

Story-telling and Subjectivity in the Selected Dramas of August Wilson and David Rabe

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Abstract: *The tensions between past and present, self and other, life and death, and the topics as confusion, self-doubt, and self-questioning in an unstable and infinitely changeable state of insights fill the works of contemporary American dramatists by means of story-telling. . Story-telling as dramatic narrative can specifically be seen in the dramas of both August Wilson and David Rabe. Their plays include contemporary forms of story-telling in order to reveal fractured and fragmented characters and their subjectivity. Rabe employs stories, especially in his famous Vietnam trilogy; meanwhile storytelling as part of the oral narrative experiences of African-Americans is the central prominence to the development of August Wilson's plays. This study attempts to reflect the function of story-telling in the selected dramas of the authors under discussion, and to analyze how the characters reveal themselves and their subjectivity in stories.*

Keywords: *Story-telling, Subjectivity, American Drama, African-American, Vietnam War*

August Wilson ve David Rabe'in Seçilen Oyunlarında Öznellik ve Hikaye Anlatımı

Öz: *Geçmiş ve an, ben ve öteki, yaşam ve ölüm gibi konular ve şaşkınlık, öz sorgulama gibi iç duygular Amerikan tiyatro yazarlarının yapıtlarında sıkça yer almakta ve daha çok hikaye anlatımı yoluyla aktarılmaktadır. Hikaye anlatımı, çağdaş Amerikan oyun yazarlarından August Wilson ve David Rabe'in yapıtlarında özellikle dikkat çekicidir. Yazarlar, hikaye anlatımı yoluyla yapıtlarında bölünmüş ve parçalanmış kişilerin öznelliğini aktarırlar. Rabe'in hikaye anlatımı tekniği özellikle Vietnam üçlemesinde karşımıza çıkarken, Afrikalı-Amerikalı toplumun sözlü edebiyat geleneğinin önemli bir parçası olan hikaye anlatımı August Wilson'un yapıtlarının merkezinde yer alır. Bu çalışmanın amacı her iki yazarın oyunlarında hikaye anlatımı tekniğinin etkilerini araştırmak ve karakterlerin hikaye anlatımı yoluyla kendilerini ve öznel dünyalarını yansıtmasını incelemektir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Amerikan tiyatrosu, Hikaye anlatımı, Öznellik, Afrikalı-Amerikalı, Vietnam Savaşı*

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Introduction

Choosing to tell a story on the stage is its own kind of event for the playwrights who resort their characters to talk instead of handling the action. In this form of narrative the speaker has the advantages of separation and self-evasion. Story-telling saves the speaker from being a teller to being deliverer. A character takes center stage as dominant speaker among other characters and delivers his/her story (either biographical or related to past, artistry, spirituality, etc.) controls the narrative time, and territorial space of the narrative. Employing stories as stage narrative, the authors can have a fictional space outside stage time and stage space, and the authors can make fact a fiction or vice versa in order to destroy the illusion of 'real life'. Thus, story-telling is not only for the sake of presenting subjectivity, but also for hiding thoughts, motives and feelings, at times. In such cases, the speaker is referring to third person either because of the inability to face the addressee, or the events prevent the speaker from saying 'I'. Both Wilson and Rabe let his major characters perform stories in their plays. Rabe's story-tellers, under examination in this study are, the title character in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and Billy and Cokes in *Streamers*, and Wilson's typical story-teller is Toledo in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

August Wilson: African-American Stories

Wilson relates the rich oral tradition of African-American culture through story-telling. He also uses stories "as key strategies in developing his characters, themes, and the social dynamics of character interaction in particular scenes" (Blumenthal, 2000: 76). Wilson uses story-telling in all his plays, thus, the stories told in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Fences* are most representative ones to illustrate his messages. Moreover, *Ma Rainey* is Wilson's first Broadway success, and the most representative of his earlier plays; *Fences* is the bridge between his earlier and later plays. "Without question the dual success of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Fences* garnered Wilson a prominent place in American theatre and, just as important, bolstered his confidence as a serious playwright" (Shannon, 1995b: 116). August Wilson tries to stress in *Ma Rainey*, as in all of his plays, the problems of race, class, cultural identity and rage related to music, history, and spiritual world. And all these important points are delivered through story-telling rather than direct (dialogic) communication.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes place in Chicago, yet the stories are still filled with the echoes of the South. The play centers on Ma Rainey, a famous blues singer, and her band which consists of four black musicians, Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Levee. Each character in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has a "solo turn to talk about past experiences, which echoes another ancient African strategy of expression-storytelling" (Pereira, 1995b: 34). The story-telling starts at the very beginning of the play when the band musicians tell each other stories related to spirituality [i.e. Toledo's story about the meaning of Lord's Prayer (21-2), and Slow Drag's story about how Eliza Cotter of Tuscaloosa sold

