


THE POWER OF THEATRICAL DISCOURSE IN A BELGIAN PRODUCTION OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

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Recent research has failed to elucidate fully the nature of the semiotic link between dramatic and performance texts. Through the reconstruction of a 1988 Brussels production of *The Glass Menagerie*, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between the two texts. This production exemplifies the power of the director (manipulating performance text) in modifying our apprehension of the play's meaning (dramatic text). At times, the director forces us to engage in the process of interpretation, thus inscribing his theatrical style in the openness of postmodernism and creating metadramatic effects. This technique invites us to reinterpret *The Glass Menagerie* as a play closer to postmodernism than has been thought hitherto.



The power of theatrical discourse, its nature and its workings, have often been slighted by scholars of dramatic literature. And yet, drama exists only as duality between printed text and production. Interpretations of plays based solely on close readings offer a limited view of the potential of a dramatic work. Semiotics has sought to remedy this state of affairs and has generated a theory of theatre taking into account its basic double-edged nature. In this respect, Keir Elam and more recent critics (Aston and Savona) have established the semiotic distinction between dramatic text and performance text, the word "text" being understood as texture, as elements woven together. Adhering to poststructuralist tenets, these semioticians define the dramatic text as a "network of factors relating to the represented fiction" on the printed page while the performance text is conceived of as a "complex arrangement of signs, expressive means and actions" as seen on stage (Rouse 146). In other words, the performance text can only be experienced in an activity of production. Despite the pioneering work of Keir Elam, the nature of the relationship between dramatic text and performance text remains obscure and therefore continues to be explored in the works of recent theatre semioticians. Thus far, two factors have been acknowledged as important links between the two texts: the power of the

director to shape the performance text, thus indirectly affecting the dramatic text and, second, the audience's power to define performance and dramatic texts — a function which can vary according to types of societies or epochs. Indeed, in postmodern productions especially, the director often engages the audience's participation. Through manipulation of the performance text, s/he lets the spectators decipher the meaning of the dramatic text. The director prompts them to fill the gap of "indeterminacy" (Vanden Heuvel 1-24) between performance and dramatic texts. According to Vanden Heuvel, performance can even "displace" the dramatic text (5), undermining the author's intentions. Further, in recent years, the relationship between dramatic and performance texts has come to be perceived as unstable, as devoid of closure.

All this of course provides but a sketchy definition of the relationship between the two components of drama. This essay will therefore seek further to elucidate the essence of this link, relying on a concrete example rather than on theoretical considerations. To this end, I shall mainly concentrate on the power of the director in linking theatrical discourse and drama in a performance of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. I thus propose to demonstrate that attending a performance of this particular play can modify our understanding of it. The production I want to analyze, that given by the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Brussels, contributed to establish *The Glass Menagerie* as a play open to a plurality of interpretations. The director, through a skillful use of verbal, physical, and visual elements of theatrical style, was able to reinforce the findings of scholarly investigations or alternately to contradict them. In the production discussed in this essay, the mise-en-scène of Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* clarified the workings of what W. B. Worthen called the "rhetoric of the theatre," i.e., the relationship between drama, stage production and audience interpretation (Worthen 1-11). It coincided with recent research on the playwright's manuscripts. Perhaps unwittingly, the director found a way of accommodating Williams's theatricalism, i.e., his original intent of using a screen projection as a backdrop to the play, in such a way that bore out Brian Parker's arguments about the early drafts of the play. In doing so, the director forced us at times to engage in the process of interpretation, thus inscribing his theatrical style in the openness of postmodernism and creating metadramatic effects

I

In an article written a few years ago, Brian Parker argues that the theatricalism of *The Glass Menagerie* serves a specific purpose. By "theatricalism," the critic refers primarily to the screen device that Williams originally conceived as an important element of his play.¹ On this screen, situated towards the rear of the stage, various textual indications and drawings would have been projected and would have underlined the action

being simultaneously performed in the front stage area. The idea that the screen might be purposeful is reinforced, Parker argues, by a study of the many drafts of the play preserved at the University of Texas at Austin. To Parker, directors err in preferring the screen-less version of the play as this device dilutes the saccharine quality of the play, especially evident in the last scene of the work. By adding a framework to the play, the screen increases the distance between the spectator and the events taking place on the stage, forcing us to accept them with some degree of irony.

