

Małgorzata Chrzan

Experimental Theatre of the 1960's - Challenges of the Performance. Performativity and Intentionality : Kennedy and Baraka

humanistica 21 1, 169-192

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Małgorzata Chrzan

**Experimental Theatre of the 1960's –
Challenges of the Performance.
Performativity and Intentionality:
Kennedy and Baraka**

Abstract

“Experimental Theatre of the 1960's – Challenges of the Performance: Performativity and Intentionality – Kennedy and Baraka” explores the nature of the borderline experience of interpreting a drama in the process of stage production. The text discusses two aspects, namely the intention of the playwright as reflected in the play script and the intention of the director manifested in the theatre performance. This borderline experience, albeit foreign to other literary genres, has been inherently inscribed into every play known in history. The playwright's intention embodied in the script is evaluated and subsequently transformed by the director. The level of transformation, though, depends on the nature of stage directions. In order to explain the mechanism which underlies the differentiated levels of production-based transformation, the paper refers to Richard Courtney's idea of a play as a skeletal literary form, as well as to Beardsley's, Ingarden's and Stanislavski's theories of intentional author/playwright. There are two in-depth case studies, of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*, which exemplify the theory that the directors may in fact be restricted in their freedom of script interpretation. The paper provides an insight into the mode of playwright's intentional seizing the control of stage production with the facilitated stage directions.

Key words: African American drama, experimental theatre, ideology, intentionality, performativity

Abstrakt

“Experimental Theatre of the 1960’s – Challenges of the Performance: Performativity and Intentionality – Kennedy and Baraka” opisuje kwestię doświadczenia granicznego, jakim jest interpretacja tekstu dramatycznego w procesie produkcji scenicznej. Tekst koncentruje się na dwóch aspektach, tj. intencji autora odzwierciedlonej w skrypcie oraz intencji reżysera zawartej w przedstawieniu teatralnym. To doświadczenie graniczne, nieznane innym gatunkom literackim, jest wpisane w byt każdej sztuki teatralnej. Intencje autora zawarte w skrypcie podlegają ewaluacji oraz transformacji ze strony reżysera. Jednakowoż, poziom transformacji wizji sztuki, jaki dokonuje się w procesie produkcji scenicznej, jest w swoisty sposób uzależniony od natury didaskaliów. Niniejsza praca opisuje mechanizmy różnicowania poziomów interpretacyjnej transformacji dramatu w odniesieniu do idei sztuki, jako szkieletowej formy literackiej Richarda Courtney’a, a także teorii intencjonalnego dramatopisarza wysuwanych przez Beardsley’a, Ingardena oraz Stanisławskiego. Niniejszy esej zawiera także, jako przykładowe zastosowanie teorii, która mówi o tym, że reżyser może być ograniczony w procesie interpretacji poprzez intencjonalne działania autora, także dwa studia przypadku, opisujące sztuki *Funnyhouse of a Negro* autorstwa Adrienne Kennedy i *Slave Ship* autorstwa Amiri Baraka. Oba przykłady pomagają zrozumieć mechanizmy intencjonalnego użycia didaskaliów przez autora w celu moderowania interpretacji sztuki oraz wpływania na jej produkcję sceniczną.

Słowa kluczowe: dramat afro-amerykański, ideologia, intencjonalność, performatywność, teatr eksperymentalny

Every play production process in the theater evokes a never-ending debate on the importance and roles of the author and director. These two constitute an uncanny duo that perpetuates the audience’s dilemma and evokes questions of ‘whose play they watch’. The practitioners of the theater experience the dominating role of the director each

time they embark on a stage production of any drama. In that case, the interpretation of the text oftentimes indicates that the authorial ideas must irrevocably lose to the imagination of the production group. Given that modern theater is perceived to be the dominion of the director, the role of the author, to many critics, is considered, in some sense, to be a whim which is lost in interpretation. Still, the text of each and every play contains the intentions of the author, both in the stage-text and in the stage directions. Intentionality as such, therefore, seems to be worth discussing, both in its theoretical aspect and in its practical application to play-script analysis.

