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**THE PLAYS OF EMILY MANN: AN EXAMPLE OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF
DOCUMENTARY THEATRE TO JOURNALISM**

by

DEBORAH POPE

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2002

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Abstract

THE PLAYS OF EMILY MANN: AN EXAMPLE OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF DOCUMENTARY THEATRE TO JOURNALISM

by

Deborah Pope

Adviser: Professor Daniël Gerould

Emily Mann is one of the major creators of contemporary documentary theatre in the United States. Because her work exemplifies the dynamic interactions between documentary playwriting and documentary journalism, particularly televised journalism, her plays can serve as case studies for an exploration of the current status of the genre: its assumptions, problems, and possibilities.

My primary focus is the impact of the news media on documentary playwriting. I examine how television has affected the way in which history is written and perceived; how the influences of television differ from other influences to which theatre has responded over the ages; and whether the television audience is cued to question the way material is conveyed or to accept the broadcast as a representation of reality. In addition, I examine how televised presentational technique has affected the dramatic structure of stage documentary; how a documentary play, employing television techniques, affects the theatre audience; and what the influence of television may be on the future of documentary playwriting.

As a playwright Mann has identified her goal: to entertain, educate, and inspire her audiences. She aims to bring to the audience representations of contemporary historical events that will allow them to re-examine society and their place in it. In her plays, Emily Mann has provided her audiences with critical perspectives on the age itself,

its politics, and its media. My task has been to discover how she has imparted to the documentary stage such a level of rigorous inquiry employing the very techniques provided by the media age in which we live.

The factors that have influenced Mann in her choice of subject and presentation technique for each of her plays can be seen as fusing political movement, artistic trend, and “being at the right place at the right time.” The volatile political climate (of civil rights and antiwar demonstrations as portrayed on television) inspired greater interest in the rights and experiences of the individual. The oral-history movement and the growing fascination with the power of facts also provided the subjects and formats most compelling to be presented onstage as documentary, historical and fictionalized drama. The focus on the individual and how history affects the life of that one person is a common theme in Mann’s work.

In each chapter of this dissertation I have examined one of Mann’s five produced documentary plays. The plays are placed chronologically in the order written, and through each is explored a different aspect of Mann’s work as a documentary playwright in a world saturated with sound-bite information. These discussions include reference to the way in which Mann has chosen the subjects of her plays, how she has chosen the style and structure for her work, how she has served her work as a director, how her position as artistic director has influenced her choices as a playwright, and finally how critical response has affected the life of her work.

Acknowledgments

My first thanks must go to Professor Dan Gerould. When I began my doctoral studies as a young woman not long out of college he provided an intellectual challenge and inspiration rare to encounter in any realm. Since that time, he has continued to provide support and guidance perhaps most critically when I was on leave from my studies. He pointed out, at that time, that the world does not need another Ph.D., the world needs happy individuals able to contribute to the social fabric. I thank him for those words and for his instrumental place in helping me complete this task on my road as a happy and contributing member of our culture.

Prof. Harry Carlson has been a friend and mentor for almost as many years as Prof. Gerould and his insight and guidance have been central to the form this dissertation has taken. I thank him for his patience and continued confidence in my work. I have valued our discussions which have touched on the many different aspects of theatre, both academic and practical, as well as on various aspects of a life in the theatre.

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There are also former members of the Graduate Center faculty whose help I am honored to mention: Prof. Jill Dolan, former Chair of the Theatre Department, who re-admitted me to the program in 1997; Prof. Stanley Warren who served as Chair during my early years completing course work and whose humor lightened the load; Prof. Stanley Kauffmann whose thoughtful and independent insights into theatre and film helped foster my own; and to Prof. Harold Proshansky whose humanity, vision, spirit and generosity remain as a standard for all who follow.

I extend a tremendous thanks to Emily Mann whose work has formed the basis for my writing, and whose generosity made all research possible and simple. At the McCarter Theatre my work was facilitated particularly by Janice Paran, literary manager and dramaturg extraordinaire, Dan Bauer, the head of publicity and Grace Shackney, Emily's Administrative Associate without whom nothing happens.

For providing this study with a number oral histories describing participation in the mounting of three of Emily Mann's plays I have to thank those who agreed to interviews and whose thoughtful responses have formed and transformed my approach to the

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Not enough is said about the support necessary in a household with children and two working parents. Amroon Wohab has worked with our family for almost eight years. She has been a partner to us and often shown us the way, herself having raised seven beautiful, loving and intelligent children. I am the beneficiary of her wisdom, humor and warmth, as are my children.

Last to thank but never, never least are my friends and family: Marion Eisenberg whose warmth and guidance never fail, Judy Hilkey whose humor and understanding serve as a lighthouse, my brother-in-law Leonard whose fortitude withstands great tides, my sister Miriam, who is my best friend and always my first point of reference, and my incandescent children, Abigail Tao Yu and Rebecca Zhen Yuan, who are quite simply the best.

This was a long march and one I could not and did not want to walk alone. I thank my husband, Peter Brooks, for making our paths come together. Thanks are not enough.

Most of all, I am gratified to be able to dedicate this work to my parents, Lillie and Martin Pope.

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Introduction

Emily Mann is one of the major creators of contemporary documentary theatre. Because her work exemplifies the dynamic interactions between documentary playwriting and documentary journalism, particularly televised broadcast journalism, her plays can serve as case studies for an exploration of the current status of the genre: its assumptions, problems, and possibilities. In his book *In Their Own Words*, David Savran writes of Mann:

In her plays Mann has evolved a distinctive and powerful dramatic form that combines her interest in oral history and journalism, her prowess as a theatre director and her understanding of musical architecture and counterpoint. In each, she illuminates a particular circumstance by running historical fact against a number of interwoven voices that describe the feeling of an event from the inside . . . In her work Mann has introduced a new political sophistication to the American theatre . . . Her plays dramatize the realization that there is no moral high ground, that all are implicated in the workings of brutality, and that there is no easy escape from violence, coercion and decay.¹

The importance of Mann's work has also been recognized by her colleagues. South African playwright Athol Fugard considers her one of the most important American playwrights working today. Gary Fisher Dawson, in his comprehensive study, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, considers her work a focal point in the development of the field: "Through Mann, American documentary theatre has evolved into a unique blend . . . Mann's *Still Life* (1980), for me, marks the beginning of the fourth phase of documentary theatre in America."² Dawson identifies the first phase in the development of the form as beginning with the work of Erwin Piscator, the second

¹ David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 145-147.

² Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 164.

phase beginning with the Living Newspapers produced by the Federal Theatre Project and the third phase beginning with Martin Duberman's *In White America*.

My primary focus will be the impact of news media on documentary playwriting. I consider how television has affected the way in which history is written and perceived; how the influences of television differ from other influences to which theatre has responded over the ages; and whether the television audience is cued to question the way material is conveyed or to accept the broadcast as a representation of reality. In addition, I will examine how televised presentational technique has affected the dramatic structure of stage documentary: how a documentary play, employing television techniques, affects the theatre audience; and what the influence of television may be on the future of documentary playwriting.

As a playwright Mann has identified her goal: to entertain, educate, and inspire her audiences.³ She aims to bring to the audience representations of contemporary historical events that will allow them to re-examine society and their place in it.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel De Certeau suggests that the attempt to recreate what has happened in art or historical writing is a next-to-impossible task:

Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice. Inhabited by the uncanniness that it seeks, history imposes its law upon the faraway places that it conquers when it fosters the illusion that it is bringing them back to life.⁴

De Certeau asserts that the present context and the personal outlook of the historian makes the effort to recreate or represent the past simply a reflection of the needs of the

³ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* (Hanover, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2001), 288.

⁴ Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 36.

present. If De Certeau's proposition is accepted, then it is possible to say that all historical writing is the evocation of the authors' feelings about and interpretations of their research. This, in fact, provides a good description of Mann's approach to her work. She maintains that each of her plays is a subjective description of her own traumatic response to the traumatic experiences of the individuals who have recounted their stories to her.

In her book *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer contends that emotional involvement can dissolve the necessary perspective on the subject required for the creation of art:

All appreciation of art—painting, architecture, music, dance, whatever the piece may be—requires a certain detachment, which has been variously called the “attitude of contemplation,” the “aesthetic attitude,” or the “objectivity” of the beholder . . . it is part of the artist's business to make his work elicit this attitude instead of requiring the percipient to bring an ideal frame of mind with him . . . It is for the sake of this remove that art deals entirely in illusions, which because of their lack of “practical, concrete nature,” are readily distanced as symbolic forms. But delusion—even the quasi-delusion of “make-believe”—aims at the opposite effect, the greatest possible nearness. To seek delusion, belief, and “audience participation” in the theatre is to deny that drama is art.⁵

Together the observations of De Certeau and Langer present a paradox. De Certeau's claim that the description of history (as art or literature) is subjective, and as an extension of the present cannot have the distance necessary for detached perspective, conflicts with Langer's assertion that art can only come from a calm detachment and a conscious distance from the subject being described. Neither of these assertions is unique; many in the fields of history, art, and literature share them. The paradox inherent in these two thoughts is similar to the ones with which I will have to grapple in this thesis, including

⁵ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 318-319.

whether it is possible for a playwright to claim the veracity implied by presenting the “facts” when the story being told is admittedly a reflection of herself; whether the techniques of the media can be employed and still effectively critique those techniques; and how the tricks played by the electronic media on an audience’s ability to recognize the artifice of a program, are different from old-fashioned theatrical “suspension of disbelief.”

