entire war experience. These images become useful tools as the character strives to modify his own surroundings, in a fashion reflecting the one Jameson identifies in his efforts to outline acts of reinventing subjectivity: "change the scenery and the setting, refurnish the rooms, or destroy them in an aerial bombardment for a new subject ... to appear on the ruins of the old" (238). David asks those around him to look: "They are all bone and pain ... And yet she dies. Though a doctor is called in to remove the bullet-shot baby she would have preferred to keep since she was dying and it was dead" (126). Harriet responds by elaborating on her familiar fashion of displacing and de-defining the "other," remaining always unaware of the fact that her own confusion intensifies. The character is merely being carried a few phases further away on her own course of sensibility crisis when she resorts to observations such as: "It's awful the

things those yellow people do to one another” (126). Totally reluctant to “look” into the nature of things Ozzie, on his part, cannot accept that his son felt free in bringing home all this reality of war, failing to address what is now an integral part of David: “Just all those words and that film with no picture and these people hanging somewhere so you can bring them home like this house is a meat house—what do you think you’re doing?” (127). Ozzie and Harriet’s conduct is definitely a typical case of what Martha Nochimson describes as “the (often darkly comic) grotesque results of the tyranny of a very reductive form of reason fabricated by our culture” (37). The impossibility of mediating, translating and communicating trauma emerges as a question pertaining directly to the historical case of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, but definitely not restricted to it. Casting the “other” in negative terms turns into a process of de-defining one’s own subjectivity for both Ozzie and Harriet. As the two parents authorize blindly an erasure of vital family narrative parts, they introduce themselves to a particularly dangerous act of curtailing one’s own sensibility. David knows that their place remains “a house in the dark” (127) and that their sanity is quite questionable, for it is only “fraud that keeps [them] sane” (134). Act one ends with yet one of Rick’s inconclusive, almost arbitrary slides capturing Ozzie’s frustration (139). Rick’s absurd insistence on the visible comes into sharp contrast with David’s efforts to sustain—despite his physical blindness—an acute vision of himself, his trauma but also of the people surrounding him.

Rick’s slide serves once again as an index for the progress of the plot: the puzzled Ozzie is not expected to reach any stable ground in the second act. On the contrary, moments of crisis and intersecting conflicting visions lead to moments of violence, as the failure of mediating acts of war results in the creation of new types of attacks. In these violent moments, the priest and his father accuse David of the very thing that they themselves practice: rejecting one’s own self (147) and being phony (153). The playwright highlights that the hostility towards David’s vision is widespread and not restricted to specific idiosyncrasies. In the case of Father Donald, the confusion revolves around the tools that he resorts to in his effort to approach David: religion overlaps with popular psychology and magazine articles. However, it is the case of Ozzie that highlights the implications of matters around the attacks on David. In a state of helplessness, Ozzie distorts things intentionally and ends up projecting the act of misappropriation on others. When Harriet finds impossible the fact that Ozzie denies the story that he himself called the police to keep an eye on his family, only to admit it a little later, the character’s state of utter confusion reaches an apex:

Sure. *I* called and then changed my mind and said I didn't when I did, and since when is there anything wrong in that? It would mean only that I have a little problem of ambivalence. I got a minor problem of ambiguity goin' for me here, is all, and you're exaggerating everything all out of proportion. You're distorting everything! All of you! (And he whirls to leave). If I have to lie to live, I will! (He runs). (154, emphasis in original)

The act of redirecting and addressing anew this very ambivalence and distortion from one's own position to that of the others emerges as the epitome of the sensibility crisis the character is going through. Just like Father Donald, who supports the mix-up of religion and popular science, Ozzie here stands up for the right to give in to this terminal confusion of notions, ideals and beliefs and thus it comes as no surprise for the audience when he pronounces his own family a deadly prison: "never seeing that it was surrendering I was doing, innocently and easily giving to you the love that was to return in time as flesh to imprison, detain, disarm and begin ... to kill" (159). In his effort to conform to the rules and norms of a context that allows no room for irregularities or exceptions, Ozzie is merely one of the many who, in Derridean terms, have to "yield to the homo-hegemony of [a] dominant language" (30). In Ozzie's case, this is all about the dominant language of a socio-cultural terrain caught in a state of utter numbness, along the parameters of which moments of crisis can only intensify and multiply.