Overall, dramatists use a scope of strategies when composing a play. Some leave space for the director's interpretation and incorporate only the most necessary stage directions. A good example here is William Shakespeare whose stage directions were reduced to the bare minimum, to stating the names of the characters that enter or exit and the place for a given scene. This enables any director to produce a play according to their own taste and the fashion of the day. His ultimate opposition is formed of playwrights who, out of the need to achieve a certain aesthetic or ideological product, provide detailed and lengthy stage directions. Here, Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka may serve as good examples. Both playwrights epitomize the experimental American drama and theatre of the 1960s which is based on a script, not on improvisation. Thus they stay in opposition to The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Open Theatre, Bread and Puppet Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, or San Francisco Mime Troupe, to name just a few key experimental groups of the 1960-1980 period. They also represent two opposing trends in African American theatre and drama. Baraka came from the experimental groups at Lincoln Center, New York, whose work concentrated on the political

dimension of dramatic art. Adrienne Kennedy studied playwrighting in Edward Albee's workshop, thus she is a representative of the highly intellectual approach to art.

Providing detailed stage directions suggests that more rigid rules for the stage production should be implemented, and is a result of playwright's conscious intention. Directors, nonetheless, may approach the production process using more than one strategy: they may adhere to the author's intentions fully, they may apply some stage directions and reject others, or they may disregard author's intentions altogether.

1. Some Theoretical Aspects of Intentionality in Theatre and Drama

The artist-creator's intentionality, philosophers have claimed for many centuries, is one of the most fundamental conditions that must be executed in the process of creating a work of art. Without intention, art would never be consciously created and, in fact, would not be recognized as art. Even a preliminary scrutiny of aesthetic theories gives the impression that the idea of conscious writer/artist creating his or her work of art is as old as criticism and philosophy themselves. Aristotle and Plato viewed art as a structure created consciously by an artist who aims at presenting something meaningful and beautiful. And although the aesthetic categories of beauty nowadays are no longer considered as valid in art, the theory of conscious creation still continues. This insight was perhaps formulated best by Beardsley who, in "Aesthetic Intentions and Fictive Illocutions," wrote that "when a discourse shows signs of concern for those features of it that affect its capacity to provide aesthetic satisfaction – when it is structured in suitable ways, has an expressive style, etc. – we may legitimately suppose that the author was interested in making something aesthetically worth having, even

though his other intentions, including his dominant intention, were religious or philosophical or political” (1978, 166). Thus, one understands that any work of art, as a result of artist’s conscious choice, reflects some artistic and ideological activity of his/her – be it even the very intention to create – which is embodied in a distinct aesthetic form.

Theatre and drama theoreticians in history have always been among those to stress the importance of intention. Especially Stanislavsky is regarded as a propagator of the idea of intentional playwright. In his “Stanislavski and the Playwright” Robert Corrigan asserted that “in the theatre, the playwright must be the primary creator; his intention must be expressed in every aspect of the production” (1965: 183). Therefore it is possible to read the author’s intentions by mere analyzing the play. Corrigan even stresses that “knowledge of his (i.e. author’s, MC) intention can only come from the text of the play itself – for the text is the form through which the playwright expresses his idea to the other artists of the theatre” (1965: 184). It is not too fanciful, therefore, to assume that if the artists of theatre are able to discern author’s intention from the work, critics and the audience will be able to do so, as well.

Nevertheless, not all intention may be regarded an aesthetic choice. Here, Beardsley appears again to be a reliable source for enlightened argument. Referring to the works of fiction, he argued that such work’s major features are constituted when it “offers a coherent narrative, in which persons and places and actions are intelligibly connected and their connections shaped for interested contemplation,” and that it “will testify to the role of an aesthetic intention in its composition” (1978: 175). Beardsley’s idea of the intentional author implied the author who necessarily and in a conscious manner structured his work of literature (and according to Beardsley this rule applies to all

genres). Yet, the aesthetic intention which presupposes mindful structuring of a work of art is not, and should not be, superficial and related to external and experiential level of the work. The elements of structure visible at first sight: the choice of characters, the structure of a plot, narrative or non-narrative character of the text, or chronology do not constitute the totality of what the author performs when constructing his or her literary work. The author's intentions go further, to the minutest aspects of the work of art, to the choice of the vocabulary, inclusion or exclusion of certain images, archetypes, symbols, motifs, contexts and understatements. To describe this process in deep, Beardsley discusses the idea of form and concludes that:

(...) not all concern with structure is aesthetic concern, but even logical clarity and rigor, in some contexts, can be understood and approved as contributions to the work's capacity to provide aesthetic satisfaction. One feature of discourse that has particularly commended itself as a defining condition of literature is semantic density, or multiplicity of meanings. This, too, I now see, is at best a sufficient condition of literature, though not part of its definition. No doubt there are difficulties in getting hold of the concept of semantic density, and its usefulness may be limited; but I am inclined to think it is needed for defining the term *poem*, if and where it is present in a discourse to a marked degree, it is always evidence of attention to the work's aesthetic character, and hence a mark of literary status (1978, 175-6).