George Lipsitz, in his book *Time Passages*, provides a good basis for appreciating the way in which the mass media both represent and destroy the expression of a society’s shared memories, hopes, and dreams:

The presence of sedimented historical currents within popular culture illuminates the paradoxical relationship between history and commercialized leisure. Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible . . . History and commercialized leisure appear to be polar opposites—the former concerned with continuities that unite the totality of human experience, the latter with immediate sense gratifications that divide society into atomized consumers. But both the variants of history and the forms of commercialized leisure familiar to us originated at the same time for the same reasons. Both developed in the nineteenth century in response to extraordinary technological and social changes. Recognition of the common origins of history and commercialized leisure can explain the seemingly paradoxical tensions . . . while also helping to explain how the “remembering” of history and the “forgetting” of commercialized leisure form parts of a dialectical totality.⁶

Peter Brook, in *The Empty Space*, suggests that television and film are perceived as an extension of the mind’s reality and therefore inseparable from it, rendering all communications from that source deceptively real; on the other hand, Brook contends that theatre demands that the audience be aware of the pretense before them. The paradox of the television experience is, of course, that at the same time as it seems to be

⁶ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5-6.

an extension of reality for the audience (and therefore seemingly like something that is happening to them), it also distances the audience from the event, encasing the event in a frame far away from where the viewer is sitting.

But once the drama onstage begins to employ the devices, techniques, formats, and even writing style of televised reality, will the audience respond to the play as if it were television? In the short bursts of information allowable on television, can the audience gain a deeper understanding of an event? If the audience, accustomed to television, can only sustain interest in these short bursts, can a playwright convey more information on a subject than can be available on television? Can that drama provide the distance necessary for the audience to contemplate the event effectively?

We live in the “age of information.” Even twenty-two years ago, Martin Esslin, in the eleventh edition of his book *Mediations*, observes that, “Never . . . in the whole of human history, have the products which television diffuses—news, views, entertainments, drama, human personality—been ingested in such enormous quantities by such large masses of human beings.”⁷ How do the other arts stand up to the deluge of televised material engulfing the public’s every waking moment? Esslin explains that the overwhelmingly large demand for “product” by television programmers almost ensures the presentation of primarily mediocre material.⁸ Despite Esslin’s further prediction that even television, in centuries to come, may distill works of genius and that classics may emerge out of the masses of its output, the question remains: what influences will have created the standards by which that work will be judged?

⁷ Martin Esslin, *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett and the Media* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1980), 188.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

While many of these questions cannot be definitively answered, their study and contemplation can, also as Esslin suggests, be quite important:

In an open society the public will get the media it deserves, but at least, in getting no better than it deserves it will be able to become more conscious of its own shortcomings and enable individuals who respond to these shortcomings to contribute to their exposure and eventual transcendence. In that sense the media—in a society in which they are rationally and flexibly organized—can, in the long run perhaps, raise the level of self-awareness of that society, and gradually contribute to an improvement in the quality of life it offers.⁹

In her documentary plays, Emily Mann has provided her audiences with critical perspectives on the age itself, its politics and its media. My task is to discover how she has imparted to the documentary stage such a level of rigorous inquiry employing the very techniques provided by the media age in which we live.

Development of Documentary Devices

These are the issues that have evolved during the development of documentary and historical drama over the past century, as the following brief survey will indicate. Piscator's early work in Europe, including his productions of *Flags!* (1924), *In Spite of Everything!* (1925), and *High Tide* (1926), brought to the stage portraits of large political movements to tell a story that would engage the audience intellectually as well as emotionally. Bertolt Brecht, a contemporary and colleague of Piscator, also attempted to appeal to the audience's intellect but, in contrast to Piscator, regarded the dramatic portrayal of an individual's story more effective as a basis for analyzing society and human nature. Both believed that through a deeper understanding of the facts, people would embrace an egalitarian society and economy (socialism).

⁹ Esslin, *Mediations*, 227.

The Brechtian/Piscatorian epic/documentary theatre, according to Derek Paget, in his book *True Stories?*, aimed to create “a tradition opposed to realism . . . in which access to the means of production is granted to an audience expected not to consume passively, but to engage actively with the material being presented.”¹⁰ The dramatic devices employed to stimulate the audience to be more active and critical include:

- A nonlinear story line, episodic scenes arranged in a montage format similar to film;
- Titles, photographs, news headlines, and audio identifying and/or underscoring the nature of each scene projected onto screens onstage;
- Machinery/theatre technology facilitating fluid and rapid progression from one scene to the next (again to mimic the fluidity of film);
- Direct audience address, the use of a narrator who moves into and outside the action explaining or mediating the drama for the audience, bringing everything together into a coherent whole; and
- Focus on a current political situation.

In addition, the audience is often provided with program notes, historical background, news articles and facts upon which the action is based, and possibly a description by the playwright of how the play was assembled, identifying the authenticity of the sources.¹¹

The forms established by Piscator and Brecht are recognized as the foundation for the development of documentary theatre around the world. In the work of Mann, as I will describe in the body of this thesis, the influence remains strong. The primary difference, as recognized by Dawson, is that the American documentary play does not aim toward

¹⁰ Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 42.

¹¹ Attilio Favorini, in the introduction to his book *Voicings*, points out that Piscator’s approach to documentary drama set a standard for the form: “Piscator’s practice effectively generates a definition of documentary drama as plays characterized by a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary event, on dialogue, song and/or visual materials (photographs, films, pictorial documents) ‘found’ in the historical record or gathered by the playwright/researcher, and by a disposition to set individual behavior in an articulated political and/or social context.” ed. Attilio Favorini, *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (Hopewell, N. J.: Ecco Press, 1995), xx.

revolution, but toward reform.¹² Piscator and Brecht broke tradition with the development of epic documentary. Mann works within a tradition, employing documentary devices, such as direct audience address, that are today as much a technique of the broadcast news as they are of the epic documentary.

John Willett credits the montage employed by Eisenstein (particularly in his film *Potemkin*), and the political agit-prop revues touring Berlin in the late 1920s, as Piscator's inspiration for the episodic nonlinear dramatic format identified as epic/documentary theatre: "Above all, Piscator had discovered the value of the revue form as a kind of elastic montage which embraced a wide range of theatrical devices and could continually be changed and brought up to date."¹³ These revues were collections of dramatic sketches based on various political issues or events, each easily modified to keep pace with current events. The episodic unfolding of a theme in scenes juxtaposed in a sharply contrasted or clashing montage put the audience in the position of having to refocus and readjust their relationship to the stage at short intervals. As Paget explains,

The purpose of the "collisions" . . . is to be found in their manifest difference from the "believable" techniques of naturalism and realism. Since the techniques of True Stories Piscator-style are so deliberately "un-believable," the active calling of the spectator's attention to technique shifts more of the burden of construction of meaning on to the audience.¹⁴

The revue format that inspired Piscator in the development of the epic/documentary form ironically also provided, decades later, the new medium of television with a basis for programs that remain popular today.

¹² Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 93.

¹³ John Willett, *Erwin Piscator: Half Century of Political Theatre* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979), 51.

¹⁴ Paget, *True Stories?*, 61.

The television revue (separate sketches, often satirical and topical, juxtaposed with songs, blended with commercials or information inserted into the ongoing revue text) flourished as *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Smothers Brothers Show*, and even *Saturday Night Live*. Steve Allen developed the revue form into what we now recognize as the *Johnny Carson*, *Jay Leno* or *David Letterman Show*. Each of these programs, just like the news magazine shows particularly popular today, employs a narrator (or host) who pulls the various segments, images, sounds, pieces of information, and even commercials together, making the pieces a coherent whole for the audience.

Episodic, non-linear presentation, direct audience address, use of a narrator to make sense of the parts of the presentation, commercial interruptions reminding the audience that the presentation is a fabrication, projection of titles identifying the parts of the drama—all of these devices when used in the theatre are expected to make the audience more active and involved. It is ironic that when employed by the television industry, these same devices create the opposite effect on an audience, who become passively engaged by a one-way medium. And since the audiences in theatres today have grown up with television as a primary influence on their world and their way of interpreting that world, since the written forms of stage and screen have begun to merge as playwrights must earn a living by writing for television and in so doing mold their talents to both mediums, the effect is that the distancing devices originally designed to make the audience alert are today part of the culture that cues the audience to be passive and go with the flow.

Contemporary playwright Anna Deavere Smith gives direct credit to the *Johnny Carson Show* as the inspiration for her form of documentary theatre, explaining that the

variety of guests on the show interspersed with the commercials created the sort of tapestry portrait of America she wished to replicate in her plays. The descendents of the stage revue include Piscator's epic/documentary theatre, the television variety show format, and, through television, the newest incarnation of American documentary plays. Smith's homage to Carson is given greater resonance by James Leverett's introduction to Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, in which he extends the power of the "Carson" effect beyond the world of art and into the lives of the audience:

Perhaps this hall of mirrors, this endless playoff between performance and reality, has always been the situation of the artist. It is certainly the perspective of the actor. But has it ever been more plainly the predicament of everyone else in this media-ridden age of instant replay? Conditioned by McLuhan and Warhol, Johnny Carson and Phil Donahue, we are all to an extent the subject of our own self-writing life story, our shoot-as-you-go movie. The possibility of celebrity for everyone seems to grow with each newscast.¹⁵

Indeed, the modern documentary, film and stage, tends to offer the person-on-the-street interview an equal status to that of the celebrity interview, giving each opinion similar weight and making everyone an expert/celebrity for a moment.