Moreover, the use of such a framework highlights the continuity between *The Glass Menagerie* and another play of the Williams canon. The link between Tom and Laura, dramatized within the limits of that framework, foreshadows the meta-theatricality of the brother-sister relationship in Williams's postmodern *The Two-Character Play* (1975). Indeed, that late work depicts actors in the very act of performance.

To Parker, the screen device firmly establishes the complexity of representational effect in *The Glass Menagerie*, by raising its realism to a poetic level far removed from mere naturalism. Parker's plea found echoes in the Brussels revival of *The Glass Menagerie* described below. In this production, the director did not use any screen but resorted to methods which approximated its function in their ability to remove sentimentality from the play. These devices were easier to implement on the stage than on a full-fledged screen, so that they may in the long run prove more endearing to stage practitioners. In other words, the director of the Brussels production struck a balance between a version with and a version without screen. The production thus clearly exhibited the power of the director in establishing the nature of the link between dramatic/performance texts, of which the ensuing performance reconstruction will seek to provide a measure.

II

In the fall of 1988, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* was produced in Brussels at the Théâtre du Vaudeville with Jean-Marc Favorin as director. The French adaptation selected for this production was Marcel Duhamel's, which adequately reflected Williams's poetic inclinations. This particular performance, which I was able to attend on November 18 1988, showed one of the possible ways of transcending the limits of stage realism to achieve what Williams himself termed "plastic theatre." It threw new light on unusual aspects of this drama.

This production revealed a few anachronisms. First, the characters' dress was not historically accurate and resembled modern dress. Nor was it, as Williams requested, symbolic. In the initial scene, Tom appeared in a tuxedo, which constituted a subjective interpretation of Williams's stage directions. Second, the photograph of the father did not present him as a First World War doughboy, as required by Williams and as the overall significance of the

play would have it. Third, the book read by Laura in the production did not date from the period in between the two World Wars, but from the fifties. This, in my opinion, marred the historical framework that Williams had painstakingly established for this drama dealing with the social conditions known in America in the thirties (Debusscher, *York Notes on The Glass Menagerie* 57; Falk 47). Viewed in retrospect, however, these — perhaps intentional — anachronisms equated the framework device intended by Williams, as they forced the public to distance itself from the surface realism of the play.

The main qualities of this production were evident in its “theatre in the round” format. The concomitant proximity existing between public and actors contributed to heighten the “chamber music” essence of this drama and its poetic tonality. In addition, the fact that the actors were playing in the area normally used by the spectators and that, on the other hand, the public was seated on the stage, emphasized the baroque vision of the world as a stage. Moreover, the decor was reduced to a minimum so that the background of the theatre building could still be perceived as such. In other words, the artificial character of the performance was underlined rather than mitigated. This insistence on the border-line between reality and illusion stressed the similarity between *The Glass Menagerie* and Williams’s absurdist drama *The Two-Character Play*, which also revolves around the theme of the relationship between reality and the world of the theatre.² In this fashion, *The Glass Menagerie* could be seen as a precursor of the dramatist’s later absurdist/postmodern experiments. This directorial stance of course confirmed Parker’s argument delineated at the outset of this essay as it added distance between the public and the characters of Williams’s work.

