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Making the Vision a Reality:
Staging the Unreal in Realist Theatre

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By
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Introduction

When Krogstad first enters in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, he tells Nora, "I'm sorry... but the front door was open. Perhaps someone forgot to shut it" (Rudall 38). On its surface, this is a harmless apology; it could even be kind and considerate, if one overlooks the *inconsiderate* detail of his not having been invited inside in the first place. However, closer examination of this greeting reveals several key features of the genre of theatre known as dramatic realism, and hints at the later mingling of visionary elements with it, which is to be the focus of this paper.

Krogstad's reference to the front door is nothing out of the ordinary. It is a simplified example of how realism involves the portrayal of domestic scenarios and relationships. The conflicts presented are typical and familiar to the audience members. In the scene in question, two such conflicts present themselves. The first is that Krogstad has entered the Helmers' home uninvited; the second is that he will, later in the scene, attempt to blackmail Nora into persuading her husband Torvald to let Krogstad keep his position at the bank, or else risk exposing her dishonest monetary practices. Marital tension, a familiar conflict which escalates in the pages to follow, leaps to the surface of the play, catalyzed by the entrance of this third-party character from the outside: Krogstad. Through the door in this scene, the outside (both in the form of a new character, and of an uncomfortable conflict) finds its way in, and that principle is another key component of realism. The fact that a reference to the mechanism which brings the outside world in (the front door) issues from the mouth of an outside element brought in to the set (Krogstad) is a masterstroke on Ibsen's part that reminds us of this, and helps us see that the characters in dramatic realism are both trapped by the familiar, and threatened by the unknown "outside." Often, the struggle in a realist play centers around a theme of trying to escape from

the confining environment and circumstances signified by the set, or whatever attempts to trap them from the outside.

Krogstad's reference to the open front door is also a deliberate tactic on Ibsen's part, a skillful and subtle reminder of the function of the set in a realist production. While Ibsen did not invent the box (or fixed) set, a type of set characterized by one or two rooms, enclosed by all but the wall in front of the audience (the invisible "fourth wall") and framed by the proscenium arch, he did textualize it, meaning that he was the first to have his characters comment so openly on it. This is what makes Krogstad's announcement about the front door so much more meaningful than an idle comment passing as some sort of awkward conversation starter. If the set is to be ignored, then essentially, it is also to be denied, invisible; but Krogstad's intentional remark about the set reinforces it for us, and makes it real as a recognized and confining enclosure for the characters. For the first time, the set becomes more than a place in which the action unfolds; it is an environment toward which characters can react. It is this distinction that partly allows for visionary elements to make their way in, since imaginative things, which could otherwise only be remembered or evoked in words alone, have permission to become fully realized in the set as things to which the characters can respond.

Krogstad's comment about the open door also reminds us about the nature of conflict in a realist work. The characters are simultaneously threatened and lured by the things that make their way in from the outside, and the ease with which the open door enables one to pass both out of and into the set, represents the delicate connection between the two tendencies. The door in this scene has been left open as a practical way to enable Krogstad, a threatening "outside" force, to enter. But it has also been left open because Nora realizes at a subconscious level, unable to

be articulated, that she yearns to leave the confines of the set and the restricting institution of marriage. The open door is a subtle, but purposeful, prodding of her towards an escape she does not even realize she needs, and signifies that the unknown that enters from the unfamiliar outside can offer salvation, in much the same way that visionary forces act in the plays I will analyze in this paper. In Krogstad's casual comment on the thing that can allow for one to leave the set, he, too, hints that realism's strictures can be broken, as I will explore in realist plays that make deliberate use of visionary elements, and which I have chosen to analyze in my argument.

If dramatic realism involves normal scenarios, then visionary theatre invokes concepts that would not be found in the ordinary lives of the audience members: stagings of memories and dreams, or ghosts, for example. I will narrow the analysis of visionary theatre in dramatic realism to its presence in a few select plays: Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *The Master Builder* (1893); August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987) and *Two Trains Running* (1990); Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947); Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949); and Elizabeth Egloff's *The Swan* (1993). How and why did the use of dreams, memories, and visions change over the course of a century to bring the readers of these works such different manifestations of the unreal, and what is it about realist theatre that even allows for the presence of the supernatural? What this paper will attempt to prove is that the introduction of visionary, unreal elements into a realist work is usually intended to further exemplify key realist themes of entrapment, escape, and the impact of the past on the present, by offering characters freedom from their struggles when they cannot liberate themselves by realist means alone.

A Doll's House

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, an abusive and controlling marital relationship imprisons housewife Nora in her home. This basic story outlines two components of realist theatre: one, the focus on everyday interactions among humans, seen here in marriage; and two, the imprisonment of a character within a fixed set, one that represents her entire house. In fact, in this play, these two factors complement each other, and as Torvald's grip on Nora intensifies, so does the menacing nature of the box set as the thing that keeps her strangled in this oppressive relationship. The title of the play itself, *A Doll's House*, indicates that Nora has little agency, and is made to do Torvald's bidding, as a doll would. His control of her is what makes her an instrument for his own entertainment and pleasure. When she dances the tarantella for him in Act Two, he instructs her manner of movement:

TORVALD: (*playing*) Slower! Slower!

NORA: This is the only way I know how!

TORVALD: Not so violently, Nora!

NORA: No, this is right!