Another theoretician, Richard Courtney, commenting on the disinterest of other literary theoreticians and philosophers in drama as an aesthetic form, suggests that the "(...) dramatic art form is in a continuous state of flux. It is no wonder, therefore, that the majority of Western aesthetic

theories conveniently pass quickly over the drama” (1968, 373). He also attempts to define a play as a “literary work written in a form which is suitable for theatrical presentation” (1968, 374). To Courtney “a dramatist successfully creates a play in as far as the performers and the audience mutually interact within the terms of reference of the play” (1968, 374). Yet, even he complains that “this does not always happen even with dramatic masterpieces” (1968, 374) for the reason that a play can be performed and a play can be read. For Courtney, plays constitute a “specific type of literature, maimed and stunted and incomplete: the written play is a more skeletal literary form than the poem or the novel. A novel is meant to be read; the essence of the novel as a form of art is in the reading. But a play is meant for theatrical presentation; otherwise it is not a play but something else” (1968, 375). Nonetheless, he fails to define what the *something else* might be and suggests that the state of flux and incompleteness must necessarily denote inability to define where the playwright’s intentions end and the director’s begin, which, for each and every reader of play scripts seems particularly undemanding.

Still, the play script itself is not, or very rarely happens to be, the accomplishment of the director; habitually, it is the director interpreting and adapting someone else’s text in the process of stage production. Consequently the playwright must be seen as an ur-interpreter of the script. As every author creates the play-script in order to have it performed, not read, therefore all the *dramatis personae* are imagined as proto-characters who generate their own narratives through interaction. Still, every play script embraces yet another category of text within any play, i.e. stage directions, which determine the pragmatics of theatre and express the specific conditions for the *parole* to take place. They are rarely noticed when an audience

comes to a performance (although there exist rare cases of characters commenting the stage directions within a play-script) but constitute the context for the theatrical communication. It is the only moment within a play the author speaks not through the characters, but for him/herself. They represent what can be specified as the direct bond between the playwright and the director.

The viewpoint on the importance of playwright's intentions and the approach to the stage directions as an integral part of any play-script varies from theoretician to theoretician, from one man of theatre to another one. Basic scrutiny of opinions provided by major drama/theatre practitioners and theoreticians will only multiply the questions concerning the uncanny power relationship of playwright and director. There is no agreement even among playwrights who undertake defining their role in theatre themselves. For one, Antoin Artaud, a playwright, theoretician and theatre practitioner, in his concept of the theatre of cruelty advocated the dominance of performance over the text, which constituted a summoning for a radical rejection of text-based theatre in favour of the direct imaginary/emotive experience. His plays represent an elaborate depiction of his emotional states rather than an account of some characters' actual and logical actions on stage, and the verbal aspects of his plays inevitably reflect the inability of human communication.

Another point of view is presented by Roland Barthes who in his semiotic *Critical Essays* pondered on the concept of theatricality. To him, "it is theater-minus-text; it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument" (25). In 1970's, Anne Übersfeld in similar fashion viewed the theatrical text as matrices of performativity, and considered the play-script to be a set of directions to be followed by a performing team. She believed in

the dialectic relationship between the text and the performance. She deemed the text (play-script) could be read independently – as a literature (hence: drama analysis) and as an inseparable and indispensable element of every performance (in theater criticism). Therefore, as she proposed, the performing team has the possibility either to consider the dialogues and monologues (what the actors are to say) as essential elements of a performance, or instead to concentrate on the non-verbal action on stage (the scenography, lighting plot, properties, changes, choreography and movement etc.) which is included in *didascalía* as a decisive aspect of a play. Such approach, nonetheless, is prone to maneuver director to committing a basic mistake because it refers the action of the performing team only to limited aspects of the drama they intend to produce. Thus they either neglect the text – reflecting only the non-verbal relationship of the *dramatis personae*, or they declamate the text without referring to the extra-textual elements of each play which indubitably are intentionally incorporated in the original play script.