Authenticating Signs of Documentary Drama

By identifying the nature of the specific theatrical signs of epic/documentary theatre it is possible to describe more accurately how the audience interprets what is presented. The recognition by the audience that the playwright has employed the documentary form is in itself an authenticating sign, a cue for the audience to believe that the playwright has verified all the facts presented onstage. Keir Elam, in his book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, asserts that the audience will interpret everything

¹⁵ James Leverett, "Introduction," Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), xii.

presented onstage and as part of the presentation as a projection of a meaning, “and whatever cannot be related to the representation as such is converted into a sign of the actor’s very reality—it is not, in any case, excluded from semiosis.”¹⁶ Elam also allows that the connotations taken by each audience member will vary, but “always within definite cultural limits.”¹⁷

Elam further notes that the type of theatre associated with Brecht and Piscator, epic theatre, is one in which the audience is encouraged to be more aware of the semiotic means or the “sign vehicle and its operations.” Given the great degree to which audiences are surrounded by information referring to events depicted in documentary drama, the points made by Elam are particularly relevant here. Entering the theatre to see a documentary play on a subject already appreciated as a book, a newspaper article, a television news report, a radio broadcast or film documentary, an audience is surrounded by signs, associations and alternate meanings extending well beyond the normal confines of a theatrical performance.

Elam credits C.S. Pierce as the founding father of modern semiotic theory and as the creator of a sign classification known as the trichotomy of sign-functions. The three facets of sign interpretation here noted are the iconic, indexical and symbolic. Perceived by Elam as the most “commonsensical” way of describing different signifying modes, this system is perhaps most useful here. The iconic sign’s governing principle is, “similitude; the icon represents its object ‘mainly by similarity’ between the sign vehicle and its signified.”¹⁸ The index signs are “casually connected with their objects, often

¹⁶ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

physically or through contiguity.”¹⁹ In this category are cause and effect signifiers, including such signifiers as a finger pointed at an object or a knock on the door. The symbolic sign or symbol is one for which, “the relationship between the sign-vehicle and signified is conventional and unmotivated; no similitude or physical connection exists between the two. . . The most obvious example of a symbol is a linguistic sign.”²⁰

Paget points to problems surrounding the use of authenticating signs in documentary, or what he terms “True Stories,” suggesting that the confirmation of reality offered by “authenticating signs” cannot be valid unless the audience has a larger context of factual information than is offered in the play.²¹ Since documentaries, both filmed and staged, often attempt to present little-known or new material, familiarity with the political, economic, and social forces surrounding the event are often spare. The subject is thus isolated from the information that surrounds the specific event. When cut off from context, incidents become generalized and representative of a type of situation rather than a particular one. Thus the documentary or “True Story” defeats itself in its aim to provide the audience with a greater, deeper, or more real understanding of a specific historical event.

It is, however, true that when the audience enters the theatre, having been prepared by reviews and advertisements for a play that presents “verbatim” the words of individuals involved in a recent traumatic historical event, that they will have been positioned to think that they will be seeing a play that will enlarge their understanding of the true facts of an event. In *Theatre Semiotics*, Marvin Carlson identifies four factors, of which reviews and advertisements are two, “which have provided audiences with

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 22.

²¹ Paget, *True Stories?*, 29-30.

strategies for organizing and interpreting their involvement with the theatre event.”²² The first factor is the expectation of the audience based on what they understand about the genre of the play about to be seen. If it is a comedy they will know they should laugh, if a tragedy to cry, if a documentary to consider the facts as real. The second factor is the use of familiar “lines of business” associated with a form, usually thought of as familiar attitudes struck by stock characters or familiar situations. Actors assuming the tone of a newscaster or the stance of reporter to set the stage for the action qualify as familiar “lines of business” positioning the audience to believe in the authenticity of the dialogue provided. The promotion created by the theatre (including advertisements and programs) to sell the play constitutes a third factor influencing an audience’s response to the material, and the reviews the fourth. While audiences go to the theatre to see a play rather than read an explanation of a play in a program, Carlson underscores the profound effect the program can have on a theatrical experience:

Interpretive essays by a director or dramaturg often seek to condition audience response in an even more programmatic way, and such conditioning need not even take the form of discursive analysis. Programs often include sketches, literary quotations, or photographs not directly related to the play, but suggesting a preferred interpretive strategy. Even a single image can have a profound effect upon interpretation. Consider the differences in reading encouraged in two audiences attending Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, one given a program whose cover depicts a British flag or soldier in heroic pose, sword uplifted, and another given a program depicting a broken corpse on the field of battle.²³

These points are particularly relevant when considering the positioning of audiences for documentary theatre because pre-performance preparation can include news reports, editorials, and television programs covering the topic of the play as well as advertisements and the familiarity with the aims and profile of the producing

²² Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

²³ Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics*, 19.

organization. Program notes are a common element employed as an authenticating sign for documentary drama, and they, along with the film and photomontage commonly projected within the action of the play, are also vivid tools with which the audience can be guided to respond to the play.

Carlson notes that the degree to which these factors influence the reception of the audience is still a field in need of further study, but there is no doubt that the influence is substantial. Martin Esslin is quite clear in his opinion of the ways in which television influences the responses of the audience,

Different individuals have been exposed to types of schools, different religious teachings, different socioeconomic milieus, different levels of conversation and discourse. But they all, almost without exception, have been exposed to and nurtured by the world as mirrored in television. Television is the *one* factor that practically all the individuals in this society have in common. It is the unifying substratum of experience. In this sense television—and above all the fictional world that informs it—is a dominant ingredient shaping our consciousness of reality.²⁴

Certainly what is transmitted by television becomes the reality no matter how compromised that information might be. The powerful effect of television news on the viewer makes it understandable that documentary playwrights employ the same structures and forms for their plays. Quite simply, by employing the devices of film and television documentaries, stage documentaries share in their impact on the belief system of the audience. By utilizing the sign system of “fact,” implanted into the cultural consciousness by television, as well as by using television and film themselves on the stage, theatre documentaries cue the audience to believe that what is presented on stage is unassailably true. It seems that documentary playwrights expect that by employing television images and formats in their plays, they will encourage audiences to interpret

²⁴ Martin Esslin, *The Age of Television* (Stanford, California: Stanford Alumni Association, 1981), 53.

those media “signs” in a more conscious and critical manner. These attempts to expose the manipulation and subterfuge of media images, however, run the risk of inspiring the theatre audience to respond to the play much as they would have to the teleplay, having been cued by the same “signs.”²⁵

Mann’s Documentaries

The factors that influenced Mann in her choice of subject and presentation technique for each of her plays can be seen as fusing political movement, artistic trend, and “being at the right place at the right time.” The volatile political climate (of civil rights and antiwar demonstrations as portrayed on television) inspired greater interest in the rights and experiences of the individual. The oral-history movement and the growing fascination with the power of facts also provided the subjects and formats most compelling to be presented onstage as documentary, historical, and fictionalized drama.

Mann’s emergence as a documentary playwright has immediate antecedents in Martin Duberman’s *In White America* (1963), Donald Freed’s *Inquest* (1970), Eric Bentley’s *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been* (1970), and Daniel Berrigan’s *The Catonsville Nine* (1973), all based on trial transcripts and all attempting to bring to light new information and ways of interpreting important historical events. Other notable American plays employing history as a vehicle to comment on contemporary society that were produced before and at the time Mann began to work as a playwright include: *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* (1970), in which playwrights Lawrence and Lee used Thoreau’s refusal to pay taxes that would support a war in which he didn’t believe to

²⁵ Nora Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War On Stage* (Bloomington, Ind.: University Press, 1996), 173.

justify and honor the draft evaders from the Vietnam War; *Salt Lake City Skyline* (1979), Thomas Babe's dramatization of the trial and execution of union organizer Joe Hill, honoring the importance and effectiveness of people's movements in the United States; Arthur Kopit's *Indians* (1969), in which Wild Bill Hickok aiding the U.S. government in its extermination of the Native Americans serves as a parallel to the bombing in Vietnam and the related lies perpetuated by the media; and *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1968), *Sticks and Bones* (1969), and *Streamers* (1976), written by David Rabe, himself a Vietnam veteran, as a trilogy of fictional plays depicting the internal ravages wreaked by Vietnam on the American psyche. These plays represent the types of dramatic subject common to the period in which Mann developed her first play. It is telling that almost all of these plays comment on the media's effect on history, as well as on the historical event itself.

This focus on the individual and how history affects the life of that one person is a common theme in Mann's work. While not all of her plays are confined to one or two actors, even the large-cast plays are designed to spotlight the voice of the individual. Mann herself points out that this focus allows her more freedom to present a fresh image to the audience, rather than having to struggle with preconceived notions about more public figures: "I could be truly free and truly private and searingly truthful, whereas with a public figure, you're always doing this act. You're dealing with people's preconceptions, you're dealing with all kinds of things that get in the way of the truth."²⁶ The preconceptions that Mann refers to here are those based on the images and information that were imprinted by television into the core of public consciousness.