TORVALD: (*stopping playing*) No. No. That's all wrong. (Rudall 83-84)

In this short exchange, Torvald reveals his controlling nature by contradicting everything his wife does, eventually telling her that her performance is "all wrong." One can almost picture him manipulating her as a puppeteer would control a marionette with strings, or, as the play's title suggests, like someone would direct the movements of a doll. In the last line of the above excerpt, Torvald might as well be commenting on Nora's person in her entirety, since in other scenes, his disapproval of her habits and his concern for the way she presents herself demonstrate

other attempts to gain control over her. For example, he chides her for the macaroons he suspects she has been hiding in the first Act:

TORVALD: Little Miss Sweet Tooth didn't make a little detour down to the
patisserie?

NORA: No. Honestly, Torvald.

TORVALD: Not even a little nibble?

NORA: No. Not a bite.

TORVALD: Not even a macaroon or two...?

NORA: No, Torvald. Honestly, I prom —

TORVALD: It's all right, it's all right... I'm only joking. (Rudall 16-17)

Torvald's persistence in getting his wife to admit that she has been neglecting her trim figure in eating macaroons speaks to his obsession with controlling her appearance, and his haste to say that he was "only joking" at the end of this exchange is an attempt to play off the intensity of his fear. If she eats macaroons, he reasons, she will gain weight, and would no longer be worthy of parading around the town as his prize. Not only does this present evidence of his desire for control, but it also suggests that he does not love Nora, since to him she is only an object to be owned and shown off, like a doll. "Be my own little lark, as always," he commands her in Act Two (Rudall 85). His use of the word "own" as a sign that he thinks Nora is his property, as well as the addition of the phrase "as always," which signifies that their relationship has unfolded in this way ever since they met, confirms Torvald's controlling nature.

But the conflict here is not so simple as that between one husband and one wife, nor is the lesson to be imparted from it as obvious as concluding that one must escape from such a

threatening situation. Rather, Ibsen uses the specifics of Nora and Torvald's situation, and the way in which the latter attempts to control his wife's behavior, to demonstrate the restraining, entrapping social institution of marriage as a whole. There are few places in which we can find domestic situations so characteristic of realism more than we find them in marriage, and in this play, it is marriage that keeps Nora tethered not only to the ideals of what Torvald would like for her to be, but also to what society in general would have her be.

When Nora is in the process of announcing her departure to Torvald, three key things occur that help us interpret a break with realism. First, Torvald commands Nora with a statement typical of a husband who is expected to provide, in the traditional sense, for a wife: "You must rely on me. I will advise you and give you directions..." (Rudall 107) Indeed, Torvald has been directing Nora throughout the play to act as he prefers, to obey him unquestioningly as women were traditionally expected to do to their husbands. On the following page, Nora tells Torvald from offstage that she is "taking off [her] costume" (Rudall 108). Pages later, she tells Torvald that she has a "duty to [herself]" and that she "must think things over for [herself] and try to understand them" (Rudall 113). In this series of dialogue, Nora reclaims her independence over herself. She "takes off the costume" of the typical motherly, wifely role, and breaks free from the restricting limits of the societal institution of marriage, in a move that directly opposes the type of domestic situation that epitomizes realism.

At the end of the play, however, all she must do to escape is to leave her own home through the front door. Given the nature of *A Doll's House* as a paradigm of dramatic realism, this action is especially significant because it reinforces the entrapping influence of the set, along with the entrapping nature of the institution of marriage. As she departs, she says to Torvald, "I

know that I will often think of you... and the children... and this house” (Rudall 118). Her pointed addition of “this house” to the end of her pronouncement is a nod to her entrapping role as a mother and a wife, and the confining house. As far as dramatic realism in its most basic definition will allow, this is the ideal way to escape from what troubles her, and to find freedom in her independence.

The Swan

Elizabeth Egloff’s realist play, *The Swan*, bears many similarities to *A Doll’s House*, but its protagonist escapes her confinement via visionary means. The name of the protagonist herself — Dora — rhymes with “Nora” in an obvious effort to equate the two characters. Dora lives alone and plays mistress to a married man named Kevin. She remains trapped by her dependence on Kevin in the same way that Nora is trapped by the dependence on Torvald that is expected of a wife in marriage. While not attacking the domestic institution of marriage in the way that Ibsen does (since Dora and Kevin are not married), Egloff does assert the importance of female independence and freedom. But this time, in a departure from realism, she uses a swan-turned-man (consistently referred to in the text as the “Swan”) to help Dora realize her independence, rather than using the set, as Ibsen did for Nora at the end of *A Doll’s House*. The Swan “hits the window” from the outside of Dora’s home at the beginning of the play (Egloff 7), and becomes a visionary tool when he transforms into a man. The moment of his bizarre transformation is described thus: “...the wings, feathers, skin, everything falls back, and a man rolls out of the basket, skitters, and stands up on his feet, new-born” (Egloff 11-12). His transition from bird

to man is what allows Dora to metaphorically transition from woman to bird, as his appearance in her life catalyzes the search within for the part of herself that can fly.

But why is a visionary approach necessary in order to grant Dora her independence? Why can she not open the door of her own house, as realism would typically demand, and free herself that way? Let us begin to answer these questions by remembering that realism is characterized largely by the rigid parameters of a box set, and by external, domestic issues unfolding among individuals. The focus on the external nature of the box set mirrors the focus on these issues, and thus, leaving her house through the front door is a sufficient way to establish Nora's independence.

Dora's problems consist more of internal woes. Yes, she has her own problems in her relationship with Kevin. Kevin manipulates her into feeling dependent on him in the same way that Torvald convinces Nora to obey him: "You don't want me to support you. You say you do, but you don't. You never did" (Egloff 10). He intends to arouse guilt in Dora so that she *will* succumb to allowing Kevin to provide for her, as traditional expectations of men's and women's roles would demand. Similarly, Kevin's repeated insistence that Dora does not love him (Egloff 14-15) is also meant to create a sense of guilt that can only be mitigated by her remaining chained to him, and attempting to prove that she *does* love him.