In the development of the plot, Ozzie's distorted vision proves one of diffuse power as Harriet and Rick join their voices in displacing David to the extreme point of leading him to suicide. Thus, to Ozzie's "No more of him" (169) and Harriet's "I don't know who you are" (165) Rick adds the final one: "We hate you" (171). Supplying his father's utter bewilderment and his mother's emotional and mental bankruptcy with his own cynicism, Rick accuses David of following the wrong path. Failing to read through the confusion of the ground he also occupies, Rick is heard saying: "You're so confused. You see, David, where you're wrong is your point of view, it's silly. It's just really comical because you think people are valuable or something" (173). This serves as a particularly negative occasion of what Thomas Docherty notes for postmodern characters in general: Rick makes apparent on a level of tragic displacement the "discrepancy between the character who acts and the character who watches herself or himself acting ... a temporal distance between agency and self-consciousness regarding that agency" (60). Thus, step by step the only type of communication

allowed is the one that unites the family in helping David commit suicide, in a final scene noted for its particularly bizarre atmosphere.

The main character's attempt to mediate his trauma, his great desire for an adequate placement of his vision, finds no hospitable terrain, no willing recipients. Rabe accurately displays that the utter confusion informing this social environment not only makes David's trauma even greater, but constitutes in itself a traumatic experience. What Jacques Derrida notes for instances of socio-political and cultural colonization in general is directly pertinent here: "One traumatism over another, an increasing buildup of violence" (24). Rabe dramatizes an intricately tragic case of "colonization," since the Vietnam trauma succeeded in colonizing specific American definitions of the "real." The urgent need but also the impossibility of establishing a unifying family vision becomes uniquely accentuated as the development of the plot draws to its climactic point. David lifts Ozzie in front of the TV set and strives once again to convince the entire family of the necessity of acknowledging his presence and recognizing the significance of his own perspective: "They will call it madness. We will call it seeing" (170). It is significant to note that the sole type of vision that is never questioned is that of the "glowing, murmuring" TV set (96). Responding to one of the first productions of the play, critic Martin Gottfried remarked that the vision of TV is "the only one vision of the family" (qtd. in Kolin 33). Yet, despite this omnipresence of the TV, its flow does not inform the course of events on stage,<sup>5</sup> providing the setting with images but no sound. Remaining mute for most of the action, the TV set is present primarily as a prop highlighting the void surrounding Ozzie and Harriet. Indicative of the characters' intense difficulty in locating meaning as well as of the painful and dislocating experience of not being able to acquire a type of candid vision are reactions such as the one Ozzie comes up with: "Who needs to hear it? We'll watch it" (170). Even more revealing of the situation is his reply when the sound suddenly returns: "I flick my rotten life" (170). Almost unconsciously the character passes a direct yet bitterly ironic remark on the fact that this is a familial context devoid of any meaningful centers.

In *Sticks and Bones*, Rabe argues in multiple ways that David asks too much. The hostility of his family is authorized by the enveloping context,

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5. The mode in which Rabe handles the TV set and its flow differs considerably from what playwrights such as Jean Claude Van Itallie in *TV* (1969) or Thomas Babe in *Great Solo Town* (1977), for example, attempt, allowing the tele-flow to have a direct and decisive impact on the main action, while also informing the very aesthetics of the work.

succumbing to the “hegemony of the homogeneous” (Derrida 40), set against any attempts at establishing a type of candid vision. Their adventures remain to the very end painful, their shots tragically fruitless. The playwright accurately points out that Ozzie, Harriet and Rick get involved in a scheme eventually traumatizing the very terrain they occupy even more seriously than David’s wounded self/text does. Their own trauma appears to be impossible to heal, as their last common targeted efforts to lead David to suicide tragically prove. This final scene, intriguingly juxtaposed to previous instances noted for the often absurdly comical qualities of the three characters’ conduct, is Rabe’s chance to articulate his concluding and penetrating remark on the deep implications of the sensibility crisis the collective American mind faced in dealing with the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The fact that the very act of attaining a type of sensibility, adequate in dealing with the aftermath of multisided, severe crises, may prove a critical moment in itself which is one of Ensler’s primary concerns in the second play to be discussed here.