her soul to the devil but suffered no fatal repercussions (35-6)]¹ while waiting for Ma Rainey to arrive in the recording studio. The first stories delivered in the play are also mainly centered on the experiences of racism. Each member of the band in the play has in common, an experience of racism. Slow Drag's report of a black preacher and Toledo's comment on black people in the white world as "just a leftover from history" (46) are represented as Wilson's political vision put at the beginning of the play. It is, however, Toledo as the only character who questions his self-image and thus, is the main story-teller in the play. Toledo tells his long story about black man, as being 'leftover from history' while the band eats lunch together. His addressee is the fellow musicians (Levee in essence) as well as the wider audience.

Toledo: Now, I'm gonna show you how this goes ... where you just a leftover from history. Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soon awhile they began to make one big stew. ... Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. Alright. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew. ... See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. ... The problem ain't with the white man. The white man knows you just a leftover. Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of. ... (46-47).

In his story about black men's *eating the stew* and being the *leftover from history*,² Toledo seems to be Wilson's mouthpiece. Through Toledo's speech to the band, specifically Levee as his actual audience, Wilson relates his political ideology to the wider audience. Toledo is Wilson's mouthpiece when he also stresses the idea that the colored man should make the world better for the colored people in the play (33, 46-7).

David Rabe: Wartime Stories

Story-telling in Wilson's plays is the strongest mode of oral discourse in African-American culture. A character who tells stories not only reveals his subjectivity but also the historical, cultural process through which he/she is formed. David Rabe also makes

- 1) Wilson, A. (1991). *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in *August Wilson Three Plays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.
- 2) John J. Hanlon reads Toledo's story related to leftovers of the colored man as Wilson's description of the stew of slavery and the post-emancipation period. For further details see, Hanlon, J. (Spring 2002). "'Niggers got a Right to be Dissatisfied': Postmodernism, Race, and Class in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*" in *Modern Drama* 45/1: pp. 95-122.

use of stories in order to reflect the inner struggles and subjectivity of his characters. In Rabe's Vietnam plays, the characters 'tell stories,' revive memories in order to distract themselves from the threat of war. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is Rabe's first professionally successful play, winning both Obie Award and Drama Desk Award in 1971. The play is about Pavlo Hummel's eight weeks of basic training, and his being an ironical 'war hero' similar to one of those in Hollywood war-movies. Adapting himself to army life, and trying to gain the approval of Sergeants and his fellow soldiers, Pavlo decides to cut off his ties with civilians and construct a new appearance in the army. Pavlo, in fact, tries to make an image for himself; he has, most probably, never achieved up to that time. He is torn in between two lives; two worlds in neither of which he is well accepted. He has decided to present himself as a tough guy both with his 'former idealism' in a street culture in civilian life and as a 'hero' and 'military machine' in his new situation. In order to achieve this, Pavlo is in need of impressing his fellow soldiers around him, and failure of dialogue he turns to story-telling.

Telling stories becomes a relevant action in a war setting, and it seems that it is the only possible language for Pavlo Hummel. Pavlo makes up two stories about his past in order to impress his fellow soldiers (especially Kress, Parker, and Pierce), and moreover to relate himself as he supposes himself to be, and also as a defense strategy against his friends' misbehaviors towards him. The first story is about his uncle who "killed four people in a fight in a bar in San Quentin"³:

Pavlo: ...He killed four people in a barroom brawl usin' broken bottles and table legs and screamin', jus' screamin'. He was mean, man. He was rotten; and my folks been scared the same thing might happen to me; all their lives, they been scares. I got that same look in my eyes like him (18).