²⁶ Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 December 1999, 9.

What Mann does in all of her plays is to show the audience a reflection of an event as it was captured in her memory. In speaking about *Having Our Say*, Mann describes her belief in the power of the “living” historical document created through oral history, by listening to people recounting the events of their lives:

Their [the Delaney sisters'] sense of history is not learned from books, and it's not abstract. It's alive, they have lived it, that's what I mean by living history. I am always challenging public history with living history. That's really the collision I'm looking for. That's why I think I love the found document. That's why I do the research.²⁷

It is the contention of some historians that oral history is not a dependable source for reliable information. The memories of individuals, when not verified and compared, could be clouded by personal prejudice or simple confusion over details. Nevertheless, Michael Frisch, author of *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, contends that oral histories can provide a direct connection between the listener and the historical event, enabling “a purer image of the experience.”²⁸ Gary Dawson agrees on the importance of giving credence to oral history, saying that it “also provides information from sources not always accessible. An example of this principle is found in Mann’s play *Annulla :An Autobiography*.”²⁹

According to Frisch, the roots of the oral-history movement in the United States began in the sixties and seventies as “a challenge to all the assumptions of conventional scholarship.”³⁰ As Emily Mann has matured as a playwright, so has the field of oral history become established as a vital, respected, and important source of valuable historical data. She has led in making the theatre of testimony an integral part of the

²⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, Princeton, N. J., 26 April 1994, transcript, 280.

²⁸ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990), 9.

²⁹ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 110.

³⁰ Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, xviii.

American theatre world, as evidenced by those who followed in her footsteps—for example, Anna Deavere Smith and Moises Kaufman.

In each of the next five chapters I will examine more closely one of Mann's five produced documentary plays. I will focus on the plays in the order in which they were written, and through each explore a different aspect of Mann's work as a documentary playwright in a world saturated with sound-bite information. These discussions will include the way in which Mann has chosen the subjects of her plays, how she has chosen the subject and structure for her work, how she has served her work as a director, how her position as artistic director has influenced her choices as a playwright, and finally how critical response has affected the life of her work.

Chapter I

Dramatic Structure and Content:

Annulla :An Autobiography

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss Emily Mann's path toward playwriting and directing, the forces that influenced her choice of documentary theatre and the experiences that contributed to her treatment of her dramatic subjects. Taking her first play, *Annulla*, as my focus, I will examine how these early influences were directly reflected in her dramatic choices, which were to become part of her signature approach to the documentary form.

Born in 1952, at the height of the post-World War II baby boom, Mann grew up in the era when television was becoming, as Ceceila Tichi describes in her book *The Electronic Hearth*, "deeply enmeshed in long-term cultural traditions and conflicts."¹ Coming into adulthood in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mann witnessed first-hand student and social protests in the United States and abroad against imperialist policies, subversive and dishonest politics, illegal wars, and outdated social institutions and attitudes. "Question authority" became one of the slogans of the time, and this attitude crept into virtually all avenues of life, from politics, to theatre, to academia. It was at this time that historians began to recognize the value of oral history—the private history of individuals swept up in the large courses of human events—which they had formerly dismissed. As Michael Frisch describes in his book *A Shared Authority*:

The worlds of historical and political discourse had been coming together: the 1960s and 1970s challenges from without became an impressive body

¹Ceceila Tichi, *The Electronic Hearth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.

of substantive new research that has transformed scholarship profoundly. This new scholarship, especially in social history, has arguably become the dominant intellectual reality of our time . . . Discussion about history more broadly—about method, topical focus, interpretation, and contemporary relevance—has become oriented around many of the concerns that only a few years earlier had made outsiders of younger proponents involved in the more challenging forms of oral and public history.²

According to Gary Fisher Dawson, author of *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, the singular quality of Mann's plays is based on her ability to "build documentary plays captured from private oral histories and testimonies that, in the process, give platform to larger societal concerns in the public arena."³

Asked how she chooses the subjects for her plays, Mann answers that she cannot describe her method fully, but that the subject must move her in some way:

I don't know how and why I do what I do; and I think that's more for the critics or the shrinks to know. I think that each one of the things I've written have had that power over me, that's why I take years out of my life to tell the story, and that each point is a particular point in time, and it usually comes from a deeply personal place. Sometimes I understand what it is that overtakes me and obsesses me and sometimes I don't. Sometimes it's awfully clear; in *Annula* I needed to know as a young person how people, my people, could be exterminated in Europe, and exterminated period—how people could be exterminated.⁴

Mann's analysis describes the factors that affect many documentary playwrights in their choice of subject, a combination of personal experience and the prevailing social climate.

Mann has employed the oral histories of individuals (influenced by the work of her father, who headed the American Jewish Committee's Oral History Project⁵). These personal histories provided documentary support for alternative interpretations of

² Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990), xviii.

³ Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form and Stagecraft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 164.

⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Gavin Schulz, Princeton, N. J., February 1991, unpublished.

⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Thad Persons, "Emily Mann, Testimony, and Modern Drama", Princeton, N.J., unpublished, 12.

historical moments and movements to those based on the memoirs and observations of national leaders and policy makers. Oral history also proved to be ideally suited to the medium of television, which focused closely on the response of the individual to any public and/or private event.⁶

In *Annula* Mann explains through the Voice of the Young Woman, “I needed to go to someone else’s relative in order to understand my own history, because by this time my only living relative of that generation was my grandmother—my mother’s mother—and she had almost no way to communicate complex ideas.”⁷ This statement emphasizes the personal and artistic inspirations for the interview/play and makes clear that Mann, like many of her contemporaries, was on a quest to explore her cultural identity. “Well, *Annulla* [sic] was a very emotional experience,” she has said, “*Annula* [sic] was going deeper and deeper into her and myself, and by doing that, going farther and farther into the large ramifications of the Holocaust.”⁸ According to Tim Cole, in the late sixties and early seventies “the ‘Holocaust’ was emerging as one of the—if not *the*—primary ethnic markers for the American Jew.”⁹

Mann has described all of her plays as examinations of traumatic events: “Mostly I think my plays deal with the question, ‘How does the human being, and how does this society, deal with traumatic events, whether war or assassination or rape or abuse?’”¹⁰

⁶ Derek Paget notes, “Through the mass media and the information agency, facts and information have begun to [supplant] religion’s place as a provider of certainties.” Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 18.

⁷ Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 10.

⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Rochelle Shoretz, “Crossroads of Culture: Exploring the Identity Enigma of Contemporary Jewish Women Playwrights,” Princeton, N. J., 19 December 1992, unpublished, 32.

⁹ Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler. How History Is Bought, Packaged and Sold* (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays* (Hanover, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2001), 299.

The thread that runs through Mann's larger body of work is her desire, in her choice of dramatic subjects, to enlarge the audience's understanding of those events. In choosing to write about *Annulla*, how was Mann able to accomplish her goal? The play does not offer any new historical information, nor does it reveal a startling new interpretation of the events as historians have described them. What the play does is look at the events through Mann's very personal experience of them, with the realism, naturalism, and detail of television drama, and with the tight focus and intimate close-ups of a television portrait.

Mann's documentary plays reflect the political activism, growth, and importance of the electronic media, and the emphasis on individualism that characterized the period of her youth. Since the 1970s the nature of her plays has continued to develop, but *Annulla* represents Mann's first effort to express her artistic and political vision. In this chapter I will discuss how she employs the tools provided by her times.

History of the Play

Annulla fulfilled a promise Mann made to herself as a teenager, to present to the world the story of a Holocaust survivor. She had observed the work of her father, Arthur Mann, an eminent historian and professor of history at the University of Chicago, and overheard the taped reminiscences of a woman whose life as a dancer in Europe had been destroyed by the war and her internment in a concentration camp. The tape was one of the oral histories being collected by Professor Mann for the American Jewish Committee's Oral History Project, a repository for the private records of individual Holocaust survivors. These histories were recorded as documents for personal and

scholarly research, not for public broadcast. Emily was so deeply moved by the tape that she urged her father to publish the transcript of the interview. Professor Mann told her that it was not possible, but suggested that she pursue this goal by locating and presenting such a history on her own terms. The writing of *Annula* can be seen, in part, as Mann's desire to meet her father's challenge.

After graduating from Harvard, Emily and her best friend, Irene Dische, set out during the summer of 1974 to record the oral histories of members of Irene's family, still in Europe. This project was especially important to Mann because all of the Europeans in her family perished during the Second World War at the hands of the Nazis. Annula Allen was Irene's elderly great-aunt, who lived in London. Irene insisted that they visit Annula before continuing on to Poland to conduct their research. The two young women visited Annula three times, and the transcripts of those visits became part of their oral-history project. Mann felt that something further should be done with the transcripts, but at the time she didn't know what.