Yet when Dora uses the Swan as a presence on which to project her own worries and fears, we can see that her problem is deeply ingrained in her psyche, and therefore of a far more internal nature than that of her counterpart in *A Doll's House*: "love is the only thing that matters if I could only get me some I could laugh again I could eat again I could belong to the world again" (Egloff 39). But notice in the above quote, which lacks any punctuation and proceeds as

a manic train of thought, that Dora is unable to express in plain terms exactly what it is that troubles her (in this case, probably that her history of failed relationships has made her insecure), and this is why the Swan appears as a visionary element. Not only does he convey her inner struggle, but he does so at a time when even she cannot explain her predicament in words (if she could, she would do so). He seems to know her better than she knows herself, suggesting that visionary elements allow for a keener understanding of the conflict in a play than dialogue alone, in strict realist fashion, could. And it is that perception that is key to understanding *why* visionary elements are used in realist theatre, and why they can allow for liberation, or resolution, where realism cannot: where characters cannot speak, visionary elements can.

Once he has heard Dora's worries, and incorporated them into his own being by repeating them to her, The Swan is in the perfect place to offer an antidote to her fears. He assumes the persona of an Italian lover who exemplifies the romance she envisions, and Dora proclaims, "This is a dream" (Egloff 41). Indeed, it is a dream, a multilayered one in which the visionary Swan is now at the heart of an imaginary sequence. But it is this dream, and Dora's growing intimacy with the Swan as the play progresses, while she simultaneously distances herself from Kevin, that ultimately pushes her to break through the window with the Swan at the end of the play and find her independence. This move is both in keeping with realism's emphasis on the set, and on the visionary as providing a means of escape, and it is all the more powerful because the solution has originated within her. The visionary creature of the Swan is necessary in this play, because he demonstrates that visionary elements can solve the problems that realism presents when the strictures of realism alone cannot allow for this.

Two characters, Nora and Dora, faced with a similar problem, find escape in two different ways, thanks to the introduction of the visionary in *The Swan*. But this dramatic shift from having no extraordinary elements included in realism in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to the introduction of the fantastical character of the Swan in Egloff's work did not happen overnight, nor without a century of gradual movement toward the extreme that was pioneered by Ibsen. As the father of realism, he himself began to stretch the boundaries of realism and to define the circumstances under which the unreal could become a part of it, at the same time that he was helping to shape realism as a genre in its own right. So Ibsen was simultaneously the chief pioneer of modern dramatic realism and the first to suggest a break from the tradition: "[his] plays extend the realist method into mythic, historical, and archetypal dimensions, and they are... multilayered" (Davis and Johnston 4).

The Master Builder

The Master Builder offers a prime example of Ibsen's inclination toward the unnatural. In this play, the character of Solness longs for an escape from his wife, a "dead woman" (McFarlane and Arup 338) whom he no longer loves. He feels imprisoned in his house, represented by the fixed set, and "indebted" to his wife (McFarlane and Arup 308) following the aftermath of a fire that stole their children from them. So Ibsen introduces the character of Hilde who, although she is an embodied and real presence on the stage, offers Solness release from his predicament in the way a visionary force would do. Solness confides in her, making her a sort of alter ego of his, in the same way that the Swan in Egloff's play becomes one for Dora. When she speaks of castles in the sky, she reflects what Solness would choose for himself if his circumstances al-

lowed for it, just as the Swan's flight reflects the part of Dora that she cannot access. And the discussion of a fantastical world that is different from the box set on the stage reinforces the importance of environment in realism, while pointing to its deficiencies. It suggests that freedom can only be found if the strictures of realism are broken, as they would be if Solness could leave the confines of his home for the castles of which Hilde speaks. As it is, however, the setting she proposes is only a dream that does not become real.

Yet this dream is tantalizing for Solness: "Haven't you ever noticed," he asks Hilde, "how seductive, how inviting... the impossible is?" (McFarlane and Arup 315). The "impossible," which in this case, is the kingdom and the castle in the sky, is "seductive" and "inviting" precisely *because* it is impossible. And paradoxically, the only thing that offers escape, this "seductive," "inviting" impossibility, will never be attained precisely because it is not real, and Ibsen operates from such a realist foundation that he is not willing to invoke the unreal in a material way on the stage. But the unreal, the visionary, is still the only thing that offers even a *chance* of escape where reality cannot.

With this specific example in *The Master Builder*, Ibsen merely edges toward the impossibility and the fantasy by suggesting it in the words of his characters. The fantasy does not emerge in a material way on the stage, because Solness' internal struggle is not such that it demands a fully embodied visionary representation onstage. His problems, concerned as they are with his wife, do not require a visionary element to provide release for internal problems. But in some ways, Hilde *is* a visionary element, because she serves more as an unreal reflection of Solness himself than as a character with motivations and thoughts of her own. Certainly, the relationship between her and Solness is only a fantasy, too: "If you've in fact been waiting for me all

these ten years,” he asks her, “why didn’t you write to me? Then I could have answered you,” (McFarlane and Arup 327). Hilde responds to this query by saying, “No, no, no! That’s just what I didn’t want.” She did not want their relationship to materialize; the fantasy was enough for her, and the possibility was inviting and seductive enough on its own. But it is her presence in his life, however much of a vision she might be, and however silly the dreams she proposes are, that allows Solness to entertain the idea of escape, which proves again how visionary forces, in whatever form they come, can provide escape where realism cannot.

Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*

Ibsen continues to simply suggest unreal elements in his work by introducing in another of his plays, *Ghosts*, the possibility of one such ghost, which is in itself unreal. Typically, of course, when someone refers to a ghost, he or she is usually discussing an apparition or a spirit of someone who has died. But while that is indeed the kind of ghost that will soon be discussed in greater detail when referring to August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, the ghosts in Ibsen’s play of the same name are paradoxically not of the spectral variety. Instead, what is true of the ghosts there that also applies to the one found in *The Piano Lesson* is that they both carry reminders of the past. And when one considers this qualification, is that not essentially what a ghost is, at its very core — a representation, or an impression, in whatever ethereal form it comes, of something that existed in the past, attempting to make its mark on the present? Because the impact of the past on the present is another critical component of realism, realism in fact invites the especial introduction of ghosts in these works, and their presence appropriately complements realism.

In Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving, the wife of a deceased Naval Captain, struggles over her unfaithful husband's recent passing. She admits that she took control of their house following her discovery of an affair he was having with one of their servants: "Then I swore to myself that this would have to stop! So I took control in the house... complete control... over him and everything else. Because now I had a weapon against him, you see, and he didn't dare say anything" (McFarlane and Arup 118). Though by the time this play begins, the Captain as a physical presence no longer exists, his influence remains in the control Mrs. Alving still exerts over the house, in the money of his which she has decided to use to build an orphanage, and in the return home of her son Oswald. Therefore, he continues to haunt her, imprisoning her along with the house that is, in itself, so representative of realism. Mrs. Alving refers to the power of the past in the following lines:

[What haunts us are] all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs... It's not that they actually live on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as the sands of the sea. And here we are, all of us, abysmally afraid of the light. (McFarlane and Arup 126)

Because the Captain is now dead, he might as well have become one of these "old defunct" theories or beliefs himself. Yet Mrs. Alving still holds on to him through her control of the house, letting the ghost of her past with him continue to haunt her. And when she uses the first person plural pronoun of "us" at the end of her speech, she includes herself among the ghosts that wander aimlessly, themselves "abysmally afraid of the light." The "light" for Mrs. Alving can there-

fore be understood as everything that awaits her outside of her house, the things that create a source of conflict within the play by asserting their presence in her hitherto comfortable world of control characterized by her house. The “light” is the truth in the world, which Mrs. Alving must boldly confront at some point, and it exists outside of the box set proposed by realism.

One example of this “light,” of a reality that Mrs. Alving is uncomfortably forced to face, exhibits itself in the form of her son Oswald. When he returns home, accompanied by a venereal disease he inherited from his father, he reminds his mother of him, thereby bringing his ghost to life for her. He tells her that his doctor described his condition as “the sins of the fathers [being] visited upon the children” (McFarlane and Arup 138), clearly indicating the haunting, lingering effect that his father still has, now in a physically observable way in his son’s presence back in Mrs. Alving’s life. And he makes a sound that causes her to remember her husband right at the exact moment when she tells a pastor that she is relieved to finally rid the house of the father’s presence. Oswald’s presence at this coincidental moment, as the symbol of his father’s ghost, provides an effective reminder of her haunting. The key is that in this play, only Mrs. Alving is haunted by her past, which helps explain why a ghost in the phantom way that we typically expect to see it, never emerges onstage here. Because it exists only in her thoughts, it does not need to appear onstage in order to show the audience that it only manifests itself for her; Ibsen’s ghost here is interior only, yet it links Mrs. Alving’s past with her present world.

August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* also features a ghost, but this time, it does not limit its influence to just one person. If we consider the interiority of Mrs. Alving’s ghost, we can determine that we never see it onstage because it is personal. Though the things that haunt her arise from circumstances outside of herself, Mrs. Alving is the only one haunted. While Dora’s trou-

bles were deeply personal in *The Swan* as well, her distress is sufficient for the entrance of a visionary force to help relieve her burden and free her, whereas the failure of a visual, fully-embodied visionary element to appear onstage mirrors the failure of Mrs. Alving to ever escape from the things that keep her trapped. But the “ghost” as seen here serves as an emphatic reminder of the impact of the past on the present, a key realist theme. The ghost in Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, however, assumes a communal nature in order to allow for the escape of an entire people from the historical, cultural binds that have held them hostage.

This play, too, highlights the impact of past on present by delving into the struggle that the Charles family faces when the question surfaces of purchasing the land where their ancestors worked as slaves. When Sutter, the last member of the Caucasian family line that once owned the Charleses, passes away, this gives Boy Willie, a young member of the Charles family, the chance to reverse the status quo that has persisted for years, by selling the family’s antique piano for the money he needs to buy the land. In the midst of this prospect, however, the ghost of Sutter emerges to challenge Boy Willie’s intentions and create conflict.

Sutter’s ghost symbolizes that the past is neither as far gone nor as easily abandoned or escaped from as Boy Willie wishes to believe, and he emerges to prove that the battle with the ghosts of one’s past is not so easily won. Because of the Charles family’s previous servitude to the Sutters, his ghost represents the Charleses’ past. But more than that, the fact that the ghost of a Caucasian man continues to haunt an African-American family, and that *every* African-American character onstage can hear him when he emerges (even a girl who is *not* a member of the Charles family), makes the situation as a whole representative of race relations between the two groups. Everyone hears the ghost because servitude and the potential for equality, in this case,

owning one's own land, are issues that touch African-Americans as a whole and have shaped their history, and the characters in the play are only parts and representatives of that whole.