Like the above contemporary theatre theoreticians, Patrice Pavis marked the predominance of the performance over the play-script. For him the very creation of drama relocates its text from the domain of literature into the domain of theatre production. In his view, the text is only a guide to be adapted at the director's and actors' will or conscious/subconscious choice. Pavis represents the pragmatic wing of theater theoreticians. He believes that theater production is of much greater importance than the original play script because the latter one is filtered, or still better – distilled – in the process of play script analysis. Pavis seems to advocate in favour of even the most extreme approach to play production, the one that actually annihilates play

script's influence in the process of producing a play; in fact he seems prone to believe that a play-script is not necessary at all. He shifts the creative process to theater practitioners only and refuses to find one in the original process of composing a play, thus denying the playwright any creativity.

Finally, it is easy to conclude that there are as many opinions as there are critics, yet the most interesting ideas concerning the intentional aspects of a play come from the works of Roman Ingarden, a philosopher representing phenomenology, who in numerous works claimed that drama that is read cannot be identified in any respect with the one that is staged. He believes there exists an intermediate phase between a play (text, literature, drama, and play-script) and an individual performance. In *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, he named it a stage-play and defined as a reflection of the directorial concept, a planning phase, and a mediating phase of the play-script analysis. For him, play script is a matrix of all performance text generated by such concept as production. Interestingly enough, it is he who notices the intention of the author, not the above mentioned theatre theoreticians. He sees a play-script as a text that renders the author's intentions into the hands of the producing team. He also finds balance in the polarized and biased (mostly by critics and theoreticians) drama/performance analysis, and stresses the need for preserving the role of an author and adding another one, equally important – role of the director.

2. Play Script Analysis and Intentionality: Case Studies

This essay is not only devoted to the debate of the theoretical aspects of play script analysis, but to the attempt at the pursuit of Ingarden's approach to re-read the intentions of two African American

playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka, that are enclosed within the play-scripts of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Slave Ship*, two plays that provoked heated debates in the 1960's. Although politically, esthetically, and psychologically different, Kennedy and Baraka share the same approach to stage directions. Both *Slave Ship* and *Funnyhouse* are filled with lengthy descriptions of the non-verbal actions, detailed property and light plots and scenography changes. Both plays have formal introductions by the authors who give detailed instruction on every technical aspect of the production, e.g. how actors should behave, what ought to be included in the interpretation of the play's script, and what should on no occasion be attempted by any director or actor. A single foretaste of the stage directions provokes a reflection that both dramatists are unyielding to the director's autonomous interpretation. Statistics provide an even more astounding discovery: stage directions in Kennedy's play constitute 35% of the entire text, and in Amiri Baraka's script the percentage grows to an astonishing 62%. This inevitably suggests that the authors intend to seize the dominant position in the author – director power relationship. Similarly, actors, instead of being considered artists free to interpret the characters, seem to be reduced to puppet-like and passive impersonators. One might ask: why did the authors decide to verbalize their intentions to such an extent? The answer seems to lie hidden within the play-scripts themselves.

2.1. Case 1 – *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

In 1964, Adrienne Kennedy became an overnight sensation of the off-Broadway theaters. Her first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*¹ left the audiences and theater critics in an unusual emotional state. Although it was

¹ All quotations from the play script are marked as FN.

immediately recognized as a very potent play, the playwright received a wide array of criticism, from very positive to extremely negative.

Adrienne Kennedy was particularly careful in constructing the world of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. In agreement with the *structural* elements of any drama, she begins her play with the list of characters, yet to understand the manner in which she creates the characters and what the actors impersonating them must achieve, she must provide detailed information. Therefore the play-script, besides the listed characters, contains the following author's note:

Funnyhouse of a Negro is perhaps clearest and most explicit when the play is placed in the girl Sarah's room. The center of the stage works well as her room, allowing the rest of the stage as the place for herself. Her room should have a bed, a writing table, and a mirror. Near her bed is the statue of Queen Victoria; other objects might be her photographs and her books. When she is placed in her room with her belongings, then the director is free to let the rest of the play happen around her (FN: 4).