Mann continued her studies in the theatre, receiving her M.F.A. from the University of Minnesota and accepting a Bush Fellowship to serve as resident director at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, one of the oldest and most prestigious of American regional theatres. This position offered her the opportunity to develop her skills as a director in the relatively protected environment of the nonprofit sector. Mann considers herself a product of the non-profit regional theatre movement, likening it to America's national theatre. "I think the national theatre in this country is the regional theatre," she has said. "The regional theatre has allowed me to make my plays, direct new plays and do a great array of classical work. And break the rules and stretch myself artistically in

every direction.”¹¹ It was during her tenure at the Guthrie that she was inspired to develop her interviews with Annulla into a play. “I met an actress, Barbara Byrne, and I made the play for her,”¹² Mann has said.

Annulla Allen: The Autobiography of a Survivor, as it was first titled, opened in March 1977 at the Guthrie 2 (the second stage). Annulla Allen and Emily Mann were listed as co-authors. At the Guthrie and in the March 1978 production at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Mann directed the play in two acts, with Annulla as the sole character. Barbara Byrne created the role in both productions, and a reviewer writing for *Variety* noted that her performance was convincing and that Mann’s script presented “a camera-eye view of her subject.”¹³

Only in 1985, during rehearsals for a production directed by Timothy Near at the St. Louis Repertory Theatre, was the play condensed into one act, the title shortened to *Annulla: An Autobiography*, and Emily Mann credited as the sole author. Near’s greatest impact on the play as director was to suggest to Mann that a second voice, representing her (Mann) as the young interviewer/visitor, would enhance the script. Near imagined that this voice would float into the action of the play from the sound system, providing an invisible through-line to the story the audience could more easily follow. To create the script for that voice, Near interviewed Mann, asking her questions about her trip to Europe, her interview of Annulla, and her thoughts on her personal connections to the Holocaust and her own family. This material was worked into the playscript, tape-recorded, and then used during performance as the counterpoint to the live action.

¹¹ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 159.

¹² Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 292.

¹³ Rees., “Annulla Allen,” *Variety*, 23 March 1977, 90.

This is the version of the play that I chose to produce in 1988 during my tenure as founding/artistic director of The New Theatre of Brooklyn (TNT). I was interested in the play's quiet and quirky presentation of an eccentric woman. As a female director and producer in a field still dominated by men, producing worthy plays highlighting a woman's view and experience of the world was important to me. In addition, it was important to produce well-written pieces for actresses, who are so often relegated to supporting roles.

When Mann gave TNT the right to produce the New York premiere of *Annulla*, she made it clear that she did not wish to direct. But when Linda Hunt expressed interest in the part of Annulla if Mann would direct, the situation changed. *Annulla: An Autobiography*, directed by Emily Mann and starring Linda Hunt, opened at TNT in October 1988, the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, "the night of the broken glass," an incident of anti-Semitic violence mentioned by Annulla in the play.¹⁴ Mel Gussow wrote of Linda Hunt for the *New York Times*, "While she speaks, the actress inhabits Annulla's memories as well as her kitchen."¹⁵ For the *New York Post* Jerry Tallmer wrote, "I don't know when I've been stimulated as much by anything on the living stage."¹⁶ This production of *Annulla* was considered for commercial transfer by producer Arthur Cantor, who ultimately decided against the move. Nevertheless, the production earned strong reviews and the theatre was sold out for the run of the play.

Although *Annulla*'s world premiere was in 1977, a time of growing American interest in the Holocaust, it achieved a relatively small success. But then Mann became

¹⁴ 9 and 10 November 1938, the pogrom against the Jewish population of Vienna, during which windows were smashed in synagogues and storefronts, hence the ironic term "crystal night," or "the Night of the Broken Glass."

¹⁵ Mel Gussow, "Testimony of a Survivor," *New York Times*, 2 November 1988, C23.

¹⁶ Jerry Tallmer, "Linda Hunt vs. the Nazis," *New York Post*, 31 October 1988, 28.

better known through the success of her plays *Still Life* (1980) and *Execution of Justice* (1985).¹⁷ *Annulla* might never have had a New York production—and one to which Linda Hunt, a highly respected stage and film actress, would lend her prestige—if Mann had not had to her credit several plays and productions lauded as important portrayals of compelling contemporary events, a Broadway run (albeit an unsuccessful one) for *Execution of Justice*, a host of awards, and good reviews in print and on television.

The production mounted at TNT was documented on video by the Lincoln Center Theatre on Film and Tape Archive. This production served as the basis for the text of the play as it was printed in the collection of four of Mann's plays, *Testimonies*, and therefore can be considered the definitive version of the text.¹⁸ Mann's playtexts are always based on an actual production, and so my descriptions of this and other plays will be of both the text and the production when described in *Testimonies*.

The Play

Of all Mann's plays, *Annulla* employs the fewest authenticating documentary signs. There are no projections of historical photographs or explanatory historical references. The action is presented as one continuous realistic stream, and not the episodic scenes associated with Piscatorian/Brechtian documentary drama. Nevertheless, the play does focus on *Annulla*, the person, in the format of an on-site or filmed interview edited and spliced together for presentation with voice-over clarifications (the Voice of the Young Woman) associated with the film documentary format. In addition, Gary

¹⁷ *Still Life* had a successful run in New York at the American Place Theatre and *Execution of Justice* was transferred to Broadway with strong reviews from seven prominent regional theatres.

¹⁸ Emily Mann, *Testimonies*.

Fisher Dawson cites the reference in the “Playwright’s Notes” to the authenticity of the words spoken in the play as evidence of the play’s documentary nature.¹⁹

Only one character, Annnulla, is ever seen on stage. The Voice of the Young Woman guides us invisibly through the interview in the manner of a reporter or narrator. While the Voice of the Young Woman is clearly identified as representing the playwright, the person from whose memory the words of Annnulla are heard, she is not contemporaneous with the action of the play. The Voice of the Young Woman urges the audience to look back at Annnulla through her eyes, providing explanations of who Annnulla really was and how her words should be interpreted. In this way the audience is guided through Annnulla’s quirks of character and memories of World War II, creating another frame, or level of distance between audience and subject. The Young Woman does not age during the course of the play, but she does contemplate herself, along with Annnulla, as the person she was when she first met the older woman in London. The result is that the audience views Annnulla both through the eyes of the interviewer and as remembered and interpreted by the Voice of the Young Woman.

At TNT the audience sat almost inside the perimeter of the set depicting Annnulla’s kitchen. The teakettle is whistling and the Voice of the Young Woman explains that what will follow is the conversation that occurred during a visit to the Young Woman’s best friend Irene’s great-aunt, Annnulla. Annnulla enters in a great hurry and greets us, the audience, apologizing for her lateness as if we are her visitors. We remain the focus of her attention and conversation for the entire play. The Voice speaks to the audience ten times during the play, to either explain something about Annnulla, convey some thought she had at the time of the interview, or offer an insight observing

¹⁹ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 129.

her younger self. The Voice speaks when Annulla is silent. Only once, at the end, does Annulla hear the Voice and respond, and it is to say “good-bye.”

After welcoming us, Annulla launches into a description of where she has just been and what she was doing there. She is taking care of her sick sister, Ada, who was hit by a milk truck six weeks earlier. Annulla complains about Ada and tells us about her childhood, her accomplished siblings, the atmosphere in her childhood home (her parents had favorites and neglected the rest), the war, and the extreme dangers through which she passed without knowing how close she came to extinction. Her presentation is filled with humor and acknowledged irony; the moments of sadness pass quickly.

As a Jew in Vienna during the Second World War, Annulla was very lucky to have evaded capture and imprisonment. The Germans thought Annulla was a gentile because of her education, bearing, and appearance (she describes herself as “cheeky”), so they did not imprison her. Neither Annulla nor Mann makes clear the details of Annulla’s successful Aryan disguise, though the Germans were thorough and requirements for papers proving ethnic purity were strictly enforced. The Germans, however, took her husband when they collected the Jewish men in Vienna just after *Kristallnacht* and placed him in the Dachau concentration camp. Despite all warnings, Annulla remained in the city near the camp in order to stay close to her husband. The Germans were amazed that a “gentile” wife would be so devoted to a Jewish husband. Miraculously, her husband was released from Dachau thirteen months after his capture, and in 1939 he and Annulla were able to escape to Italy and finally England, where Annulla has lived ever since. Annulla comments that her husband, who died six years

prior to this meeting, was so good and so gentle a man that “even the Nazis could not kill him.”

While Annulla succeeded in escaping capture by posing as a gentile, she does mention that a cousin who attempted to do the same was caught and perished. During her description of her sister Ada’s various ill-fated relationships, Annulla mentions in passing the fact that their mother and one older sister were shot by the Germans.

The character Annulla is a great reader and she makes reference to Solzhenitsyn’s characterization of tyrants in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, and to Brecht’s gangster portrait of a “Hitler-like” Arturo Ui in his play of the same name. Annulla describes the outrage she feels in response to Brecht’s play:

Ada dragged me to Brecht’s *Arturo Ui*. I was outraged. This moronic man, this Brecht, makes Hitler *funny*! Did he think no one in the audience had lived through it? You know, Brecht had not. He was in Hollywood. To make Hitler into a gangster, *this* shows ignorance. To make Nixon into a gangster, this I can understand. But anyone who had lived through Hitler would not do this.²⁰

Trivializing Hitler and the Holocaust in art obviously outrages Annulla. When she chastises Brecht for attempting to make Hitler funny and expresses her horror at such shabbiness, we understand the seriousness with which Mann must have taken the older woman’s sentiments. But then Mann seems to demonstrate how easily this kind of trivialization can occur when she quotes Annulla describing the Nazis as merely “crude,” unable to kill her husband because of “his goodness,” and, finally, crediting them for saving her husband’s life by testing a new sulfa drug on him. By quoting these comments, Mann illustrates how memory diminishes the seriousness of even the most horrific of experiences.