As mentioned above, the documents preserved in the archives of the University of Texas-Austin have now made abundantly clear that Williams at first intended this play to bear a certain resemblance to expressionistic theatre. Some degree of abstraction would have been detected in the set through Williams’s use of the screen described in my first paragraphs. Although this device was eventually removed by Williams to focus on the play’s realistic underpinnings, the director of this production reintroduced comparable expressionistic elements into the structural framework of the play. They were perceptible in three specific instances: in the initial scene, which presented Tom as a successful writer winning an Oscar ceremony award. This certainly was not required by Williams’s stage directions, but the mechanical acting with which it was accompanied forced us to distance ourselves from the subsequent realistic action of the play; the second instance consisted in a mimicked scene opposing Amanda and the school principal. This silent tableau counterpointed Amanda’s own monologue recalling the confrontation. This called for a mixture of realism and expressionism deepening our understanding of the play’s structure. The last noteworthy instance of that technique was the constant presence of maids,

dressed in a characteristic uniform, who removed the decor properties in between the scenes in full view of the audience. Thus, the role of illusion in any theatrical show was again manifest. This addition to Williams's text seemed to be justified because it underlined Tom's potential as a stage magician, a creator of illusion. Thus, *The Glass Menagerie* made explicit its resemblance with the dramas of Eugene O'Neill, who even in expressionistic plays like *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* managed to fuse realistic and expressionistic features.

However, the award ceremony motif was perhaps less effective and appropriate than the other two examples I have provided. Indeed, the director decided to reintroduce it a second time in the epilogue of the play. This blurred, then, the motif of the similarity between Tom, the son, and his father. At the end of the work, Tom should indeed be dressed in a sailor's outfit resembling his father's doughboy's cap. Through this similarity, Williams indicates that Tom, by choosing a vagrant life, might well experience a dark future comparable to his father's, that of World War II (Debusscher, *York Notes on The Glass Menagerie* 44-45) But as in this version Tom wore a tuxedo, this motif was removed from the work and consequently, the play lacked some of its emotional intensity. Moreover, as Tom accepted the award, the various characters of the play moved closer to him. He launched into his last poetic lines in their presence. Such directorial decision seemed to me to lack justification. I would argue that at this moment in the drama, Tom should be left in isolation in order to stress the solitude of the artist motif that concludes the play.³ But again, this representational mode was coherent with the director's decision to tone down the sentimental apparatus of the play and to emphasize its postmodern overtones.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, sentimentalism often threatens to pervade the acting style. However, the actors of this production never gave us the impression that the play was lachrymose. As Tom, Olivier Callebaut certainly possessed the natural looks of a poet. He was considerably aided by his dreamy eyes in the characterization of his part. Despite several weaknesses in vocal technique, he managed to convey the emotional poignancy of his character, especially in the scene confronting him violently with his mother and in the poetic recitation ending the play. As Amanda, Jacqueline Préseau admirably suggested the illusion of aristocracy in which the mother dwells. Through a skillful alternation of vocal registers, she simultaneously made us feel the hysterical and tender-hearted nature of Amanda. As Laura, Pilar Arcas subtly introduced the motif of the limping girl. She did not overdo the character's birth defect, thus reminding us that Laura exaggerates the importance of that handicap and thus stressing its deeply psychological origin. As Jim, Laurent Bruno displayed an incredible verbal virtuosity. In the gentleman caller's confrontation with Tom, I must confess that both Laurent Bruno and Olivier Callebaut too often indulged in a colloquial Parisian pronunciation bearing no resemblance whatsoever with

the type of American English dialect that Williams's characters should adopt. This could nonetheless have tied in with the prevailing directorial wish to extend the meaning of the play from the romantic to the postmodern, again widening the distance between spectators and characters. However, this pronunciation flaw was redeemed by the two actors' excellent sense of humor, to which the audience reacted promptly. Through the various acting decisions I have delineated, the director emphasized Williams's ability freely to combine comic and tragic moods, again in an attempt to heighten the spectator's distance from the drama.

