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“Blueprints for the Reconstruction”: Postmodern Possibility in *Stairs to the Roof*

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“If civilization is falling, you’re not going to walk around sighing gently over the beautiful ruins while we, the little people are lying *squashed underneath*! No, we’re going to be on the top of the dump heap, too. And there isn’t going to be any gentle sighing about it. There’s going to be lots of hard work putting it back together. And the blueprints for the reconstruction are not going to be supplied by the old architects—the ones who put so much water in the cement that it wouldn’t hold up!—No! No, we the people, are going to draw them ourselves!”

[. . .]

“What is it? The Millennium?—Possibly! Who knows?”

— Tennessee Williams, *Stairs to the Roof* (1941)

In one of his earliest interviews in 1940, after the Theatre Guild optioned *Battle of Angels* for his first major professional run, Tennessee Williams spoke about a work-in-progress, *Stairs to the Roof*, set in St. Louis during the years just before World War II.¹ He described the play as “a social comedy about a lowly paid clerk trying to escape his economic cage” and explained, “My interest in social problems is as great as my interest in the theatre. [. . .] I try to write all my plays so that they carry some social message along with the story” (qtd. in Devlin 5). Even after the success of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945, Williams still called *Stairs to the Roof* his “second-best play” after *Battle of Angels* (qtd. in Devlin 10). As Allean Hale acknowledged in the Introduction to the published version of the play, Williams’s “social comedy” owes an obvious and considerable debt to Elmer Rice’s social play *The Adding Machine* (1923). Both works emphasize the impersonal and dehumanizing aspects of a mechanized world through the presentation of robotic characters and the use of letters (Messrs. P, D, Q, T in *Stairs*) or numbers (Mr./Mrs. Zero, One, Two, Three, etc., in *Adding Machine*) in place of proper names. In addition, each has a scene near a lake, a loveless and burdensome marriage, an extramarital romance that the protagonist initially refuses, reductive portrayals of women, and an instance of divine intervention. A small, perhaps subconscious, nod in Rice’s direction can also be seen in The Girl’s final liberating speech in *Stairs*, where she identifies “we the people” as the architects of a new world order (85); Williams would certainly have known Rice’s 1933 play, “We, the People.” But if, as Hale argues, Williams “did borrow ideas from the established playwright, it was perhaps a deliberate tribute to Rice and another move in his campaign to get his play staged. . . . Like all writers, Williams got ideas from his predecessors; the new ways he built on them made them unique” (xiii).

¹2 In this essay, I compare Rice’s *Adding Machine* with *Stairs to the Roof* in order to illustrate that even though these plays deal with social issues—specifically the human costs of industrial capitalism—neither one is strictly a social play in the established sense of the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s. The clear espousal of Marxist ideology and a call to political action, presented most notably in the plays of Bertolt Brecht and “agitprop” theatre, is absent from these two works. Both were innovative plays for their respective times, dealing complexly with the contradictions of industrial capitalism in relation to the individual. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that

Brecht's plays were not complex in their presentation of the contradictions of a capitalist social system, but his solutions were much more direct, even as he offered the audience open-ended conclusions to ponder. On the other hand, agitprop or Workers' Theatre did tend to deal with the simplistic aspects of living under the system of industrial capitalism, but its aims were more immediate, hoping to reach a wide audience and incite protest. Much of Brecht's brilliance, in fact, lies in his complex anti-Aristotelian presentations that, for all their didacticism, avoid coercing the spectator or reducing the issues. Brecht, however, saw political reform on earth as a possibility, a duty even, whereas *The Adding Machine* and *Stairs to the Roof* are less assured of their political ideology and seem to abandon concrete political solutions. Rice portrays a fixed human nature that is doomed to cycles of enslavement, only suggesting the possibility of social change. Williams, more interestingly than Rice (as I will show), is rather playful in his approach and sees change in abandoning the old political forms to "experiment" and reforge something entirely new out of the old. While I do point out key similarities between the two plays that differentiate them from other forms of socially conscious drama, it is where the similarities end that I see Williams moving toward a postmodern sensibility in relation to the devastations of two world wars. This prefiguring of a new postmodern American identity under capitalism is one of the factors that makes *Stairs to the Roof*—formerly dismissed as one of Williams's "apprentice plays" until New Directions published it in 2000 with Hale's insightful introduction—a pivotal work for 1941.