²⁰ Mann, *Testimonies*, 26.

While Annnulla's story includes descriptions of what Germany was like during the war, she (the play) dwells equally on the dynamics of her family, on the disagreements she continues to have with her ailing sister, and on a play she has written, *The Matriarchs* (still in manuscript form and now reduced to a six-hour playing time). In describing the events of her life, Mann juxtaposes Annnulla's fears of Hitler's extermination of the Jews, her emotional trials growing up, and her current troubles with her sister, presenting all with equal intensity. Annnulla's discourse includes the information that her husband was gentle though not too bright; that she and her mother hated each other; that the anti-Semitism in Vienna was not truly evident until the Jews were kept from the universities; that the Allies were responsible for Hitler because of the unreasonable reparations demanded of Germany after World War I; how her heart was broken because her son had to grow up without her in order to be saved from the Nazis; and how much she misses her husband since his death.

Because she was an interesting woman with an entertaining eccentricity, Annnulla is a good subject for interview and dramatization. Part of her charm is that she is a bit scattered as she fusses about her kitchen and around her typewriter. She will apologize for having dropped the entire typewritten manuscript of her play, the pages of which she has not thought to number. Central to the play is Annnulla's vision of a society run by women and therefore devoid of the horrors rampant in this male-dominated world. Annnulla claims that because women are mothers, they would not be capable of the killing and destruction to which she has been witness. *The Voice of the Young Woman* sadly disagrees with Annnulla. However, only the audience hears her comment.

The Young Woman introduces information about her own family, those lost in the war with no trace of their lives or deaths, and her surviving grandmother, who refuses to discuss the war. For these reasons the Young Woman felt she needed to learn from Annulla about her own history and to understand better the horrors of the war. The Voice of the Young Woman, then and now, and finally Annulla herself, rather than the subject about which she chats, become the center of the audience's focus.

During tirades against the Nazis or her sister Ada, Annulla continues to move about her apartment attending to small jobs here and there, fixing tea for herself, putting groceries away or examining her playscript. The character's major task, however, is to make chicken soup for Ada's dinner. As she speaks to us, she washes the chicken, cuts the vegetables, puts everything in a pot with water, and places it on the stove to cook. During the course of the play, Annulla's house, and therefore the theatre, is filled with the aroma of cooking soup. When the soup is finished Annulla lets us know that she will have to leave us to bring the food to her sister. She packs everything up and puts on her coat and hat. She stands at the door to leave and the Voice says,

I came back to America just before my grandmother died. I told her we went to Ostroleka. I think she actually was glad. I tried to get into Bucovina where my father's family came from, but it's no longer in Austria, it is in Russia and they wouldn't let us in. My family names on my mother's side are Brum, Blum, Schleifer, Zimyevesky, Blut and Simon. There is a wonderful fairy tale about a young girl who loans her relatives to another young girl who doesn't have any. You see? It's been fourteen years since I visited Annulla.²¹

At the end of this speech the Voice of the Young Woman states that she has taken Annulla to be an adopted member of her family, since her own relatives from that generation are now silent. After one more farewell to us, Annulla turns to leave and, for

²¹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 29-30.

the first time, hears the Voice say “good-bye.” She turns to look at us, but says “good-bye” to the Voice.

***Annulla* and Images of the Holocaust in Print, on Stage, and on Television**

In citing at the end of the play the names of her mother’s family members destroyed in the camps, and by dedicating the play to her mother, Mann expresses her intention to pay homage to those who suffered, and died, and who should be remembered. She took the words of Annulla as a testament to those in her family who had perished. The play is presented as the story of a survivor of the Holocaust; its original title was *Annulla: The Autobiography of a Survivor*. In this way, Mann has positioned the play as part of the dramatic literature dedicated to witnessing the Holocaust.

Yet *Annulla* does not tell the story of surviving the concentration camps or of enormous hardship and deprivation. It is important to this discussion to elaborate on the different demands made on both the artist and the audience, when attempting to create or appreciate artistic interpretations of the horror of the Holocaust. In other words, an artist attempting to tell the story of one who has perished in the camps faces a different challenge from one who portrays, as Mann does in *Annulla*, the experiences of a refugee. And asking audiences to watch the dramatization of the life of someone who has died in the camps is different from asking them to watch the life story of someone who escaped and led a fairly comfortable life. It is my aim to illustrate how the softening of images of the Holocaust, primarily by television and film treatments of the subject, have molded the

public's vision and ability to comprehend it, and in turn influenced the way the subject is treated on the documentary stage.

For the purpose of this discussion I have created a scale of the different degrees to which the Holocaust could have affected an individual, Level 1 being the most severe and Level 6 the least severe. This is a subjective separation of degrees and should serve only to facilitate the ideas in my thesis:

Level 1—those who perished;

Level 2—those who survived the death camps;

Level 3—those forced into slave labor;

Level 4—those forced into hiding;

Level 5—those forced to leave their countries; and

Level 6—those who lost family members.

The characters in Mann's play, a woman who evaded the Nazis and survived as a refugee (*Annulla*) and a young woman searching for her family's past in Europe (*Voice of the Young Woman*), situate the play between Levels 5 and 6. In this context it will be possible to consider *Annulla* as it compares with other treatments of the Holocaust, in print, on stage, and on television, and consider the ways Mann has adopted the forms of television to create a watchable play. Her choice of subject may be based on her drive to explore her family's past, but the nature of the content has much more to do with Mann's sense, as an artist, of what her audience will absorb.

Lawrence Langer, in his book *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, puts forth the idea that "the task of the artist is to find a style and form to present the atmosphere or landscape of atrocity, to make it compelling, to coax the reader into

credulity—and ultimately, complicity.”²² In *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, Robert Skloot further states that artists

write or paint or sing about the Holocaust because they are attracted by something, which can touch us to the core, and they accept the challenge of making it accessible to the imagination in order to touch us. They reject silence or stillness or darkness because they feel the need to respond to the survivors’ call and bear witness to the degradation the victims endured and, sometimes, with great courage overcame. They seek to retell the story and thereby make the murdered live again, if only in the imagination.²³

Before agreeing that the artist can and should attempt to interpret the Holocaust, however, both Langer and Skloot carefully examine the dangers of taking on such a challenge. Skloot offers a succinct description of the pitfalls inherent in the endeavor:

First, is it possible for the Holocaust to be dealt with in works of art? Second, if it can be dealt with, will the experience be cheapened, trivialized, or exploited in the treatment it is given? And third, what moral responsibility do artists have in taking up the Holocaust theme? As might be expected, the answers are complicated, controversial, and highly debatable.²⁴

Elie Wiesel, a Level 2 survivor and one of the most vocal and profound documenters of the Holocaust, contends that while the enormity of the atrocity can never be represented in any form, he firmly believes, as his life work attests, in the necessity for multiple forms of remembrance of and response to the Holocaust:

Anyone who does not actively, constantly engage in remembering and making others remember is an accomplice of the enemy. Conversely, whoever opposes the enemy must take the side of his victims and communicate their tales of solitude and despair, tales of silence and defiance.²⁵

²² Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 1.

²³ Robert Skloot, *The Theatre of the Holocaust* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 12-13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” ed. Elliott Lefkowitz *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 16.

Mann agrees with Wiesel, describing her own need to remember and encourage others to remember as part of her impulse to write *Annula*:

We have an incredible responsibility to do a great deal of study to understand the event, and then show our interpretation about the event, and make no bones about the fact that this is our interpretation . . . to try to show, as honestly as we can, what is out there, so that in the end you allow the audience to make its own synthesis.²⁶

George Steiner, in his book *In Bluebeard's Castle*, agrees on the importance of continuing the discussion and examination of the Holocaust. He also notes, "such knowledge corrupts and lowers the threshold of outrage" and can also be disbelieved or revised in order to avoid direct confrontation with the reality.²⁷

In a sense, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, successfully produced on Broadway in 1955 and revived in 1997, emblemizes the conflict described above: between the artist's need to create work that will attempt to represent the horror accurately and her need to create art that is not so accurate that the viewer will have to turn away. With this conflict comes the challenge of presenting the subject to the audience in a palatable but respectful manner.

As an American journalist in Europe to cover the war and its aftermath, Meyer Levin read the Anne Frank diary in its European edition and was enthralled by its message. Levin became instrumental in bringing the diary, for which Otto Frank had initially had difficulty finding a publisher, to Doubleday, which printed the first American edition in 1952. Otto Frank and the European publishers had edited out approximately 30% of Anne's original text for the European version of the diary. The

²⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray," (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 209.

²⁷ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 49, 66, 68.