That said, Sutter's ghost is first only visible to the character of Boy Willie's sister Berniece (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* 12), and it is she who must forcefully expel him by calling upon her ancestors in a song she plays on the antique piano at the end of the play. And although others *hear* the ghost throughout the play, Boy Willie is the only one to wrestle it at the end, as he refuses to run away from his family's past and encourages Berniece to do the same:

Berniece recognizes the empowering force that can come through embracing one's history when she sees the fearlessness with which her brother wrestles with Sutter's ghost. Finding the courage to join her brother in battle, she plays the piano and calls out the names of her ancestors in song. Only then does the ghost of Sutter dissipate. Having looked to her ancestors for strength, Berniece discovers the healing power of cultural and family pride" (Elkins 95).

As she begins her song, Wilson notes in the stage directions that "it is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle" (*The Piano Lesson* 106). In driving Sutter's ghost out of her home, she is also finally ready to fight her past by calling upon the names of the people there. Because it is then that Berniece finally owns her "cultural and family pride," she represents the importance of looking to one's past to escape from it and to help shape the present, and the ownership of African-American cultural history in general.

Berniece's confrontation with Sutter's ghost links her past to her present, and, as the use of visionary elements is ideally supposed to do, frees her from the internal reality she is fighting. Berniece is just one member of a race that has long been subjected to the status quo mandating

Caucasian superiority, and to a history of racism. Her staunch refusal to sell the family piano in order to re-obtain the land that rightfully belongs to her family suggests that she is still something of a prisoner to this history. She, like Dora, is trapped in a situation from which she does not exactly know how to escape, but unlike Dora, she carries the burden of an entire race. This makes her the ideal catalyst for the destruction of the ghost *and* a confrontation of the cultural history between Caucasians and African-Americans at the end of the play, and it explains why the visionary force which appears does not merely reflect some aspect of herself, as an alter-ego would. It also reveals that cultural significance can supplement the personal fears discussed previously in this paper, as a reason for visionary intrusion. For August Wilson, “the thesis that ‘race matters’ as a foundation for group identification based on shared biological and cultural roots lies at the heart of [his] theory of artistic production” (Shannon and Williams 97), and it is this larger political focus that makes Berniece’s internal reality, one which reflects the shared history of her people, manifest itself in the form of a ghost that resonates with every member of this culture. The cultural context necessitates the recognition of a realist element onstage in a way that Ibsen’s personal ghost for Mrs. Alving was never meant to do, and it provides freedom for the characters in a way that realist dialogue would not.

Two Trains Running

August Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* is another play that introduces a ghostlike presence to emphasize the realist theme of escape from one’s past by facing it unflinchingly. Aunt Ester is an implied presence who is rumored to be able to help those in dire straits escape from their current circumstances. She never actually appears onstage, and is only ever discussed by the char-

acters as a legendary figure with a reputation for sorting out and solving people's problems, and helping people to land back on their feet in trying times. The fact that the audience never sees her, coupled with her age at 322 years old, makes her an ethereal presence like the ghosts discussed above, and a mere "suggestion" of the unreal as proposed initially by Ibsen. Aunt Ester is either lying about her age, or she is a spirit who has been dead some time. If she were a living, breathing, physical presence at this point, it would make more sense to bring her onstage than to leave her outside of it, but her absence makes her a ghost, which is crucial because a ghost, as discussed above in relation to *Ghosts* and *The Piano Lesson*, is a more tangible illustration of how the past can impact the present in a visionary way.

Holloway first speaks of Aunt Ester's mystical, magical effect on people: "[Reverend Samuel] had all his money going to his church and they arrested him for income-tax evasion. That's when he went to see Aunt Ester. He walked in there a reverend and walked out a prophet. I don't know what she told him" (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 25-26). Whatever Aunt Ester advised the Reverend about, or instructed him or inspired him to do, the effect she produced in him was magical in its life-altering ability. Holloway also explains later that Aunt Ester "got that bad energy off [him]." These mystical encounters hardly belong in the realist tradition of keeping the situations that unfold onstage close to reality, and Aunt Ester's implied mysterious physical presence outside of the fixed set indicates an acknowledgement of this. By introducing her presence offstage, August Wilson not only uses the visionary to intervene in realism, but he also initiates a dialogue between realism and visionary theatre, arguing that it is, at times, necessary for the two to be part of a mutual relationship.

Something that is central to the story and the transformation of the characters in *Two Trains Running*, that is, Aunt Ester, lies outside of the walls of the set. This fact says that realism as a genre on its own cannot provide all of the answers an audience might need in attempting to interpret a play. This point is further emphasized when Holloway says, “You go up there talking about you wanna get rich and she won’t have nothing to do with you” (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 25). Monetary concerns create the focal point around which many themes in realism revolve, and Ester’s verbal refusal to handle matters of this nature also signifies a rejection of the genre of realism as characterized by this. Inserting Ester as a ghostly offstage presence is one way for August Wilson to explain why visionary intervention is necessary in realism. But then, why *keep* her offstage, as an implied ethereal presence? Why not bring her onstage as a character? Would that not have the same effect?

As mentioned above in relation to Sutter’s ghost in *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson focuses on a reclamation of African-American cultural history and identity, by making Sutter’s ghost a powerful indicator of an entire people’s past as slaves in early American history. The characters’ triumphant confrontation with him at the end shows their ownership of the past, and the transformation that stems from it. Certainly the character of Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running* is intended to be another representation of the history of African-American people. Aunt Ester’s attempts to improve individual lives are also rooted in looking the past squarely in the face and owning it to become something different, but as someone who has survived in whatever sense for 322 years, she is also a representation of the course of African-American history, which has existed in the United States for about the same number of years, by the period of time in which this play is set at the beginning of the twentieth century. With regard to the character of

Aunt Ester, Wilson has commented, “[She] says it most clearly: you’ve got to return to your past... It’s a matter of reclaiming the past, as opposed to discovering who you are. I think we know who we are, but it’s a matter of reclaiming and saying — irrespective of recent political history — that we come from a long line of honorable people” (Bryer and Hartig 157).