¶3

For all their similarities, the two plays differ greatly in their ultimate message, as Rice's play, written a few years after World War I, inevitably hints toward some vague sort of social reform as the only option (in its moral inversions, postmortem rewards for resisting oppressive social convention, and exposure of the cycles of social enslavement), while *Stairs to the Roof* seems to be operating on another level entirely, taking on the post-World War I philosophy of "make it new," in the words of American poet Ezra Pound, and prefiguring its application in a post-World War II era, where the "new" would signal a postmodern embracing of contradictions and differences that are able to coexist in the same space in order to create something innovative—new solutions, new identities—with what already exists. Though I am not necessarily arguing that *Stairs to the Roof* is a postmodern work, I am proposing that *Stairs*'s presentation in 1941 of the transformative possibility inherent in uncertainty, contradiction, experimentation, and play gestures toward a postmodern American identity that would mark this country during the second half of the twentieth century. While there had been a vague hope evident in the American theater between the Wars, this hope was fading during the late '30s and early '40s as the Great Depression reflected a devastated economy and World War II was well under way in Europe. As the United States became involved in World War II, the country was entering a more pessimistic age or, more positively put, an age that began to abandon faith in absolutes in favor of an acknowledgment of the concepts of reality and truth as complex, often relative, and open for negotiation.

¶4

In his Foreword to *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams wrote that when he was "halfway through [the play,] the United States of America went to war," and he wondered if he should continue the work. But he kept on, deciding that "Wars come and go and this one will be no exception. But Benjamin Murphy and Benjamin Murphy's problems are universal and everlasting" (xxi). Similarly, Rice is concerned with social issues mainly in terms of their effects on individual existential anxieties rather than on the exploration of paths toward political change. According to Thomas Allen Greenfield, *The Adding Machine* leaves the spectator "fearful of the state of his own soul and worried about the nature of his being": by "[d]ownplaying the employer-employee conflict, even minimizing the oppressive poverty of the Zero household, and wholly dismissing the tenets of the

work ethic, Rice makes us concentrate on the universal question of the fragility and vulnerability of human dignity” (44–45).

¶15 Therefore, even though both *The Adding Machine* and *Stairs to the Roof* deal with social issues and are effective portrayals of the dehumanization of an increasingly mechanized society, neither one offers any constructive political alternatives to the impending urbanization of modern life in the years just after the devastation of World War I and the increased development of industry brought on by World War II, nor do they directly present any complex social contradictions for the audience to ponder, as do, most notably, the plays of Brecht. Moreover, neither play comfortably falls into the category of agitprop political theatre or Workers’ Theatre in the tradition of Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), which ends with a call to “STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!!”

¶16 Despite Rice’s affiliations with social issues in works such as *The Seventh Commandment* (1913), *The Iron Cross* (1915), *The House on Blind Alley* (1916), *Street Scene* (1929), and *We, the People* (written 1932; produced 1933), and despite Williams’s self-proclaimed interest in “social problems” and in the work of German director Erwin Piscator, credited with originating agitprop theatre in the 1920s—Williams took Piscator’s Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York City in 1940—neither *The Adding Machine* nor *Stairs to the Roof* is a social or protest play in the established conventional sense, in that neither promotes the rights of the working class, espouses Marxist ideals, or actively calls for social resistance and revolution. In fact, each play is much less concerned with social class bias than with existential humanist ideals and the imprisoned state of the human soul in an age of increasing spiritual emptiness and impersonality under American capitalism, which seeks to overwhelmingly control the course of human development.

¶17 Therefore, for all their criticism of American industrial capitalism, *The Adding Machine* and *Stairs to the Roof* are, ironically, very “American” in their pursuit of individualism and preoccupation with the personal destiny of the soul rather than a collective socialist/Marxist agenda. Even the plays’ escapism—the comic *deus ex machina* in *Stairs* or Mrs. Zero’s fascination with Hollywood romantic fantasy and her criticism of “Westerners” in the opening of *Adding Machine*—relies on distinctly American discourses and myths. These plays are aware that capitalism, while an individualist economic system, ironically winds up enslaving the individual. This irony, however, is embedded in the system, as individualism is only promoted insofar as it threatens neither the status quo nor those in power. This notion is elegantly expressed in Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where he writes on the bourgeois politics of *virtu* in the theatre, reminding us that:

While its principal opposition was to feudal nobility, the bourgeoisie directed its energies toward the exaltation of individual man—the same man who was later submitted to severe reduction, by that same bourgeoisie, when its principal opponent came to be the proletariat. (65)

Despite these nuances, *The Adding Machine*’s final destination does seem to be a gesture toward social reform, although Rice arrives there in a very roundabout manner. For Rice, humanity is doomed and there is no escape from oppression, not even in the afterlife. The human soul is so conditioned to slavery that Mr. Zero cannot even choose freedom and love when it is offered to him in Paradise. He rejects a life of leisure with Daisy, and must repeat the cycle of oppression ad infinitum. The economic system in the play, Greenfield argues, is “born of the cosmos. . . . It is ‘manned’ by demons in the afterlife against whom no one can contend, much less win” (45). Mr. Zero therefore goes back to earth and its bleak realities under a false assumption, by indulging in the

ultimate fantasy, a vision of a woman named “Hope,” a “good looking . . . blonde with big blue eyes and red lips and little white teeth” (62) who “will help make [him] forget” about the fact that he must remain “a slave to a contraption of steel and iron,” less than an animal, with “The animal’s instincts, but not his strength and skill. The animal’s appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them” (61). Social and economic conditions have won control over the human spirit, and “Hope” is only an illusion that keeps us enslaved. By presenting a situation in which neither love nor death offer escape, and social systems force individuals to participate in their own oppression, Rice suggests that the only option for salvation is social reform. But Rice’s presentation, far more subtle than that of Odets or Brecht, leaves it up to the audience to discern the choices confronting them.

¶8

Those characters shunned by society—the drunks, jobless poets, unmarried lovers, murderers, and those who question religious doctrine—are rewarded in the Paradise of Elysian Fields for opposing oppression and standing up to injustice. Mr. Zero’s murder of his boss, therefore, is seen as a positive act—a gesture of resistance against a hypocritical capitalist immorality that would allow the callous disposal of a faithful employee after twenty-five years of service, while condemning those who love outside the contract of marriage. The cycle of social enslavement, Rice’s play implies, is inevitable unless we have the courage to question what passes for morality and to operate outside ideological prisons.

¶9

Stairs to the Roof can also, in a sense, be seen as a social play, even though it does not argue for social reform in America (or even on earth). The solution to industrial mechanization and the entrapment of the human soul, the play suggests, lies not in social change but in escape to another planet, where a new race may be founded. To an even greater extent than Rice’s play, *Stairs* combines a superficial critique of American capitalism with an espousal of the mythology that goes hand-in-hand with industrial capitalism. It exalts individualism and personal destiny, while embracing the Anglo-patriarchal American values of freedom, adventure, and the conquest of new frontiers. As Ben comes closer to threatening the social order, Messrs. P and Q offer him a position on “The road, the road!” in the open West where there would be “Nothing but Indians!” (88). The imperialist mentality behind the colonization of another planet—the ultimate frontier—participates fully in a capitalist ideology. The objectification of women as objects of conquest, fulfilling the functions of pleasure and procreation with no complex desire or identity in their own right, is typical of a patriarchal capitalist ethic, even as the play rallies against the commodification of *men’s* souls in the workplace. The female protagonist is, appropriately, called simply “The Girl” and dismissed or silenced throughout the play. Therefore, while the play certainly does criticize the dehumanization of the individual (specifically male individual) under capitalism, it simultaneously embraces many of its values, making its protest somewhat contradictory.

¶10

What seems, at first, an awkward juxtaposition—the play’s simultaneous critique and embrace of capitalism—acquires fresh import when considered as a herald of the postmodern mentality. Seen in this light, *Stairs* illustrates the complexities of social systems and reveals the misleading simplicity of social protest plays, specifically much of the agitprop theatre of the 1930s. *Stairs* gestures toward a postmodern complexity in both content and form during the crucial years during World War II, a time of experimentation, when the illusive modernist search for absolutes was being transformed to a postmodern age where truth and illusion are often indistinguishable, identity is not fixed, and differences coexist in the same space. If hope for renewed human possibility on earth was an illusion in *The Adding Machine*, hope on earth is abandoned altogether in *Stairs to the Roof* in favor of an “experiment” (Williams 95) that would develop a brand new frontier that could save the human soul.