### **Outward/ Inward Trips to Spheres of Wounded “Otherness”**

In *Necessary Targets*,<sup>6</sup> Ensler is interested in exploring the challenging procedure of establishing a candid vision of one’s own critical position along, as well as against, the suffering of others. The play opens up on two women whose professions are closely related to the question of approaching, interpreting and handling cases of trauma. J.S., a psychiatrist, and Melissa, a counselor and writer specializing in the consequences of war situations, are involved in a project organized to offer help to women war refugees in Bosnia. Early on, the audience is adequately acquainted with the fact that distinctive, individual motives fuel the two women’s willingness to deal with war trauma. In the development of the plot what is put to the test, questioned, rejected, expanded and reshaped to an extensive degree are the very modes of understanding the two professional women resort to. Thus, despite the emphatic tone in which Melissa insists that “it’s what I can’t see that frightens me” (Ensler, *Necessary Targets* 10), she is gradually brought to confront the fact that her own desire to look into the nature of matters is not quite disinterested or purely unbiased. Scene one, accommodating the first

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6. *Necessary Targets* was first produced at Hartford Stage, in Hartford, Connecticut in November 2001. The 2002 New York production of the play received “lukewarm” reviews (Bovard 642). In the early months of 2008, a Greek production of the play was presented in Athens, at Altera Pars Theater.

encounter between the two collaborators, brings also to the fore the question of grounding. The onlooker may very easily become an object of study and vice versa: Melissa does not want to be decided by the terms of a “shrink.” While, in her turn, J.S. is not prepared to be considered ill-equipped for their mission in comparison to Melissa who has been through war situations before. Purposefully enough, act one serves to make audiences primarily aware of the interchangeability of the roles of the victim/target/study-object and the onlooker/the researcher/the scientist.

As scenes exchange each other in a pattern of intense, quick rhythm, the second one places the two collaborators in Bosnia, faced now with the very reality of the pressing question of defining one’s own grounding in a terrain totally devastated by deeds of war. Thus, the phrase “They know we can leave” (11) informs decisively the line of communication between the two American women and the Bosnian refugees. They both feel that their own positioning in this context is closely related to the issue of defining categories along which an act of fixing the object of study, the wounded “otherness” may be appropriately carried out. J.S. and Melissa are presented with the fact that essence can prove extremely and painfully elusive as they attempt to approach the content matter of the narratives of their interlocutors. One of the first things that Ensler carefully highlights is the fact that the victims may easily get victimized anew thanks mainly to this desire to get to “know” them. In a mode owing a considerable lot to the epic, Brechtian theater practice, Ensler not only organizes the play in brief scenes, accommodating short-span yet complete episodes, but also makes sure that each character is a representative of a specified area of experience, an eloquent example or symbol of a designated field of activity and creativity. Thus, quite pointedly it is Jelena, the level-headed, “earthy woman in her late forties” (12), who is justified in responding to the two women’s efforts of envisioning their stance within this context in a voice marked by bitter irony: “We are very honored that you Americans came all the way here” (14). More importantly, Jelena decides to elaborate on her statement and manages to draw attention to the complications and inherent contradictions that inform most attempts at fixing a place for wounded otherness within the parameters of mainly visual contexts: “We read about ourselves in the paper. They made us sound deranged. And the scarf, always the scarf. Pictures of Azra with the scarf” (15). In her own original fashion, Ensler foregrounds questions of the following type: is it possible to produce pictures or texts adequate enough to accommodate the extremes defining the other’s tragic predicament? Along what lines can anyone

consider oneself authorized in translating and mediating trauma as an endemic condition of otherness? Thus, it is by no means a mere accident that Melissa finds intense difficulty in explaining and justifying her position:

MELISSA: My writing is not to exploit you. Traumatized war victims...

NUNA: Is that what we're called? Traumatized war victims? Sounds so spooky.

MELISSA: It's not a judgment.

JELENA: No, worse, it's a life sentence. (16)

In this play, Enslar is interested in exploring and interrogating the validity of efforts to fix meaning, decide on positions as well as attempt to refashion the very subjectivity for the target of interest. Despite their intense motivation and the educational and professional backgrounds, both J.S. and Melissa at first fail to acknowledge what it is exactly that they lack, to spot the factor rendering their initial attempts at approaching the refugees pointless. Although there is never anything distantly, or even faintly, comic about the two American professionals amid the women of the refugee camp, initially they do resemble Ozzie and Harriet in Rabe's play in being quite shortsighted in certain respects. As their encounters with the refugees progress from one phase to another, what gets clearly highlighted and intriguingly pronounced is that J.S. and Melissa are beholders of a limited scope. Quite appropriately the playwright assigns to Zlata, a doctor, the task of reminding them of the very basics of what they have undertaken to deal with:

You don't understand that this happened to us—to real people, we were just like you, we weren't ready for this ... you all want it to be logical—you want us to be different than you are so you can convince yourselves it wouldn't happen there where you are—that's why you turn us into stories ... Then afterwards we become freaks, the stories of freaks—please-get us one raped Bosnian woman, preferably gang-raped, preferably English speaking. (25)