The acting climax of the production lay in the superb interpretation of the scene between Laura and Jim O'Connor. The magic atmosphere emanating from the scene was religious and indeed replete with tragic overtones. This may seem to contradict my previous comments, as this seems to affirm that the final scene reverted to some lyrical and romantic stance. However, the presence of the ironic and distancing framework devised by the director could be felt. The director chose to highlight the often oblique religious themes Williams introduced in this concluding scene (Debusscher, *York Notes on The Glass Menagerie* 67-69; King 85-94). Early on in the play, Jim is described as a potential Savior figure, with the atmosphere of expectancy surrounding his coming in the Wingfield household. Amanda clearly hopes Jim would help Laura to escape the dreariness of their present life. In the last scene, the dramatist parodies the communion ceremony, as Jim offers Laura dandelion wine and presents her with "Life Savers." Williams further undermines Jim's status as a Savior, emphasizing the fact that he breaks Laura's unicorn, a glass figure in her private menagerie. The unicorn is a traditional Christian symbol meant to represent purity. The destruction of the unicorn thus points to Williams's veiled use of irony. This Christian symbolism received an explicit treatment in the performance style. Indeed, the actors, perhaps under the influence of the director, chose to give special weight to nearly every word of that scene and to adopt a delicate mode of delivery allowing *The Glass Menagerie* to glow with all its power. On the other hand, the rapid rhythm of their diction forced some of the sentimentalism of the play to disappear and highlighted the more tragic and ironic overtones of the work.

III

All in all, the Brussels Théâtre du Vaudeville production of Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* allows us to clarify the notion of directorial power. This power can be seen as a specific choice of the means to fill in the gap of indeterminacy between dramatic and performance texts. Power was concretized in this production by a constant desire to introduce a distance between spectators and actors, by efforts to reduce the play's sentimentalism, and by various adaptations of Williams's distancing screen device. Second,

the power of the director repositioned the relationship between dramatic and performance texts. In other words, the decoding of the performance text no longer remained subsidiary to the interpretation of the dramatic text but, on the contrary, became complementary to it. By emphasizing on the stage the mixture of poetic realism and expressionism inherent in the work, stressing its religious dimensions and pointing to its affinities with the theatre of the Absurd, this production further established the power of theatrical discourse in our understanding of *The Glass Menagerie*.

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Notes

1. Parker is not the only critic to recommend the screen version of *The Glass Menagerie*: see Christian Jauslin 129, 123-25; and George Brandt 184-85.
2. For a thorough study of *The Two-Character Play*, see an article by Sy Kahn, "Listening to Out Cry: Bird of Paradox in a Gilded Cage."
3. The motif of the artist's predicament, probably inspired by Hart Crane's poetry, pervades the work of Williams. See Gilbert Debusscher, "Minting their Separate Wills': Tennessee Williams and Hart Crane."

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Η πρόσφατη έρευνα δεν κατάφερε να διαφωτίσει πλήρως τη φύση του σημειωτικού συνδέσμου μεταξύ των δραματικών και παραστασιολογικών κειμένων. Μέσω της αναδόμησης μιας παράστασης, του *Γυάλινου Κόσμου* στις Βρυξέλλες το 1988, είναι δυνατό να επιτευχθεί μια καλύτερη κατανόηση της σχέσης μεταξύ των δύο κειμένων. Αυτή η παράσταση καταδεικνύει τη δύναμη του σκηνοθέτη (που χειρίζεται το κείμενο της παράστασης) να καθορίσει τον τρόπο που προσλαμβάνουμε το νόημα του έργου (του δραματικού κειμένου). Μερικές φορές ο σκηνοθέτης μας αναγκάζει να ασχοληθούμε με τη διαδικασία της ερμηνείας, εγγράφοντας έτσι το θεατρικό του ύφος μέσα στις ανοιχτές δομές του μεταμοντερνισμού και δημιουργώντας μετα-δραματικά αποτελέσματα. Αυτή η τεχνική μας καλεί να επανερμηνεύσουμε το *Γυάλινο Κόσμο* ως ένα έργο που βρίσκεται εγγύτερα στο μεταμοντερνισμό απ' όσο έχει μέχρι τώρα θεωρηθεί.