So for August Wilson, his use of the supernatural in the characters of Sutter’s ghost and Aunt Ester furthers his goal of relating the importance of owning African-American cultural history, of making them the “cultural custodians of [their] art, [their] literature and [their] lives. To give expression to the spirit that has been shaped and fashioned by [African-American cultural] history is of necessity to give voice and vent to the history itself” (Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, 36). It is only in doing this, Wilson determines, that they can free themselves from any feelings of inferiority. The “spirit” to which Wilson refers above is an energizing force, akin to a breath of life, that has endured as the essence of African-American culture throughout the centuries. How much more resonant it is to let this “spirit,” be embodied by the spirit (a word which means “ghost” in this context) of Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running*, and Sutter’s ghost in *The Piano Lesson*. The double meaning of the word “spirit” as both a force of life and an ethereal presence invites the use of a ghost to illustrate it, which is why Wilson inserts the visionary Aunt Ester (and Sutter’s ghost in *The Piano Lesson*), of dubious reality, to represent African-American cultural history, rather than choosing a character to proclaim her significance in words. This is a brilliant technical move.

It is also more credible for Ester, someone who has allegedly witnessed the entire span of the culture’s history, to “give voice and vent to [it],” than to have any other character speak of it without the authority that comes from surviving its duration. West comments on page 76 that

when a person dies, he or she becomes “a part of everything that come before. And that’s a great thing. Ain’t nothing you can do in life compared to that” (Wilson, *Two Trains Running*). Ester’s credibility as a representative of the cultural history is therefore intensified because, if she is, in fact, dead, then she is not only a symbol of the history, but she is a part of it herself in a way in which the living characters are not. Again, this gives Ester, as a visionary force, more authority than does a realist conversation between characters.

Wilson’s use of visionary forces is tailored to his goal of sharing the importance of African-Americans owning their cultural history. Yet he also uses her in ways that supplement the claim that visionary forces are to be used where the boundaries of realism end: where characters can no longer understand or articulate enough of their own plights to explain it in words, or to help themselves. Aunt Ester does indeed offer to help her clients, but she does so only when the clients have already done all that they can.

When West, for example, complains that Aunt Ester has asked him to throw twenty dollars in the river and return to her, with no guarantee of whether he will receive the money again, Holloway replies, “You want somebody else to do it for you. Aunt Ester don’t work that way. She say you got to pull your part of the load” (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 76). This exchange speaks to Aunt Ester’s presence as a visionary element, and how she can be used as an example of how they are best used, and why. Aunt Ester will not help someone surmount his or her problems without that person also putting forth some individual effort. However, when the person can go no further on his or her own, Aunt Ester picks up the slack. It is a cooperative, mutual partnership, as Wilson is suggesting realism and visionary theatre can be; she is meant to help people who can no longer help themselves.

This certainly resonates with the presence of visionary elements as we have encountered them in the plays I have previously discussed as well. The situations that call for visionary implementation are situations in which characters can solve their problems no further on their own because, they cannot even express to themselves what the problem might be. Consider, for example, *The Swan*'s Dora, who lacks the confidence to see herself as the object of an abusive relationship with Kevin, yet is able to break free with the entrance of the Swan. Aunt Ester helps point us to this usefulness of the visionary in a realist work, as she, in a similar way, gives Memphis a voice he did not know he had, in giving him inspiration he needs to fight for the money he needs: "You got to go back and pick up the ball" (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 109). But this only happened after he did his best, and threw twenty dollars in the river first.

As Holloway says, "Aunt Ester got a power cause she got an understanding. Anybody live as long as she has is bound to have an understanding" (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 22). Ester's understanding is such that it surpasses the understanding of any of the other normal, living characters. For this reason, she is able to intervene where characters cannot comprehend or articulate their own circumstances, either as an individual understanding for themselves, or as an understanding that would allow for a conversation with another, which would fall into realist parameters.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the ways in which the visionary infringes on the real, while demonstrating how the genres can seamlessly intertwine. Blanche DuBois, a real character whom the audience sees on the stage, and who is readily recognized by

the other characters, becomes a sort of visionary tool in herself, thanks to the false ways in which she represents herself. While she may not be unreal in the same sense as the specters in *The Piano Lesson* and *Two Trains Running*, for example, her “reality,” carefully constructed as it is to be selective and manipulative, is an illusion — a falsehood — in itself. It is as though, even when the dilemmas which visionary theatre is intended to solve *can* be spoken aloud (as in this case, they potentially could, through a character who exists in a real way on the stage), they still resist this verbal acknowledgement, because only a visionary element can most effectively communicate the issue. This is why Blanche’s genuine thoughts and fears finally betray themselves through the visionary element of the “Varsouviana,” heard in Blanche’s head but brought to life on the stage in a sound that everyone in the audience can also hear.

In Scene One, Blanche emphatically commands her sister, “...don’t you look at me, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off... I won’t be looked at in this merciless glare!” (Williams 19). Then, later in the play, when Blanche returns home with Stella to a poker game that Stanley is conducting with his friends, she says, “I feel so hot and frazzled. Wait till I powder before you open the door. Do I look done in?” (Williams 47). In Scene Nine, she declares passionately:

I don’t want realism. I want magic! ...Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth, and if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! (Williams 117)

Blanche ardently claims her reasons for falsely representing herself to Mitch, and for essentially becoming a visionary tool in herself, in her own unreality. But when she comments on how she tells “what *ought* to be truth,” rather than what *is* truth, she also comments on why visionary, and

unreal representations of things, are introduced into realism in the first place. She suggests that visionary tools present solutions and scenarios that are somehow more real than actual realism, and that these are somehow “better” solutions because they tell “what *ought* to be truth.” Like Aunt Ester’s “understanding” in *Two Trains Running*, this again gives us the impression that visionary forces are more keenly perceptive of the action unfolding in a play than their realist counterparts. The way the “Varsouviana” bursts onto the setting in several different scenes tells the audience that Blanche not only has difficulty relinquishing the past (the impact of which on the present is a key theme found in realism), but it reveals the fears and fixations which she is careful to hide, thereby more completely illuminating the play’s conflict by giving us a side of the problem that would not be revealed if Blanche were left to her own devices.