Thanks to first-hand experience, Zlata is aware that mediation—as Susan Sontag notes in her careful study of the omnipotence of the image currently—is “the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete” (367). In addition, what Zlata's lines highlight is the fact that each act attempted under the delusion of knowing

what the wounded other needs often constitutes nothing less than a manifestation of hubris. The playwright stresses that possessing the know-how of fixing these necessary targets, fashioning out roles and identities for them and capturing them in a stereotypical casting are all acts bound to lead one to particularly dangerous pitfalls. Similar to Ozzie and Harriet who resort to clichés and stereotypes, J.S. and Melissa at first appear clueless about coming up with and controlling an alternative scheme of approaching the targeted sphere. However, unlike Ozzie and Harriet's inward movement, the two American women in Ensler's play consciously embark on an outward voyage to meet these traumatized women, and thus gradually get adequately acquainted with the implications and considerable dimensions of the sensibility crisis they face. J.S. and Melissa often remain suspended, hovering above and about the stage, and in sharp contrast to the grounded Bosnian female figures, they come into conflict with their own desires and aspirations, but, more importantly, they confront the shortcomings and limitations of their modes and techniques of understanding. The rapport they establish with the refugees proves decisive in guiding them towards a refashioning, a reinvention of their tools, a thorough reconsideration of the cons and pros of their sensibility. On a second level, the case allows the playwright to comment on how demanding the act of leaping towards traumatized areas in political terms often proves, while highlighting the fact that the motives activating the role of the arbiter of order on a large scale can never be considered disinterested or objective.

Ensler succeeds in exposing the complicated nature of the trip of refashioning one's own sensibility by focusing effectively on the confrontation between the two distinct idiosyncrasies J.S. and Melissa represent on stage. On her part, J.S. is the one bringing in the issue of standing back and attaining a critical distance in which patience needs to be assigned a central role. Instead of always recording and transcribing, in what emerges as an incessant flow, J.S. senses that there must be something worth exploring in a new type of understanding: "It's just I think sometimes you need to hang back a little, you need to watch, wait ..." (26). From this point onwards, J.S. becomes increasingly willing to experiment with different approaches, often in direct conflict with Melissa's urge to enter ever more traumatized spaces in the hope of attaining—what appears to her—the whole picture. In a particularly charming mode, the play itself turns into an exemplary case of what J.S. asks for: the playwright takes time to "hang back" for a while, allowing thus images, bits and pieces, fragments of actual life of pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina become an indispensable part of the

action on stage. Ensler effectively enough structures a number of scenes along a series of productive contrasts: stream of life experiences vs. acts of mediation, peace and beauty vs. war enterprises, physical contact vs. interpretive methods, love vs. mutation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the audience gets acquainted with instances such as that of Nuna, the teenager, who poignantly comments on occupying now a mid-ground because of her mixed ethnic origins: “Before the war we who were mixed were considered the most beautiful because so much had gone into making us. Now we are dirt” (28). Nuna’s words bring to the surface the seriousness of shifting perspectives in the collective reception of people, notions, stances, attitudes the war has established. Equally alarming is the insight Jelena offers into yet another significant aspect of the mutations this war has spawned, the moment she refuses to recognize her husband’s bodily presence as amorous when the latter returns seriously affected from the experience of war: “and when he found himself all little on the ground, broken, hating that I loved him, he beat me. But I felt nothing. Nothing. Dado’s fists, they couldn’t touch me. I was with the old Dado” (32). As becomes apparent, each one of the refugee women contributes her own piece, always underlying the necessity for a new redefined and alternative type of sensibility, if these narratives are to be thoroughly understood. As Ensler moves from one contrast to the next, she prepares the ground for an opening, a serious reformation of the setting. In this respect, it can be argued that her own work is directly linked not only to the efforts of these Bosnian women, dealing with the consequences of war, but with the indispensable contribution of healing women are always expected to offer. Commenting on this exclusively feminine input, Ensler notes in the introduction to the Villard edition: “After war, men are often shattered, unable to function. Women not only work, but they create peace networks, find ways to bring about healing” (*Necessary Targets* xiv). Being fueled by such realizations, she works with the hope of envisioning a type of understanding between selfhood and otherness, set in direct opposition to established routines of current global politics.

In this play, the act of refashioning one’s own sensibility is cast as an opening desired by all characters in an effort to reclaim one’s own territory, beyond and after the moment of trauma. As the confrontation between J.S.

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7. It is indeed surprising that New York reviewers failed to account for the exceptionality and effectiveness of Ensler’s modes and techniques of exposition and argumentation. See, for example, Brantley’s review in *The New York Times* or Murray’s review in *Off Broadway*.

and Melissa reaches its climactic moment, it becomes more than obvious that the course of matters will have to get seriously reformed:

J.S.: These women have suffered terribly and still they are trying to trust us.