American version followed with the same deletions. Levin wrote a front-page essay for the *New York Times Book Review* heralding the book as representing the “voice of six million vanished Jewish souls.” *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* became a best seller in the United States. Emily Mann read this version when she was eleven years old during a trip she took with her family to Europe. The trip and the diary proved to be a riveting experience that, according to Mann, was to begin her life as a writer.²⁸

The passage of Anne Frank’s diary to the stage began when Otto Frank agreed to work on a script with Levin, who was dedicated to representing Anne’s story as faithfully as possible. More than a dozen producers rejected Levin’s adaptation. Otto Frank decided to transfer the project to writers who might be able to develop a more marketable script. Albert and Frances (Goodrich) Hackett, a Hollywood team known for their film scripts *The Thin Man*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and *Easter Parade*, created the play, in association with the very successful Kermit Bloomgarden (producer), Garson Kanin (director), and Lillian Hellman (consulting writer), that was ultimately approved by Otto Frank, and that became an overnight hit on Broadway in 1955. Unfortunately, Levin responded by suing Frank for breach of contract, distraught at what had been removed from the story to make it commercial. In *Selling the Holocaust*, Tim Cole describes Levin’s objections: “In particular, he claimed that they had removed the ‘Jewishness’ from Anne Frank’s diary entries.”²⁹

According to Cole, the various alterations made by the Broadway/Hollywood

²⁸ Mann finished the book in Brussels and was incapacitated by the strength of the story “I was reading the book and I completely projected myself onto her [Anne Frank] and I thought it was me. And I couldn’t eat and I couldn’t sleep. I got so sick I ended up in the hospital and never did get to see her [Anne Frank’s] house . . . It was from that moment that I really started to keep a diary, and I really started to write seriously . . . It’s the first time I’ve put myself in someone else’s shoes completely. Lived it through. And I think it’s telling that my first play was about that.” Emily Mann, interview by Daniel Goldin, “Emily Mann’s Theater of Testimony,” Princeton, N. J., unpublished, 6.

²⁹ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 30.

Goodrich/Hackett/Kanin/Hellman team went far toward transforming the diary into a document emptied of specificity, closed off from its true conclusion, and therefore appealing to a wider audience:

Thus a diary in which the Holocaust provided the context rather than the central theme was made into a play and a film that reflected the concerns of 1950s America much more than it reflected the Holocaust. It was not only the specifically Jewish references of the diary which were omitted from the play and the film, but also the relatively few specifically "Holocaust" references.³⁰

The story of the stage adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* encapsulates the dilemma of representing the Holocaust in art.

In its relatively unvarnished state this material was perceived by the collaborating artists as overwhelming. Levin, a journalist (a man uncomfortable with tampering with original documents), was not able to remove from the book the information that he felt was basic to Anne's story: her Jewishness, her misery, her despair, and her ultimate destruction. In this case, the original documents, the diary upon which the play was to be based, describe the experiences of a direct victim of the Holocaust, providing little buffer between the information and the viewer. To temper the story, the artistic team removed from the documents the elements that were thought potentially offensive to the general public.

Annulla's story was not as dark as Anne Frank's, and therefore from the start it was more easily made into a viewable play, without altering the original material. But the two plays do share similarities: writing makes each day bearable for both women. Each confides details about her troubled family relationships, her memories, and her love life, dwelling relatively little on the details of the war. Anne evades the Germans by

³⁰ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 32-33.

hiding herself; Annulla hid by passing as a gentile. Each play brings the audience into a small apartment away from the world, and each universalizes the nature of the Holocaust, broadening the perspective to include the persecutions of all peoples. Both Anne and Annulla believe that a better world is possible, though not within their grasp. And both of their voices reach the audience through layers of mediation. Anne's words were revised first by her father, then by the editor, then by the producer, the director, and finally a consulting writer. Anne's father, even in the play, serves as the audience's guide through her words as he opens the drama to find her diary and begins the story by reading it to us. We are guided through the words of Annulla by the Voice of the Young Woman in much the same way.

The crucial difference between these two characters is, of course, that Anne did not survive and Annulla did. Cynthia Ozick, in her essay "Who Owns Anne Frank?," contends that the loss of Anne Frank's whole story is a tragedy in itself:

The diary is incomplete, truncated, broken off; or, rather, it is completed by Westerbork (the hellish transit camp in Holland from which Dutch Jews were deported), and by Auschwitz, and by the fatal winds of Bergen-Belsen. It is here, and not in the "secret annex," that the crimes we have come to call the Holocaust were enacted.³¹

Because Annulla survived and escaped harm, the portrait created by Mann can be seen as a consistent whole, while Anne Frank's story was truncated and revised. While Anne Frank experienced the Holocaust at Level 1, the avoidance and suppression of this fact in the edited version of her diary and in the play lessen the impact of her tragedy on the conscience of the world. Lawrence Langer offers an explanation for the popularity of Anne Frank's story by comparing it to Elie Wiesel's autobiographical book about his time in Auschwitz, *Night*:

³¹ Cynthia Ozick, *Quarrel & Quandary: Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 78.

A book like *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, incontestably more popular and influential than Wiesel's *Night*, by its very widespread acceptance confirms our unpreparedness to respond to the grimmer realities and the imaginative re-creations of the literature of atrocity.³²

In her book *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Annette Insdorf examines a broad range of television programs and movies that use the Holocaust as a central theme, from fiction to documentaries. Insdorf states, in agreement with Steiner and Wiesel, that it is impossible to draw a direct picture of the Holocaust (Level 1), just as it is impossible for her to understand her own mother's experiences and memories as a survivor of the camps. But Insdorf attempts to explain what films can convey in helping to understand the Holocaust. She quotes film theorist Siegfried Kracauer in his description of the myth of Perseus's slaying of Medusa: Perseus could slay the Gorgon only by looking at its reflection in a mirror, lest he be turned to stone. Kracauer (and Insdorf) suggest that it is possible to look at the Holocaust only through indirect description or risk self-destruction; therefore, indirect description of the Holocaust might be the only way to keep the memory alive.³³ Nevertheless, Insdorf readily admits that certain treatments of the Holocaust are more successful and honest than others. In discussing the television miniseries *Holocaust* broadcast on NBC in 1978, Insdorf comments that

This mini-series took Nazi atrocities out of the province of specialized study and made them a "prime-time" phenomenon—with both the benefits of exposure and the drawbacks of distortion. Its case illustrates the rewards and tendencies inherent in films made for mass audiences—the power of sensitizing, the danger of romanticizing and trivializing.³⁴

³² Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 76.

³³ Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), xiv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

Insdorf is describing the obvious tendency of television to please the audience by transforming the serious and important into the familiar. To encourage viewership, the broadcasting companies seek to make the subjects examined palatable, entertaining, and unreal.

Martin Esslin, in his 1981 examination of the position of television in modern culture, describes the manner in which television blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, thereby softening the impact of the facts:

And here we have come to the heart of the matter: in essence a dramatic medium, television from the beginning has been compelled by the special requirements of its nature—its own inner logic—to put its emphasis on material with a dramatic, emotional, personalized content. TV is therefore perceived by its audience primarily as a medium of *entertainment*, and all programming—including the news, documentaries, and political broadcasts—is ultimately judged for its *entertainment value*. The effect is that material about events in the real world has to compete, as entertainment, with the openly fictional material radiated incessantly, which constitutes the collective daydreams of the masses. Embedded in a never-ending stream of such material, these fragments of reality, glimpsed through the framed stage of the TV set, merge into the world of fantasy with which TV is preoccupied. The distinction, between daydream and reality are again blurred and distorted.³⁵

It is the contention of Jeffrey Shandler, in his book *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, that it is through television that the American public has had its most complete exposure to information and interpretation of the Holocaust.³⁶ If Shandler's view is considered through the lens of Esslin's observation regarding television's ability to soften reality into a type of fantasy, then Americans, who have received information about the Holocaust primarily through television, will have formed a rather sanitized sense of the "final solution."

³⁵ Martin Esslin, *The Age of Television* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Alumni Association, 1981), 61-62.

³⁶ Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xv.

Before the NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, documentaries about the war as well as smaller-scale dramas about the Holocaust had been aired, cultivating their audience's attitude toward the subject. Thus it was the industry itself that created the market for *Holocaust*, or, in other words, for more television. Television also, as Shandler points out, formed the public's vision of the event and prepared them, as well as the playwrights reared on those images, to create and look for a certain type of dramatic and documentary treatment of the subject.

Mann's Approach

Mann realized that she was facing a great challenge. "There are two issues that the audience does not want to look at: one is slavery, and the other is the Holocaust," she told me.³⁷ How then can a play about the Holocaust become something the audience will want to see? Mann solved the dilemma of creating a watchable yet historically accurate account of the Holocaust by distancing her audience from the subject in a format modeled on television. Annulla suffered the trauma of the Holocaust, but since she is a witness at Level 5 involvement, her material is already tempered by distance. Mel Gussow, in his review of the TNT production of the play, noted:

In no traditional sense is Annulla a victim. The daughter of a millionaire, she moved from country to country during the rise of Nazism, learning various languages . . . remaining strangely detached from the tragedies that surrounded her.³⁸

Without having to dilute or diminish the horror of the event or deviate from the documentary evidence provided by her interviews with Annulla, Mann is able to further soften audience confrontation with the subject by allowing them to view the story

³⁷ Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 October 1999, 9.