The director thus discovers who the main character is, what the referential system between the characters and places is, and whose relations are the most intense. Thus, even before the stage production is taken into consideration, Sarah becomes the point of focus and reference to the remaining characters. Later, the relationship of particular selves of Sarah's and their attachment to each other is explored in minute detail. Out of her four selves, three are associated with whiteness: Queen Victoria, Duchess of Hapsburg and Jesus, only Patrice Lumumba is *black*. From the first scene the stage directions point to the nature of the relationship between these characters: queen, duchess and Jesus spend some time together, they communicate with each other and exchange caresses, and they leave

Patrice Lumumba aside. Kennedy to a great extent constructs her *dramatis personae* according to their symbolic significance. Scenography is conceptualized in an analogous manner. Sometimes a crowd on stage represents several persons, in a different scene one character is presented by more characters and shifts its personality from one *dramatis persona* to another from scene to scene, and finally, a character may be a disguise of a soul in a foreign body. In the *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Sarah is one of three actual *human* characters, yet, because of her being split into four selves, viewers witness a group of *personality manifestation* characters on stage, a crowd with a startling unity. All this moulds into a peculiar world somewhere between the reality and imagination where the living, the imagined and the dead have equal rights to torment one another, where it is even difficult to distinguish between those who are dead, imagined and those alive. There is also a prominent similarity of the three Sarah's *white* alter egos: they all have non-Caucasian *wild kinky hair* that continues to fall out, and by the end of the play all these characters are bald. This symbolic action points to the acculturation, the final loss of the unwanted racial identity, but also to the personal distress of these characters, elevated to the level of a symbol or metaphor, to be performed on stage. A mulatto who does not accept the African American heritage is thus able to pretend they are fully white. Hair, however, also becomes a signifier of womanhood and beauty – queen and duchess, and of a religious icon – Jesus. A bald woman is less womanly, a bald queen is less royal and bald Jesus is a blasphemy.

Besides Sarah herself, there is also a character of Sarah's mother, largely reduced to a pantomimic aspect of *mise-en-scene*. It is an extremely reduced character in *Funnyhouse*. She appears on stage only twice, but is a crucial referential to other characters.

Yet, the basic source of knowledge about her lies in the stage directions. In fact, she appears to have two heads: the beautiful pale-faced one, with long, straight black hair, sitting firmly on her shoulders – the beautiful face Sarah remembers from her childhood – and the bald one that she carries in front of her, to which she speaks about her misery of marrying a Black Man – the face Sarah saw after her mother became insane and after she had lost her hair. Mother is a thought concept which becomes embodied on stage which may only be attributable to stage directions, an image taken either out of Sarah's imagination or presupposed memory. For Sarah, she is an object of admiration, of perfection that is very hard to be achieved. At the same time the mother figure has the quality of a shape taken out of the worst nightmares that could haunt many African Americans in the mid twentieth century – of somebody who could pass for a white woman and lost her opportunity in life by attachment to/ being trapped in Blackness.

The minute details Adrienne Kennedy provides in stage directions result in instilling specific images of particular *dramatis personae* which are non-negotiable in play-for-stage adaptation process. For instance, the Landlady, one of the two white characters that are not formed in Sarah's mind is described as:

(...) a tall, thin, white woman dressed in a black and red hat and appears to be talking to someone in a suggested open doorway in a corridor of a rooming house. She laughs like a mad character in a funnyhouse throughout her speech (FN: 10).

Kennedy enforces an image, a metaphor not only embedded in aesthetic valuation (circus colors and aesthetic), but also heavily burdened with ideological/ political/ social predilection. Metaphors, in the case of Kennedy's theatrical idiom, are not only formed by words the characters utter. They are also an

outcome of the already imposed symbolism of *mise-en-scène* elements. In *Funnyhouse* characters' dialogues and monologues are further complicated by the changes in the scenography – places become more than a fixed space on stage: a room is also a jungle and a palace – which allows the process of illocution to attain numerous layers of meaning.

Kennedy, a student of Albee's workshop, limited the number of colors in the scenography which marked a deeper and more complex reference to symbolic actions of the characters. The three colors: black, red and white, are discussed in detail in the didascalia and their interpretation is key factor in the understanding of the play. Thanks to them the analysis allows the portrayal of Sarah, the main character and a mulatto, whose selves range from *white* queen and duchess, through a *yellow* (mulatto?) Jesus, to *black* Lumumba, who is fascinated with whiteness and repulsed by blackness and who builds her own mythology based on color. For her, her white mother is a deity, but also a ghost that haunts her. Her black father, who keeps returning and is beastly, is a nightmare she cannot free herself of. But the play is not a simple hailing of the white and rebuffing of the black, it is a detailed analysis of complex relationships of a tragic mulatto, who love/hates both parents, and the nature of colors (*white* – ugly, ghastly, rat-gnawed, *red* – blood-like, sensual, violent, sacrificial, *black* – beastly, ravens, deathly) described in the stage directions in detail only serves to further limit the freedom of artistic interpretation of the main character.