MELISSA: Don't lecture me.

J.S.: We are not tape recorders. You do not get to hit and run. Seada didn't have her terrible experience to serve your book.

MELISSA: If people didn't read Seada's story, they would never know it happened.

...

J.S.: OK. You're a lost little girl trying to find yourself in the middle of big scary wars ...

MELISSA: Maybe I am. Maybe I am. (36)

This is not merely a case where both sides may have a point. More importantly, J.S. and Melissa are now more than ever before aware of the critical nature of the moment facing them and painfully conscious of the demands they place on themselves. Trying to pave a new ground in making things intelligible, of investing both their own acts and the refugees' tragic predicament with meaning, proves a daunting endeavor. As a reaction to this deadlock, Seada's story is acted out on stage for a multitude of purposes. On the whole, it is an alternative means of making things matter. The playwright offers the scene as an answer to the impasse of J.S. and Melissa. What is highlighted is the necessity to look deeply into the very essence of things; the very roots, the origin of trauma becomes the targeted and desired area for both on-stage and off-stage audiences. Thus, matters need to be cast in a bare fashion, very much in the vein that Derrida prescribes when he calls for a form of "decomposition ... that would lead back to the indecomposable simplicity of the origin" (46). In this case, the origin is the experience itself recast on stage in terms of an almost therapeutic recreation and reproduction, a competent means of recapturing a critical moment in theatrical terms. The tragic story of the young mother abandoning her house and dropping her baby daughter amidst the chaos of the attack is not simply narrated on stage. Seada's story is on in more than one sense. It is indeed one of the playwright's accomplishments that this narrative is approached critically as a case in point, while also carefully designed so that no one—whether on-stage or off-stage—may remain immune to the dynamics of it. As Seada re-lives the ultimate traumatic moment on stage, a process of

emotional and intellectual probing for the refugees as well as the two American women is initiated.

Informing the aesthetics of the play in more than one sense, Seada's episode ushers in a moment of catharsis for both on-stage and off-stage audiences. The characters appear now ready to confront their fears, feelings and deeper thoughts as they attempt to come to terms with their positioning. J.S. cannot help commenting: "We're not in America, where we get paid not to get involved, Melissa. We're here" (39). Both collaborators proceed with their investigations: Melissa will go on following active verbs like "go," "write," "do" (39), while J.S. will experiment with reforming her means of approaching things. This outward movement towards the wounded terrain of otherness leads to an inward exploration and stresses the necessity for a versatile type of understanding often beyond the confines of ready-made categories and preconceived notions and types of gaining insight. In *Necessary Targets*, the playwright's effectiveness in translating the experience of being exposed directly to the refugees' "insane humanity in the face of catastrophe" (xiv), as noted in her introduction, sheds light on how closely interrelated the acts of making sense of the wounded other's placement and gaining an understanding of one's own position are. It is precisely this pronounced difficulty of making sense of one's own grounding that links Ensler's probings to those Shepard exposes in the last play this discussion focuses on.

### **Figures/States Colonized by Terror**

In *The God of Hell*,<sup>8</sup> Shepard is particularly interested in exploring the act of acquiring an understanding of one's own position within a seriously mutated socio-political terrain. Responding to the new climate permeating life experience in post-9/11 America, Shepard studies his characters as they are confronted with the demanding task of self-placement within a totally new scheme of things and a particularly precarious enveloping context. In the opening scene, the audience is exposed to a peculiarly vague delineation of the government attempted by the couple, Emma and Frank, inhabiting the stage. Equally disconcerting is the fact that the two characters experience great difficulty in offering anything specific and deciding on who their guest, Haynes, actually is and whether all three of them may occupy the same

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8. *The God of Hell* was first produced at the Actors Studio Drama School Theater in New York, in October 2004. The playwright's original plan to present the play just before the 2004 U.S. presidential election was thus fulfilled.

ground. Furthermore, similar to what happens in Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*, in this play the familiar is gradually being displaced by the grotesque: the heartland of America is transformed out of a hospitable, peaceful but also uneventful place into a terrain of no definite dimensions, impossible to be clearly defined, open to all kinds of new threats. This gradual invasion of the grotesque is initiated with the introduction on stage of "a large cookie in the shape of an American flag" (Shepard 7). An entirely realistically conceived setting and an atmosphere of intense familiarity and naturalistic detail are totally disrupted when this incongruous, absurdly funny item intrudes as an agent of an unidentified new order. The audience is brought to realize that, in a place as typically and by definition American as this farmhouse in Wisconsin is, the necessity of a symbol employed to ascribe a national "color" or "quality" to the setting is simply absurd.