Because she heard it before her first husband shot himself, the “Varsouviana” continues to signal imminent disaster for her. But just as she could not have foreseen that event, the song continues to herald things that Blanche cannot quite detect for herself. It extends from her subconsciousness, but since she is unable to even anticipate some devastating events herself, she cannot expect to articulate them in words. This is why realism falls short here, and visionary elements are necessary. The “Varsouviana” explodes forth from this subconscious awareness to convey what she cannot express. Again, it makes the inexpressible, expressible, and picks up where realism leaves off, incapable of detailing the problem at hand, or of finding a solution. The staging of the “Varsouviana,” while it does not exactly solve Blanche’s problems, does, at least, open up the play to the honest confession of what is happening. And it is only through honest acknowledgement of what is being repressed, that any sort of solution, or liberation, can be attained.

Blanche claims that her first husband shot himself because she had exclaimed to him, “I saw! I know! You disgust me...” (196). While this helps us understand Blanche’s own aversion to reality and to the truth, it also establishes the connection between *knowing* something distasteful, however consciously or subconsciously, having that precede a tragedy, and the “Varsouviana” emerging as the omen of it. These things recur significantly in the final scene, throughout which the “Varsouviana” plays, as Blanche prepares to meet Shep Huntleigh, the millionaire she deludes herself into believing will come for her. At one point, the polka is even “filter[ed] into a weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle” (139). This indicates a subconscious awareness on Blanche’s part that Shep is not, in fact, coming for her, and it portends the arrival of the doctor and the matron to carry her to an insane asylum (the latter of which bring a danger to her that is akin to the “cries and noises of the jungle”). Again, the “Varsouviana” warns of what Blanche herself cannot, because of the intensity of her denial. And because the “Varsouviana” reminds Blanche of her husband’s death, its repetition throughout the play also links the past to the present in a way that helps reinforce the impact of the past on the present as a theme in realism.

Death of a Salesman

In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, the memories of the character of Willy Loman, though presumably realistic in nature because they are recollections of the past, actually function as visionary devices themselves. Willy Loman is an aging traveling salesman whose job prospects have depleted along with the relationship with one of his sons thanks to an affair the latter witnessed between his father and an unknown woman. The play advances with seamless

transitions between Willy's recollections and the present, all while breaking the walls so carefully constructed by realism, both literally and figuratively.

The action that occurred in the past is represented onstage on an apron outside of the walls of the set that denote the present:

Before the house lies an apron, curving beyond the forestage into the orchestra.

This forward area serves as the back yard as well as the locale of all Willy's imaginings... Whenever the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines, entering the house only through its door at the left. But in the scenes of the past these boundaries are broken, and characters enter or leave a room by stepping "through" a wall onto the forestage. (Miller 12)

Because the walls of a set and the trap that they create for the characters are such central components of realism, this distinction is automatically an indication of the unreal to come, and a visual rejection of the boundaries established by realism. Additionally, one can hardly read the line about stepping "through" one of the set's walls without perceiving this as a reference to the visionary, too, because of course that is an action that cannot take place in everyday life. Still, the mention of "scenes of the past" here also places this setting in the context of realism, because it states directly that the past is going to interact with Willy's present self over the course of the play.

Yet what the stage directions above fail to point out is that these "scenes of the past" are only scenes of the past as far as Willy remembers them, and memory is highly subjective. So these constructions called "scenes of the past" are not accurate representations of what happened there, but are rather only constructions produced by Willy himself. They are his subjective re-

membrances of what has happened, but they are not actual representations of what happened. And because they are associated so strongly with Willy's emotions, either of happiness in remembering the ideal relationship with his children, or of anxiety in contemplating the state of finances, the subjectivity of these perceptions increases. Psychologists Elizabeth A. Phelps and Tali Sharot write on the topic of emotional memory, "It is often assumed... that a vivid, detailed, and confidently held memory is likely to be highly accurate... However... [these] are distinguished primarily by the *belief* that these memories are accurate. In spite of the fact that most people report high levels of confidence in their memories for... highly emotional events, the details of these memories are often incorrect" ("How (and Why) Emotion Enhances the Subjective Sense of Recollection," 147).

Knowledge of this automatically calls all of Willy's "remembrances" into question. Although Willy's confidence that his memories are correct is what drives them to be represented onstage, they are indeed of dubious authenticity. So that must be the case even more for the character of Uncle Ben, who appears in the play, but cannot technically be "remembered" at length because Willy has had little interaction with him in the past. All the audience knows of this character is that he exists, and that he went away for a while, ended up in Africa, and came back rich from the diamond mines he found there (Miller 48). Uncle Ben existed, but Willy cannot have remembered much of him if he were hardly around. Most of Willy's memories of him must be either subjective or entirely imagined constructions, and therefore, visionary tools. But the fact that Uncle Ben sprouts from a past memory, however sparse the known facts concerning him actually are, means that the tendency in realism to rely on the past's impact on the present

for providing meaning actually provides the means here for the visionary representations of uncontrolled memory.