The limitation established on the number of colors used in the scenography conveys a startling effect when another element imposed on the performing crew – strong white light – adjoins it. The colors are suddenly intense, but, as the author describes it in the stage directions, extremely ugly. In the scene in

Raymond's room the audience must put their trust in what they hear rather than in what they see. Adrienne Kennedy defines the technical aspects of the production as well. She devises the shutters which hide mirrors positioned so as to reflect the light and blind the audience whenever Raymond-impersonator opens and closes them at his will.

Each gesture an actor is obliged to take, each pose becomes a kind of sign, still expanding the number of possible readings of the text by the audience. Yet the gestures are to be vivid and clear since they are limited to the minimum by the stage directions. In this manner Adrienne Kennedy changes actors into puppets set in the slow-motion reality of Sarah's mind. All this amounts to the effect of some unreal, though somehow familiar world, in which ideas are blurred to the extreme, reaching the point after which it is not possible to discern where the symbol is born, how it develops and what it results in, since Kennedy is far from being static in her understanding of the African American idiom.

2.2. Case 2 – *Slave Ship*

In 1967, Amiri Baraka completed *Slave Ship: a Historical Pageant*² which is considered to be among the most influential African American plays of that decade. It presents scenes from African American history, opening with the horrors of the Middle Passage and concluding in the turbulent 1960's. *Slave Ship* is unique since it represents a spectacular difference in the approach to spectacle production. It should perhaps be referred to as an anti- or counter-spectacle, since the traditional aspect of a theatre – the visual sphere – is extensively manipulated. Baraka, intending to revolutionize African American art, used a novelty of the time – stroboscope light – to impair the vision of the audience and provide a sensation of viewing

² All quotations from the play script are marked as SS.

a series of scene flashes rather than a continuous action. Mike Sell, in his 2011 work on avant-garde performance (249) refers to it as *conceptual strobing* (concept of destabilizing – almost deconstructing – the visual aspects of the spectacle).

The play script itself is beset with detailed stage directions which constitute more than sixty per cent of the script, and that in itself indicates that compliance with authorial ideas/ideology was for Baraka of primary importance. The author conforms to the tradition of presenting the characters at the beginning of the play script, yet, he provides much more detailed list of properties to be necessary for the proper performance. He enumerates usual properties, like elements of scenography, costumes, lightning plot, but then he happens to include such unconventional elements as:

Smell effects: incense... dirt/filth smells/bodies
Heavy chains /.../Drums (African bata drums, and
bass and snare)/.../ Rattles and tambourines
//Banjo music for plantation atmosphere// Ship
noises/.../ Ship bells/.../ Rocking and splashing of
sea/.../ Guns and cartridges/.../ Whips/whip
sounds (SS: 132).

That list, no matter what the analysis method is applied to it, is not quite complete, though. If the playwright was to enlist the whole sound and property plot, he ought to have included live jazz music and a severed head of one of the characters in the second part of the play. In some manner, he seems prone to improvisation within the stage directions themselves, and treats them neither as a specific literary form per se, nor as an entity separate from the dialogues and monologues whose role is to present the technical aspects of staging a play. Baraka, instead, seems to eagerly assume the role of a director and orchestrates the actions of the actors. He tends to

use the poetic language of image and metaphor rather than technical information:

Whole theater in darkness. Dark. For a long time. Just dark. Occasional sound, like ship groaning, squeaking, rocking. Sea smells. In the dark. Keep the people in the dark. And gradually the odors of the sea, and the sounds of the sea, and sounds of the ship, creep up. Burn incense, but make a significant, almost stifling, smell come up. Pee. Shit. Death. Life processes going on anyway. Eating. These smells and cries, the slash and tear of the lash, in a total atmos-feeling, gotten some way. African Drums like the worship of some Orisha. Obatala. Mbwanga rattles of the priests. BamBamBamBamBoom BoomBoom BamBam. Rocking of the slave ship, in darkness, without sound. But smells. Then sound. Now slowly, out of blackness with smells and drums staccato, the hideous screams. All the women together, scream. AAAAAIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEE. Drums come up again, rocking, rocking; black darkness of the slave ship. Smells. Drums on up high. Stop. Scream. AAAAAAiiiiiEEEEEEEEEEEE. Drums. Black darkness with smells (SS: 132).