And the second story is more interesting in that it is about his stealing twenty three cars in two years, and his run away from the police chasing:

Pavlo: ...Man, sometimes I'd hit lower Manhattan, and then the next night the Bronx or Queens, and sometimes I'd even cut right on outa town. One time, in fact I went all the way to New Haven. Boy that was some night, because they almost caught me. Can you imagine that. Huh? Parker? Huh? Pierce? All the way to New Haven and cops on my tail every inch a the way, roadblocks closin' up behind me, bang, bang, and then some highway patrolman, just as I was wheelin' into New Haven, he come roarin' outa this side road. See, they must a

3) Rabe, D. (1993). *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, in *The Vietnam Plays*, Vol. One, New York: Grove Press, p. 18. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

called ahead or somethin' and he come hot on my ass. I kicked it, man, arrrrrgggggghhhh ...! Eighty-two per. Had a Porsche; he didn't know who he was after; that stupid fuzz, eighty-two per, straight down the gut, people Jumpin' outa my kickin' ass, up to ninety-seven now, roarin' baby sirens all around me, so I cut into this alley and jump. Oh, Jesus, Christ, just lettin' the car go, I hit, roll, I'm up and runnin' down for this board fence, up and over, sirens all over now, I mean, ALL OVER, but I'm walkin' calm, I'm cool. Cops are goin' this way and that way. One of 'em asks me if I seen a Porsche go by real fast. Did I see ... (18-9).

We learn that it is Pavlo's defense strategy to make up these stories, as he tells his fellow soldier, Pierce: "And anyway, I wasn't lyin'; it was story-telling. They was just messin' me a little, pickin' on me..." (20). He expects to relate himself through the stories since there is no way of constructing meaningful dialogue with his friends. Both stories, on the other hand, remind us of Hollywood productions of action movies. Pavlo is shaped by the movies, and thus wants to draw a tough movie-soldier picture (as presented by Hollywood) to his fellow soldiers. The impact of the movies on Pavlo Hummel might probably stem from his admiration to war pictures and street scenes in Hollywood action movies, definitely not from his real experiences. "*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is about the difficulty of understanding the world, of finding a language that can explain it" (Bigsby, 1999: 262).

The ignorance of anarchic depths of the war can obviously be attributed to the middle-class family setting in Rabe's next play, *Sticks and Bones*.⁴ There are some resemblances between *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and his second Vietnam play in the trilogy. If the problems of everyday life are brought to battlefield in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, on the contrary the horror of war is brought into ordinary life in *Sticks and Bones*. The problem is again the difficulty of finding a language that can explain the situation. The stories also refer to the broader theme of the difficulty of communication in *Streamers*; there is a breakdown in communication between the characters that each turns to story-telling when one wants to reveal something serious about him.

Streamers is accepted to be Rabe's 'masterpiece,' regarded as the most effective of the Vietnam plays. The play won New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best American play of 1976, Drama Desk Award, and the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1977. The set is a cadre room in which soldiers, having completed their basic training, are waiting to go to the Vietnam War. The story revolves around the interaction of soldiers in Virginia barracks. The three characters Billy, Richie and Roger share the same barrack

4) *Sticks and Bones* is resembled to a very popular TV soap series of "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" in the 1950s. See, for instance, Mohr, U. (2001). "The 'Reality' of War: Rabe's and Shepard's Vietnam Dramas," in *Sixties Revisited: Culture, Society Politics*, Munich: American Studies Series, v. 90, p. 270.

room with frequent accompaniment of Carlyle, and with intrusions of two Sergeants, Cokes and Rooney. The intrusions of Cokes and Rooney, military men of the World War II generation who call themselves ‘Screaming Eagles,’ to the cadre room expose real voices of the war. Their horror stories of war end up with singing of ‘Beautiful Streamer.’⁵

Story-telling starts at the beginning and continues throughout *Streamers*. Every character in the play has his story, and thus they together share the main story of war. “The war exists only as an awful rumor: in the first act, they out-to-do one another telling stories of what they have heard about jungle warfare” (Homan, 2001: 77). War stories start with Billy’s rumor on the Korean War. He opens the discussion about being in war where there is snow or snakes.