¶11

The only escape from industrial capitalism's clutches in both *The Adding Machine* and *Stairs to the Roof* seems to occur through the supernatural, either in the afterlife or by way of divine intervention. Reality is seen as so entrenched with the defeat of the human spirit that it is completely abandoned and disregarded in favor of fantasy and the spiritual realm. Not only is an escape into fantasy the only way for the main characters to free themselves from the unbearably dull existence defined by the cycle of unfulfilling work and the social prison of marriage, but it seems that fantasy is the only way for them to find any sort of love or romance as well. Both Mr. Zero in *The Adding Machine* and Ben Murphy in *Stairs to the Roof*, while initially pursuing fantasies of romance with the girls in their offices ("Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore" and "The Girl," respectively), reject the possibility of a permanent joyful union, choosing instead the oppressive realities of work and tedious, loveless marriages.

¶12

In the end, both protagonists embrace the idea of union with a woman, but their choices are in fact illusions of women or necessary conveniences, not partners in love or romance. In *The Adding Machine*, the mirage of hope that Mr. Zero follows is not an actual woman whom he knows and can love, as Daisy was, but woman as an illusion, a temptation, even a commodity. If this is the "hope" of twentieth-century America, a world of illusory commodities that are dangled in front of men in order to make them slaves to the corporate "adding machine," then Rice's play prefigures the changes in society that postindustrial capitalism would bring after World War II—and women, of course, figure strongly in this mythology as passive objects or blank slates.

¶13

The women in both plays serve as substitutions and take on shifting roles, but in *Stairs* this shifting can be seen as illustrating a postmodern sense of instability and "play." *Stairs*'s focus on postmodern play is specifically evident at several points—in the deconstructed binary of fantasy/reality and the role-playing that takes place in Ben's recasting of The Girl as "Alice [in Wonderland]," in the "Beauty and the Beast" scene, and in its fantastic ending. The Girl is depersonalized from the beginning through her generic identifier, and when Ben meets her on a street corner one night, he imposes a fantastic, stereotypical identity on her, calling her "Alice. The everlasting Alice in every girl's heart! Looking for Wonderland!" (55). He convinces her to join him for a night's adventure of his own orchestration, placing her in his fantasy narrative and blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality, just as Mr. Zero does with his illusion of a woman.

¶14

Ironically, however, Ben eventually tells The Girl that he does not "believe [she] know[s] what reality is" (78). Even though she is willing to live in any reality/fantasy he invents for her, he still rejects her. Ben sees The Girl as a postmodern chameleon, fulfilling various dehumanized incarnations in the typical forms of bird and flower: "One moment you're a swan—the next you're a bird of paradise" (76). Even when Ben finally sees her as "a woman," she is associated with the role of his mother, "shedding real honest-to-God tears for me, the first time that has occurred since I came home to Mother with my first black eye . . ." (76). The Girl, however, is not immune from using Ben to fulfill her own fantasy, for she is in love with her boss, Warren Thatcher, who does not return her affections. When she first meets Ben, she tells him that he "looks very much" like Warren, the resemblance prompting her to believe that Ben "was actually *him*" (62). By the end of scene 10, she calls him by Warren's name, and Ben decides that "It's a fair transaction! I'll be Warren and you'll be the swan!" (69).

¶15

The odd and disturbing "Beauty and the Beast" scene in the park is even more problematic in its theme of transformation in relation to women, as the Beast turns into a handsome young man after he essentially rapes Beauty, a violation for which Beauty is grateful, declaring that she "owned no beauty til it felt [the Beast's]

need” (73). At the end of the play, the actor playing the Beast “resume[s] his ugly mask and is choking Beauty” (73), acting the Beast in real life and blurring the distinction between acting and being.

¶16

The idea of role-playing also comes up in a different sense at the end of *Stairs* when Ben’s boss, Mr. Gum, realizes he has lost control of his employees, who are all fleeing to the roof. In an attempt to appear in control, he tells his managers to “Smile, you sons of bitches! Act delighted. Play like this is what you always wanted!” (98). The fantasy ending—the comical Mr. E sporting a “beautiful sky-blue robe sprinkled with cosmic symbols” and holding “an enormous sparkler” as his “beard flows purely and whitely in the freshening wind of a summer twilight” (92)—illustrates a whimsy that characterizes the entire play. Fantasy, Williams suggests, is the only way out of the devastating “mess” (95).