The main representative and spokesperson of this absurd emphasis on the national is Welch, an invader arriving unexpectedly, informing Emma that her place is being identified as a target of application for a new policy. Welch is direct, though intentionally vague and indefinite, in outlining his mission: "We've targeted certain outlying areas we feel might have potential—" (11). It remains deliberately unspecified who the agents noted as "we" are or what the policy to be applied actually amounts to. Welch never offers any insight into the particulars of this project or his own background. Most of all, he attempts to redefine the space Emma and Frank occupy by means of a peculiar invasion. The first encounter between Emma and Welch is an instance simultaneously menacing, startling, irritating, indeterminate, and yet comic and of an intense rhythm. Just like the kitsch national paraphernalia, the dialogue between the two characters upsets the almost indisputable equilibrium of the setting prevalent in the first moments of scene one, causing discomfort to the audience. Along similar lines, the blue light emanating from Haynes, the couple's guest, cuts in the atmosphere in an abrupt mode, blending the element of dark humor with that of the unexpected and the menacing. The main recipient of menace is Emma once again: the first time she comes into contact with Haynes she "screams and jumps back," before she accepts her guest's excuse that the blue light is only an indication of static shock (19). However, as scene one draws to its end, Haynes introduces both Emma and Frank to the particular nature of plutonium, the element named after the god of the underworld, in Shepard's terms "the god of hell": "tasteless, odorless and invisible" (26), plutonium remains deadly radioactive for thousand of years. The analogies between the chemical element of plutonium and the element of fear are more than

readily apparent: the condition of terror evolving into a state of absolute panic insidiously enters the stage only to dominate gradually the entire setting, despite Emma's initial emphatic assertion: "I'm not afraid of anything" (31). Habermas' comment on the very elusiveness of terror, the quality ascribing to the phenomenon of terrorism unprecedented dimensions at present, is particularly pertinent in this case: "This intangibility is what lends terrorism a new quality" (qtd. in Borradori 29).

It is precisely this feeling of being free from fear that is being targeted in the second encounter between Emma and Welch. Shepard builds the scene carefully around two conflicting visions of America: Emma's open-door policy is purposefully counterpoised to Welch's rhetoric of national containment:

EMMA: Well, I do mind! You can't just come busting into people's houses like this. Who do you think you are?

WELCH: Busting? I wouldn't exactly call this busting. The door was open—

EMMA: The door was open because this is Wisconsin and we all leave our doors open in Wisconsin. It's the open-door policy.

WELCH: Well, that's a charming custom.

EMMA: It's not a custom, it's a trust. Now, get out! (38)

Emma feels that Welch's rhetoric will help de-define the very notion of home, the heartland of America is about to be colonized and transformed dramatically. However, Welch considers Emma's reaction simply pointless, for the process of containment is already underway, "by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine" (Derrida qtd. in Borradori 25). As the plot develops, Emma tragically recognizes that a cooptation of unimaginable dimensions is already at work in her very own house, since Haynes is already there inhabiting her space and Welch has brought in the rhetoric as well as the atmosphere of menace. In an interesting meta-dramatic instance, it is no one else but Welch who is heard commenting on one of the central themes of the play: "It's extraordinary how blind the naked eye is. No wonder people have so much trouble accepting the truth these days" (41). Welch's observation serves as a direct even if particularly ironic remark on the crisis of sensibility Emma and Frank are caught in, since they are forced to confront this new order entering their space. In his review of Giovanna Borradori's book entitled *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), FrKurt Messick comments on the particular nature of the war on terror that would

also help illustrate why and how these two characters are required to deal with a crisis of unprecedented extensions:

Unlike conflicts such as World War I and World War II, or even the more vaguely defined Cold War or Vietnam War, this is a war where the front-line can be anywhere and nowhere, where the enemies can be anyone and no one, and where the tactics, strategies, motives and hoped-for achievables are so far removed from what traditional political and military methodology deals with that it requires a paradigm shift in our thinking. (“Postmodern Situations, Postmodern Ideas”)

In the second scene, the crisis Emma and Frank face follows a pattern of gradual escalation. The audience is brought to realize that Welch’s presence, as well as his vision and the entire agenda he supports are set deliberately against Emma and Frank and their stance. Welch invades the farmhouse claiming that he “knows” the enemy. The minute he manages to convince Frank that he can really identify the enemy, Welch gains in significance, and thus the first essential phase of the establishment of the rhetoric of absolute panic commences:

EMMA: I don’t know what our government is any more. Do you? What does that mean, “our government”?