But again, we must consider *why* these memories surface as visionary devices in the first place, instead of having Willy remember Uncle Ben merely in dialogue. In spite of the fabricated nature of Willy's so-called remembrances with Uncle Ben, they are in fact rooted in elements of the past, so realism still has a foothold in this play. In Act One, Ben describes his and Willy's father by associating him with perceptions of the old American West:

We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and all the Western states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. With one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.

(Miller 49)

With this description, Ben not only describes what we can assume is his and Willy's own family past (although the notion that they traveled the entire country gives us a sense that this is embellished), but he also alludes to the greatness and the promise that the American frontier, the West, enjoyed in early American history. The family's adventures sound as epic as those of the early pioneers heading out West, as they traveled through "all the Western states" to reach success by selling Father's inventions. As an inventor and a producer of flutes from which he made his fortune, Father becomes, through this description, the very epitome of American success as it relates to prosperous business. Ben's appearance onstage to articulate this for Willy allows this ideal to emerge as an external representation of the conflict Willy's supposed business success is being

faced with in his son's determination not to follow in his footsteps. Business success is the ideal around which Willy has been building much of his life, but in many ways it is still, in fact, a dream, one that is described at the top of the show, in Miller's stage direction, as visibly "cling[ing] to the [house], a 'dream' rising out of reality" (Miller 11).

It is this dream of Willy's that resonates with the long-held American cultural ideal of achieving success in business. In the same way that Sutter's ghost appears offstage in *The Piano Lesson* to help address a cultural issue, the "Varsouviana" articulates a reality that Blanche cannot grasp in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Dora requires the help of the Swan to free herself in *The Swan*, these visionary "memories" in *Death of a Salesman* emerge, unprovoked, to note how this cultural expectation has failed Willy as an individual, and therefore, to address its inadequacy when he cannot do so. In his explanation of the family history above, Uncle Ben outlines the principle of American business success, and when Willy debates whether he should accept the \$20,000 business proposition offered to him, he discusses the matter with Ben on the stage apron, in what we can assume is another imagined sequence. When Ben "drifts off upstage" (127), Biff replaces him in the scene. It seems that the conversation he and Willy then have is realistic, but since it still takes place on the apron, where all imaginary sequences are noted to occur, we cannot be sure whether this is supposed to be representative of a real or fabricated encounter. But the juxtaposition between Biff's staunch refusal to accept his father's notions of what qualifies as "success" in business, and Ben as the symbol of business success just moments before, provides a grating context for the scene. This pair of interactions illustrates the inadequacy of the cultural expectation of American business success more starkly than the con-

versation between Biff and his father, assuredly in the present, and unaccompanied by the scene with Uncle Ben, would do.

Willy recalls worrying about finances with his wife in the early days of his career (Miller 35), which reveals that his success was not as easy to come by as he would have wanted. Years later, in the present, Willy struggles with maintaining his job, so the success he has envisioned has never actually materialized for him. Rather, it remains as a dream Willy then fixes on his son Biff, in hoping that he will continue to carry on the family legacy through work similar to his father's. But Biff eventually realizes the fallacy of this dream:

What am I doing in an office, ... when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! ...I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! ...I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! ...Pop, I'm nothing! ...Will you let me go... Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? (Miller 132-133)

Biff's tirade is a recognition of the dream his father never reached by reminding him that, despite his small success, he was "never anything but a hard-working drummer," as well as a vehement declaration that the dream his father has for him is not one he will fulfill. And Ben's presence allows for the examination of this dream. When Willy envisions his own funeral in a later conversation with Uncle Ben, that is a dream, too, of the day his son will finally realize how "known" his father is (Miller 126), and of the day his success will finally be evidenced. But it is still only ever a dream. Leah Hadomi notes that Willy's suicide at the end of the play is "the ultimate act of self-deception in his struggle to impose his fantasies upon a reality that consistently

thwarts his ambitions and will” (“Fantasy and Reality: Dramatic Rhythm in *Death of a Salesman*” 1). It is his ultimate act of self-denial; because this is the act that would get him to the glorious funeral he envisions, it is his final attempt to reach that dream.

Conclusion

In each of the visionary plays discussed above, unreal elements intrude on the comfortable environment of realism provided by a box set. In many cases, these visionary elements help expand on the realist theme of escape, by offering a solution to problems the characters themselves might not even know they have. In some cases, they achieve this by rejecting other themes inherent in realism, like the way in the Swan helps Dora fight the accepted, dependent female societal role by breaking through the window to gain her independence; or Hilde’s “castles in the sky” in *The Master Builder* offer the potential for Solness to escape his guilt-ridden marriage as well. In some cases, they help achieve freedom from personal battles against interior struggles, as the “Varsouviana” in *A Streetcar Named Desire* helps to create a path towards the honesty that will begin to guide Blanche to eventual freedom, and in some cases, these personal struggles have larger cultural resonance.

In August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, it is only with the entrance of a visionary force that centuries of African-American history can be reclaimed, a cultural history that Aunt Ester, another visionary force in *Two Trains Running*, also represents as she helps her clients escape from their problems. In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, the use of the visionary is connected strongly to the perception and ideal of business success firmly embedded in American culture. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts*, where difficulties can either be expressed in

words, or are understood enough by the characters themselves to avoid visionary representation, the unreal need not emerge in a material way. Rather, only the suggestion of the unreal is warranted in those instances. In all of the above cases, visionary elements pick up where realism leaves off to enhance, most of all, the realist theme of escape, by allowing characters freedom from cultural expectations, from the impact of the past on the present, and from those things which they themselves cannot understand on their own. Visionary elements complement realism to finish articulating in some other way what cannot be voiced in words, or in reality.

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