Billy: We used to ask it all the time. All the time. I mean, us kids sittin’ out on the back porch tellin’ ghost stories at night. ‘Cause it was Korea time and the newspapers were fulla pictures of soldiers in snow with white frozen beards; they got these rags tied around their feet. And snakes. We hated snakes ...⁶

Richie continues the similar rumors to Billy and Roger about Vietcong who put “elephant shit in a wound in your foot, ... and you crawl right into the snakes that they have tied by their tails to the ceiling in the dark ... and get bitten to death” (31-2).

Billy’s story about his friend he grew up with (47-48), Richie’s story about his father (76), all refer to the theme of the difficulty of dialogue. War, on the other hand, is the cause of the inability to solve a problem with conversation.

Apart from the rumors, the real jungle war stories are delivered through sergeants; Cokes and Rooney. Standing side by side, Rooney as presenter and Cokes as story teller, using strong military jargon language, climbing onto the footlocker, and with jumping, yelling, screaming-eagle sounds, and making clowning eagle gestures, both resemble performance artists, rather than sergeants in the play. Cokes’s two stories, the first about the streamer, O’Flannig, who falls down to the ground because of his unopened parachute (39-40) is more realistically than both the rumors and the media presentations.

5) The word ‘Streamer’ comes to several meanings; in dictionary meaning it is a long narrow flag or a long narrow piece of colored paper; colored strip of paper, used to decorate knight’s helmet, or a place for celebration (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], p. 1284). In the play, “a streamer” refers to a parachute which fails to open, as Hertzbach explains “the thin ribbon of silk merely trails the hapless jumper as he [parachutist] plummets towards certain death. As he leaps out of the safe womb of the airplane, he is born, after a few moments, into a brief life governed by the terror of circumstance, the rule of irrationality, and the absence of alternatives to the destruction awaiting him. See S. Hertzbach, J. (1981). “The Plays of David Rabe: A World of Streamers,” in *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*, (eds: Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim). Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, p. 173.

6) Rabe, D. (1982). *Streamers*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 11. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

Cokes: This guy [O'Flannagan] with his chute goin' straight up above him in a streamer, like a tulip, only white, you know. All twisted and never gonna open. Like a big icicle sticking straight up above him. He went right by me. We met eyes sort of. He was lookin' real puzzled. He looks right at me. Then he looks up in the air at the chute, then down at the ground (41).

And the second story is about his dropping grenade into the enemy's hole which reflects the horror of war:

Cokes: But the one I remember is this little guy in his spider hole, which is a hole in the ground with a lid over it (And he is using Richie's footlocker before him as the spider hole. He has fixed on it, is moving toward it). And he shot me in the ass as I was runnin' by, but the bullet hit me so hard- (His body kind of jerks and he runs several steps.) –it knocked me into this ditch where he couldn't see me. I got behind him. Crowlin'. And I dropped a grenade into his hole, Then sat on the lid, him bounchin' and yellin' under me. Bounchin' and yellin' under the lid. I could hear him. Feel him. I just sat there (41-2).

In short, war is full of stories as Rabe observes and explains within such war stories of fact and fiction. Failure of dialogue, Rabe's main characters in Vietnam trilogy reveal themselves by referring to story-telling.

Conclusion

Both Wilson and Rabe create "historical moments" between fact and fiction by means of stories in their dramas. The stories in Rabe's Vietnam plays are points of reference in that they constitute the threat of death, and drama, yet, the "pressure which fractures character, exposes the fissures in experience, reveals the inadequacy of language" (Biggsby, 2004: 266). The stories give Wilson as a playwright, a possibility to reveal emotional side (subjectivity) of his characters on one side and to instruct the audience about the social and cultural situation of African-American community, on the other. Wilson constructs black subjectivity through foregrounding of African-American culture and history in the stories, and the main messages in Wilson's plays are explicated through the use of stories. The 'historical moment' comes out through both playwrights' imagined reality which is beyond merely to inform by recording history, toward the emotional landscape of American and African-American experiences.

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