FRANK: That means he knows more than us. He’s smarter than us. He knows the big picture, Emma. He’s got a plan.

EMMA: What big picture is that?

FRANK: The Enemy. He knows who the Enemy is.

EMMA: What enemy? (48)

Emma’s direct and disarming questions help foreground the process of serious de-definition of political power that is offered and to which Frank remains oblivious. Welch’s rhetoric redefines and captures anew the very notion of the government from a force committed to the wellbeing and security of the governed people, to an agent who vaguely decides on what or who will be recognized as the enemy. The questions Emma and, only slightly, Frank attempt to formulate remain intentionally unanswered, precisely because they are impossible. In Derrida’s words, a scene dominated by the experience of terror forces one to pose questions of the following type: “From where does this menacing injunction itself come to us? How is it being forced upon us? *Who* or *what* gives us this threatening order?” (qtd. in Borradori 88, emphasis in original).

Scene three opens on a moment defined by the ultimate transformation of the ground the characters occupy. Emma as well as the audience are brought face to face with a serious redefinition of the setting, as Frank abandons his occupation, sells his heifers, and becomes involved in an obscure high-sounding project for the causes of which he is exposed to exactly the same extreme torture that Haynes experiences in the previous scene. Similar to Haynes, Frank finds himself totally divorced from any acts of articulating any essential parts of the narrative of an ideal American topos of freedom, openness and safety. The two male characters suffer as they allow the cooptation of their selves/texts by a deeply mutated socio-political context, spawning in its turn instances of private, inner modifications of unimaginable consequences. Welch appears to have absolute control on both of them by means of the electrical cords attached to their genitalia. It is clearly indicated that this practice of torture is directly linked with the project for the purposes of which the two characters are co-opted. Frank and Haynes emerge on stage as concrete examples, striking, shocking images of physical suffering and mental numbness that the rhetoric of terror establishes. In *The God of Hell*, Shepard portrays a widespread process of co-optation. Not only the house, the activities, the reactions and emotions of the characters are colonized by this new order of panic, but most of all what is explored is a case of co-opted conscience. Johan Callens accurately notes that the playwright resorts to stage imagery “deliberately evoking both *Waiting for Godot* and the much publicized U.S. practices in Irak’s [sic] Abu Ghraib prison” (34). Shepard wishes to voice his own statement on the alarming fact that distinctions between what happens “over there” and what is practiced “over here” are being currently erased in carefully programmed, insidious modes.<sup>9</sup>

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9. The reviewers Elyse Sommer and Paul Taylor, criticizing Shepard for merely “preaching to the choir” (qtd. in Callens 33), chose to downplay the significance of the fact that stage images of this type-if adequately handled-may serve to bring home for the members of the audience feelings, notions, recognitions, and ideas in full force and newly defined form. Furthermore, what these reviewers mainly sought to highlight was their belief that Shepard showed little or no interest in convincing spectators whose points of departure in questioning the peculiarities of the present moment do not necessarily coincide with that of the playwright’s. However, as the present discussion shows, by means of careful and directed employment of plot, dialogue, and characterization, combined with the chilling effect of the above discussed images, Shepard desires to achieve a decisive impact on audiences’ modes of reaction, irrespective of different standpoints.

Purposefully enough, to this mutated terrain the playwright juxtaposes Emma's resistance. In a sonorous voice, precisely because everything around her appears to be muted and frozen, Emma addresses Frank: "Snap out of it!" (55). As scene three develops, for a moment Frank appears to be on the track of recovering his conscience and comes up with the interesting comment: "I miss the Cold War so much." (55). Frank's short-lived experience of epiphany is received by the audience as an intense, comic instance noted for its sarcastic and bitterly ironic qualities. Echoing, and in a sense responding to, a sentiment prevalent among many of the members of Shepard's intended audience, Frank's lines make clear that, in comparison to the atmosphere ushered in by the war on terror, the context of the Cold War emerges as an idyllic topos. At a moment of terminal indefiniteness, a condition defined by the character's utter inability of attaining any type of perspective, this absurd and improbable manifestation of nostalgia can be partly explained and excused on the account that the earlier historical case is viewed as an instance retaining some traces of determinacy. It must be noted that Frank's remark is closely related to his rather hazy realization of the fact that he has been deceived on practical grounds: "You told me my heifers were going to be glorified. Heroic!" (58). However, a minute later, the character succumbs to the overwhelming scheme of things Welch has succeeded in introducing on stage and just synchronizes his step with that of Haynes, who now appears totally programmed and manipulated. The two characters, obeying Welch's orders, follow a course that bears analogous traits to the ones Derrida notes about the track paved by the repetitive use of the term "9/11," being in essence a "litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about" (qtd. in Borradori 86). Feeling that this is a course of a dangerous metamorphosis, Emma desperately strives to drag her husband out of that march: "This isn't you! This isn't who you are! Frank! What have they done to you!?" (59). Standing on the periphery of things, Emma might be feeling helpless, yet she is the only one who retains the hope for a vital sort of sensibility, as she proves capable of passing candid remarks on the extreme absurdity of the context appropriating now both Frank and Haynes. Emma has no answers; just an endless series of pressing questions. Coming to grips with the new reality of terror, the character inevitably encounters the condition that Frank Furedi, in his intriguing and insightful study of the current predominance of fear, outlines as "[the] harrowing experience of insecurity [that is] apparently incurable" (130). Emma finds herself enveloped by the supremacy of terror, a context in which "what is at issue is not just not knowing but the impossibility of knowing" (69).