And it is, it seems, only Baraka's poetic vision that is supposed to inform the performers of the nature of the roles they enact on stage. He does not distinguish a particular player, nor does he characterize particular personality of a given character. He provides the description of the actions, which are supposed to be the sole element characterizing the *dramatis personae*. Moreover, the characters on stage appear not to be invented as individuals; rather, they are motifs, type representatives, or stereotypes incarnate. Baraka envisions the final effect in its entirety: with music, lights, and emotions which should be evoked, and renders his play to be a historical pageant. Therefore, in order to inspire emotions, he utilizes

the language of emotions and not of the theatre technique. This probably best explains the usage of phrases like “like mad old nigger ladies humming forever in deathly patience”, or “slave, rageddy ass, rageddy hat in hand (...) agreeing and agreeing, while the whips snap” (SS: 136-7).

The text contains frequent authorial comments concerning the nature of music accompanying certain scenes, or specific sounds to be produced by actors. Baraka requests the African-type drums and screams, the humming of the blues, spirituals and new jazz. Besides that, there are numerous references to dances which he envisions as performed in particular scenes: African dances, slave dances, and modern dances. The majority of characters seems transformed into stereotypes and presented as if encapsulated within a flash of light, which permits only partial conveying of the information concerning their identity. African American characters, as well as white characters give the impression of not being permitted any individuality, and always representing a group, a type, or a stereotype. There is also a character whose action is choreographed in detail and not permitted any liberty of actor's interpretation. Such is the impersonation of a Tom-preacher. He was supposedly designed on the basis of Martin Luther King's character and is believed to constitute his parody. Baraka describes him through the actions of *jeffing* and *tomming*. The audience is able to observe him sermonize intensely (though with no believable significant content) and simultaneously push a corpse of a black child away with his foot. Moreover, he can be observed in acts which demonstrate his not being able to discern the injustice the African Americans were subjected to. Finally, Baraka describes him as the only character in the play that is hunted and murdered by the rebellious Blacks in an act of self-liberation.

Baraka, contrary to intellectual Kennedy, attempts his play to incorporate the audience into his designed action. The audience by his design was supposed to become an involuntary participant and in this manner to become ideologically conscious of and involved in the struggle for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1960s. Baraka, moreover, does not intend to indoctrinate *ex cathedra*. He invites the audience to dance. Hence, the music once more becomes significant: the spectators-participants are supposed to dance to *Rise up*. Baraka orchestrates the movement in the stage directions in the following manner:

(Lights come up abruptly, and people on stage begin to dance, some hip Boogaloo Yoruba, fingerpop, skate, monkey, dog... Enter audience; ... get members of audience to dance. To same music Rise Up. Turns into an actual party. When the party reaches some loose improvisation, et cetera, audience relaxed, somebody throws the preacher's head into center of floor, that is, after dancing starts for real. Then black (SS: 145)).

Music and dance – here understood as references to the manner in which emotions are evoked – seem to accentuate the author's political beliefs and become a means of implementation of political agenda. Ideology, one may argue, is therefore to be naturally assimilated by the audience, not lectured or forced.

It might prove of some interest to address briefly the 1967 premiere of *Slave Ship* and analyze whether such orchestration of the play production was actually effective. In exploration of total engagement of the audience into the play, Baraka decided (with Gilbert Moses, the director) to directly influence all the viewers' senses. In fact, on the day of the premiere, the manipulation commenced even before the spectators took their places. They were guided to enter a dark space and seated on wooden benches, not

knowing who was next to them. They believed in the unbreakable safety zone of the spectator – in “the fourth wall” tradition. To their astonishment, they were assaulted by the sounds and the smells they commonly would not associate with art (the stage directions are quite explicit: *the odor of piss, shit, shackles, cries*). Only after some time were they able to realize that there was no separation between the actors and the audience, that the audience placement also constituted part and parcel of the scenography, and that their neighbors may in fact be the members of the performing crew, and they (spectators) involuntarily were included into the performing group.

The audience was also forced to depend on the subconscious. To be more specific, as Diana Rosenhagen indicated in her 2011 essay on violence in Black Art, “the smells and sounds have clearly defined local origin and encompass the whole theatrical space including the space in which the audience is seated, thus implicating the spectators in the sensual experience of being on the slave ship” (151). The people who descended from slaves subconsciously understood the meaning of the banjo sound – the reference to the plantation life in the American south, which, as Rosenhagen (151) decried, *was not so gallant*. They gave the impression of being able to feel the dire logic behind such images as the old plantation Tom (minstrel – like and compliant with the whites) trading his compatriots for the chop of pork. They sensed something nobody intended to admit openly at first – that the transformation that was intended in the USA for African Americans after the collapse of the slave system did not signify much change in the view of their social status or advancement possibilities. Only, as signaled in the play, the *old Tom* changed into a *new Tom*, a slave became a compliant preacher whose sole role, according to Baraka, was to hinder any social protests.