¶17

The devastating effects of World War I are evidenced in both these plays, but Rice in 1923 could at least end his play with Mr. Zero’s promise of some sort of “Hope,” however empty, illusory, and problematic. By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, Williams saw hope and the possibility of meaningful heterosexual union only in the extreme of rejecting the world and escaping to a “new star” known as “World Number Two” (94-95), where Ben and The Girl would populate the planet. Ben’s union with The Girl, however, is rooted simply in practical reproduction. The only reason Ben agrees to take The Girl away with him to the next world is that even though “Mr. E”—a comical representative of the divine²—insists that World Number Two is an *experiment* to remedy the “rather sorry mess that having two sexes has made of things down here on World Number One” (95),³ Ben is not fond of the idea of monosexual reproduction, and designates The Girl as his reproductive partner, making a rather interesting Adam and Eve duo. Love, romance, and intimacy have nothing to do with their union, at least not from Ben’s perspective. Both Ben’s and Mr. Zero’s unions are not based on the redemptive values of human connection, but on reductionistic stereotypes of women’s functions.

¶18

In *Stairs*, escape is the only solution—social reform is not even possible. Yet this play is not entirely an escapist fantasy, as the final escape is not a definitive and easy solution, but an ending left with uncertain questions and a lot of work ahead in giving birth to a new human race. Neither is *Stairs* strictly a humanist play, since the triumph of the individual occurs in such an unlikely and even comic way as to cancel out any real possibility of triumph. Although the ending may suggest spirituality as salvation, the play does not seriously espouse religion as a viable alternative to the problems on earth. It simultaneously proposes and mocks a spiritual solution, presenting a sometimes laughing, sometimes tearful figure in a white beard as humanity’s salvation. The play’s apparent “solution” (hardly a realistic solution at all) is so outrageous in the context of a “social play,” and its “escape” fraught with so many uncertainties, that we must look elsewhere for the play’s message. In realistic terms, the arrival of the cartoonish Merlin is as much help to humanity as the nonappearance of Samuel Beckett’s Godot. Moreover, the divine Mr. E is not God, but a mad scientist—Ben first addresses him as “Doc” (93), and as Mr. E exits, he invokes the name of the Lord, declaring that “I, by God, am the *oldest* fool of them *all!*” (97). The play’s final tableau of drunken celebration and jubilation with the ultimate question—“What is it? The Millenium?—Possibly! Who knows?”(99) — as the closing lines promises only the possibility of a better day without any concrete plan, just a lot of questions, contradictions, and possibilities. If this is *Stairs*’s version of hope, then its offering comes quite close to Beckett’s vision, echoed in his reported favorite word—“perhaps.”

¶19

If, on one level, *Stairs to the Roof* is a social play that criticizes the mechanization of the individual under industrial capitalism and culminates in an escapist fantasy, on another level it can be seen as planting the seeds

of a postmodernism that acknowledges the complexity of issues dealing with the individual versus the collective and the need to find entirely new ways of thinking about that binary. We must “make it new,” but “new” in the sense of taking what already exists and fusing contradictions in postmodern fashion. *Stairs*’s open-endedness (an open-endedness very different from Brecht’s) is not existential, as it does not completely deny spirituality, nor is it quite postmodern in the nihilistic sense that some theorists have interpreted postmodernism. Instead, *Stairs*’s “solution” lies in postmodern possibility, play, and the reimagining of old forms.

¶20

For Williams in *Stairs*, a utopian future is yet to be imagined, and it is not through politics, humanism, or spirituality that this vision will occur, but an as-yet-unimagined combination of the forces we have at our disposal—an “experiment” (95). *Stairs to the Roof* is Williams’s homage to the “Mr. E” (i.e. mystery) of possibility in the American creative imagination, fueled by “Human Courage” (97), as we forge ahead with his famous battle cry, “En Avant!”

Notes

¹ *Stairs to the Roof* was written in 1941, produced in 1945, and finally published by New Directions in 2000.

² Mr. E’s human characteristics are shown several times, as when he “blows his nose on a starry handkerchief” (97). This is reminiscent of the gods in Brecht’s *Good Woman of Setzuan*, who are more and more disheveled each time they appear, showing “signs of a long journey, extreme fatigue, and plenty of mishaps” (Brecht 99).

³ In her introduction to *Stairs to the Roof*, Allean Hale suggests that this line may be Williams’s defense of homosexuality, despite an otherwise stereotypical comedic portrait of a gay male in the character of “A Designer,” who in the original script was called “An Effeminate Man” (xvi).

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