Shepard relies a lot on the friction created out of the conflict between Emma's stance and Welch's authoritative posture. To her utter bewilderment, Welch responds in words marked by cynicism and paradoxical directness and clarity: "You didn't think you were going to get a free ride on the back of Democracy for ever, did you? Well, did you? What have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility?" (59). Despite her resistance to the reality of co-optation Welch has brought in and although she is capable of passing comments on the mutated condition of Frank and Haynes, Welch now introduces Emma to areas she appears totally incompetent in dealing with. Thus, one more urgent question is added to her long list: how can her own apathy and numbness have led to the current condition of terminal and absurd violence? Bringing the character step by step in direct confrontation with this type of interrogation, Shepard succeeds in establishing an interesting course of evolution for his own line of argumentation, which reaches a culminating point in the final moment of the play. A minute before the lights on stage go off, Emma can only afford to remain speechless, having been exposed to the fact that both she and Frank proved tragically inadequate in attaining an understanding of their own positioning within this seriously redefined scheme of things. Thanks to what appears to her a totally absurd scheme, she is reminded not only of the need for a constant re-assessment of one's own self-placement but also of the significance of an uninterrupted flow of re-examining central values, ideals, and practices that are often relegated routinely to the status of insignificant given facts. Shepard stages a type of sensibility crisis that authorizes for the subject the long-running process of being exposed to phenomena spawned by various techniques of de-defining democracy.<sup>10</sup> Emma is excused in being lost for words and is appropriately asked to ring the bell (60), not vaguely asking for help but raising an alarm. The character aspires to upset the setting, her frantic efforts are meant to stress the need for action and resistance. In *The God of Hell*, Shepard finds chance to stage his own plea, for what Jurgen Habermas calls, "the critical power to put a stop to violence, without reproducing it in circles of new violence, [which] can only dwell in the telos of mutual understanding and in our orientation to this goal" (qtd. in Borradori 38).

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10. The play appropriately remains open-ended; no denouement as such is offered to the audience. Rather, this void and emptiness, created out of the haunting visual and auditory image of Emma ringing the bell, serves to illustrate the playwright's conviction that what is more urgent than anything else is precisely the establishment of a setting, along the lines of which audiences may pursue, on their own, the types of interrogations highlighted throughout the play.

## Conclusion

It is precisely this route, the “orientation” towards a state of thorough understanding of one’s own self-placement vis-à-vis terrains of traumatized experience that all three playwrights discussed here attempt to follow in their own individual and distinctive ways. David Rabe, Eve Ensler and Sam Shepard approach carefully instances of sensibility crises, arising out of settings of generalized conflict and experiment with establishing critical stances and alternative modes in making “crisis” intelligible. In all three works, there is a conscious effort to shake audiences out of the familiarity of monolithic and sterile representations of crises, arguing and proving in practice that what, in the majority of cases, is the most serious facet of “crisis” is nothing else than the very impossibility of attaining a thorough understanding of the moment itself. Their efforts are carefully directed towards an exploration and exposure of all the factors that contribute in establishing a condition where the subject is allowed to capture only glimpses of its own positioning, a scheme along the lines of which one can only afford to synchronize one’s own step in a nonsensical “litany.” As a result of their bold and thorough probing into sensibility crises, these artists succeed in entering multifaceted spheres, ranging from the (im)possibility of healing, in Rabe’s work, to the effort of translating on stage the experience of trauma—while exposing the feeling that in its essence this remains largely untranslatable—in Ensler’s case, to the state of absolute suspension Emma experiences, in the final scene of Shepard’s play.

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