3. Concluding Remarks

Numerous African-American critics (Harrison, etc.) of the 1960s and 1970s claimed that Adrienne Kennedy, although African American herself, should not be counted among the revolutionaries of Black theatre. For them, she was too much preoccupied with the negative picture of the black life in America, her plays were pessimistic and her characters too often identified with the whites. They did not consider the technical aspects of her plays or her poetic vision as significant in creating new forms of Black theatre; even more, they commented that she only revived what the white culture had instilled in her.

Adrienne Kennedy, however, represents a disambiguating approach to stage directions. To some extent, she inserts the information that is not included in the play's action. Her *didascalia* are constructed so as to reflect her vision as faithfully as possible. She describes characters, their costumes; she provides detailed background information on the nature of scenography. She concentrates on rendering emotions through the specific metaphorical image. She weaves a web of relationships between her characters and regards them as figures in the play of chess. Directors, to be able to present numerous strata of meanings, must considerably utilize the author-given stage directions. In doing so, however, they are not limited only to her vision. They can construct their own meanings on top of the meanings proposed by Kennedy and thus stimulate a theatrical production whose significance is richer than originally intended.

Baraka, on the contrary, approaches stage direction as a prosthesis of the dramatic dialogues and monologues (hence: inclusion of onomatopoeias within the stage directions, and not giving them to particular characters to utter). He refers emotionally to the action itself, providing a step-by-step manual of what the actors should do and with what intensity.

His play is an enormous piece of instruction for a political ritual, without any in-depth psychological analysis of the characters and without giving suggestions on the nature of relationship between them. In fact, this text of stage directions has the quality of a staged improvised poem and, as such, it is more expressive than stage directions of Adrienne Kennedy. Yet, because it limits characters to the role of stereotypes and images, it leaves no space for the artistic interpretation. Baraka is prone to create meaningful message only in the sphere of propaganda which quickly becomes dated.

Over 40 years later, ironically, no-one contemplates the political statement in art to such an extent. The revolutionary Baraka nowadays seems dated, overrated, and is not performed as often as Adrienne Kennedy, who did not follow any political programs, and whose plays are, to some extent, a confessional theatre and require some art education from the audience. It is also worth noting that 2010 became a year of substantial revival of Adrienne Kennedy's art. Times have changed, and the performative aspects of Kennedy's plays still enable the critics to define her as an intriguing author whose plays, through their high symbolism, resonate with the contemporary audience. Baraka's performance strategy that relies on the expression of the political agenda in the form of drama does not seem *saleable* as of today. Although both playwrights initially embarked to establish their strong presence in American theaters, commercially, Kennedy seems much more universal to contemporary directors than Baraka.

Bibliography

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and its Double*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

- Baraka, Amiri. *Slave Ship. The Motion of History and Other Plays*. New York: William Morrow and company Inc., 1978. 129-150.
- Barthes, Roland. *Critical Essays*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
- Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetic Intentions and Fictive Illocutions. What Is Literature?* Ed. Paul Hernadi. Bloomington, London: Indiana UP, 1978. 161-177.
- Coleman, Mike. *An Interview With Imamu Amiri Baraka. "What is Black Theater?" Black World* 20/6, April 1971:32-36.
- Corrigan, Robert. *Stanislawski and the Playwright. Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Robert Corrigan. New York: Grove, 1965.
- Courtney, Richard. *Drama and Aesthetics The British Journal of Aesthetics* 8/4, 1968: 373-386.
- Ingarden, Roman. *Das literarische Kunstwerk*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1965. Print.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. *Funnyhouse of a Negro. A Play in One Act*. London: Samuel French, 1969.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.
- Rosenhagen, Diana. *Actual Explosions and Actual Brutality' Baraka, Violence and the Black Arts Stage. Violence in American Drama: Essays on its Staging, Meanings and Effects*. Ed. A. C. Muñoz, R. E. Romero and B. M. Martinez. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 143-156.
- Sell, Mike. *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Übersfeld, Anne. *Lire le Théâtre*. Paris: Éditions sociales, 1977.

Małgorzata Chrzan

Uczelnia Lingwistyczno-Techniczna w Świeciu

ul.Chmielniki 2A, 86-100 Świecie/ Polska

E-mail:mchrzan@yahoo.com