³⁸ Mel Gussow, "Testimony of a Survivor," C23.

through the frame of the Voice (Level 6) watching her younger self interview Annula, who is also remembering herself as a child and young woman, and who experienced the Holocaust as a refugee (Level 5). The layers of voice and memory through which the audience perceives the Holocaust create a series of doorways, or frames, around the subject of the play. The view of the audience is carefully guided through these portals, each portal absorbing a bit of the attention and feeling that might finally reach the actual subject of the play, Annula's memories of the Holocaust. In this forced perspective, Annula—who she is and was, what she thinks and thought, how she acts and acted—and the interviewer—who the interviewer was, why she interviewed Annula, and who she is today—become as important to the audience as the subject Annula is being urged to explore. This inversion of focus is one identified as common in reporting television news, in which “the personality of ‘the anchor’ seemed to become more important than the content of the information being communicated.”³⁹

Mann constructs a visit with Annula that touches on the Holocaust, but then quickly shifts to a lengthy description of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the situation in China, and the number of women in the U.S. Congress:

Do you know that during the war people did nothing? They saw evil all around them and they didn't do anything. Of course, a Marx could have inspired people to make a revolution. It has to be a Marx. But do you know that all of the main revolutions ended up with things becoming as they were before? Look at the French Revolution. Look at any revolution you like. Everything gets worse. I have a special chapter in my play for the Chinese.⁴⁰

Mann presents Annula's whole life, including moments of humor and sadness, her personal philosophy and responses to art, her childhood memories and the pain of lost

³⁹ Michael Tracey, “Non-Fiction Television,” ed. Anthony Smith, *Television: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 133.

⁴⁰ Mann, *Testimonies*, 25.

loved ones, and her response to the Holocaust. Only Annnulla might have left a testament to what happened to her husband during his thirteen months in Dachau, but she says nothing of his experiences there, and little about the deaths of her family during the war. While these oversights may have been a sublimation necessary to Annnulla's survival it is clear that Mann did not choose to place Annnulla's selective memory and quixotic sense of proportion in external perspective.

Because of the informal nature of Mann's interviews with Annnulla, it is natural that the play would be set in her kitchen. "And I knew from *Annnulla* you could talk about real horror and terrifying events in a kitchen and not sound didactic. Even talk about Auschwitz while you're making chicken soup and it becomes part of life," Mann has said.⁴¹ In reviews of the TNT production in 1988, critics made special note of the effect the smell of the cooking soup had on the audience's appreciation of the play.⁴² This olfactory sensation is, of course, impossible to reproduce in film or television, but just as a commercial interruption breaks the tension and heaviness of serious television programs and provides the comforting distraction of going to the kitchen, the smell of chicken soup deflects, comforts, and lightens the action taking place onstage. Not only does the aroma distance the audience from the subject at hand, it also reframes the material as something warm and special to be shared with very special people in the circle of a very safe family-like environment.

Sally Banes, in her recent essay "Olfactory Performances," suggests that the resurgent use of smell in contemporary theatre may be the manifestation of "theatre's anxiety toward the mass media." It is Banes's conjecture that while television and film

⁴¹ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony," 213.

⁴² Leo Seligsohn, "Linda Hunt Cooking Up Magic," *Newsday*, 2 November 1988, 9.

can reproduce visual realism so much more effectively than theatre, the electronic media cannot offer audiences the evocative sense of smell, that “vivid slice of ‘the real’,” so amply possible in a theatre. Banes also defines the various possible effects potentially sought through the use of specific odors during performance: “to evoke a mood or ambience; to complement or contrast with aural/visual designs; to summon specific memories; to frame the performance as ritual; and to serve as a distancing device.”⁴³ Mann accomplishes all six of these goals with her use of the smell of chicken soup cooking on the stove, an almost universally familiar smell of childhood in a parent-driven universe.

However, the distancing can never be so complete that the horror of the Holocaust disappears. The Voice of the Young Woman describes in brief the degradation and extermination the Nazis visited upon her own family. At the end of the play, the Voice provides a short but moving list of the names of those in her family who perished in the camps. These losses were so devastating that members who did survive were unable even to speak of their memories: “When I asked my grandmother about it she’d say, ‘Why do you want to go there? They killed us there. Why—what do you want to know about that place?’”⁴⁴ Although Mann’s grandmother was not in Europe during the war, the nightmare of what happened to her family was, as Langer has implied, too grim to attempt to convey. Mann’s grandmother heard of her family’s destruction in a letter, as the Voice of the Young Woman describes:

They were all herded into the town square. My great-grandfather unfortunately was a much-loved elder of the community, so he was . . .

⁴³ Sally Banes, “Olfactory Performances,” *Drama Review*, 45:1 (Spring 2001): 69.

⁴⁴ Mann, *Testimonies*, 13.

you know . . . taken by the beard and made to eat grass before they killed him and then the entire community was shot. And my mother remembers when my grandmother got the letter in America—telling her.⁴⁵

Hearing this jarring and graphic description from the disembodied Voice creates an experience for the audience similar to the experience of watching a film in which the narrator tells you what has happened in the past to the person you see on the screen. The viewer/audience is distanced from both the subject on camera and the subject of the narration.

Annula's avoidance (perhaps in actuality, or through the editing of the material) of a direct or lengthy examination of the painful events in her life by generalizing the tragedy is similar to Mann's grandmother's refusal to talk about the Holocaust. This tactic moves attention away from the specific nature of the experience by linking it to the rule of all tyrants, including Stalin and Mao. Deeply embedded in the center of the play's narrative is a single reference made by Annula to the camps:

People needed a catchword, you know, for the misery, and the Jews were the obvious target. They always are. I cannot even talk to you about the death camps . . . this whole affair, this whole Hitler affair . . . this whole war, made me start thinking about my Women's Party.⁴⁶

Annula cannot focus on the atrocities of the war. Whenever she comes close to the subject she is reminded of some other form of repression, or her visions of a better world, or her strong attachment to writing. Annula's experience of the Holocaust is that of a refugee, and her distance from the event is enlarged first by her own decision to avoid the topic, and further, by the intermediary role played by the Voice of the Young Woman.

Vivian M. Patraka describes two American Holocaust museums in her essay "Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U.S.

⁴⁵ Mann, *Testimonies*, 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

Holocaust Museums.” Patraka describes the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles: “While the D.C. museum acknowledges that it can never manage to represent and make comprehensible the Holocaust experience, the Beit Hashoah in L.A. primarily asserts the manageability of Holocaust history and of its relation to our experience and world view.”⁴⁷ The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., focuses on the Holocaust as a specific and unique event. While the museum provides the visitor with artistic interpretations of the Holocaust, there is no one there to mediate and/or interpret what is seen. Patraka explains that the Beit Hashoah achieves its goal through its predominant use of video, computer, and technological representations of small portions of the larger subject:

Much more of its design relies on computer-synchronized and computer-created exhibits. This, in a way, reduces history to information—information that then can be simulated and re-simulated through various performance technologies.⁴⁸

The impact of the darkness of the Holocaust on the spectator is thus diminished. The on-screen mediator/guide, the “Agent Provocateur,” protects the viewer by framing the event and through the wonders of modern technology allows the viewer to absorb information from a familiar, safe, and comfortable distance. The Beit Hashoah describes itself, and is described by Patraka, as a museum of tolerance in which the issue of the Holocaust can be universalized and viewed in terms of other races and ethnicities who have endured or continue to endure persecution.

⁴⁷ Vivian M. Patraka, “Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums,” ed. Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 104.

⁴⁸ Patraka, “Spectacles of Suffering,” 104.

The parallel drawn here is between the designers of the Beit Hashoah and the author of *Annulla* in their treatment of the Holocaust. Both provide distance to the viewer by mediatizing a live experience—making the subject bearable and therefore viewable—and by universalizing the Holocaust, making it more than just a “Jewish” experience.

From *Annulla* to *Still Life*

Although Langer is speaking of the Holocaust, it is possible to apply his observations to the manner in which the American public was able, or unable, to appreciate the nature of the U.S. military in Vietnam. It was through the portal of television that Americans thought they were being acquainted with the grimmer realities of that war. In actuality, the news was carefully edited and did not present the grimmer realities. Quite a number of the plays written during the sixties and seventies reflect a desire to present an image of the war, illuminating it as an unjust, pointlessly destructive, and therefore criminal war. Furthermore, in many of these plays the way in which the media controlled and created not only American perception of the war, but American reality, constituted an important part of the drama.

It was in this artistic community, filled with antiwar sentiment and antiwar drama, that Mann produced *Annulla*. World War II is often referred to as a “just” war: one that men and women knew they were fighting for a universal good. But in Mann’s play *Annulla* speaks out against war, not against anti-Semitism, bigotry, or genocide. It is implicit that these are wrong, but *Annulla* does not take for granted that the audience will see war as wrong and so she, through Mann’s

mediation, dwells on that as her advice to us all. In other words, the focus of subject in Mann's play reflects the time in which it was written more than the time it is attempting to describe. It is most probable that Annnulla believed in the goal of World War II, but not in the wars that followed (such as Vietnam). Because the play was speaking to an audience dealing with the aftermath of Vietnam, and was written by a playwright who was against that war, the relevance of *Annulla* is surely enhanced by its antiwar content.

Mann's next play was *Still Life*, based on interviews she conducted with a veteran of the war in Vietnam. This play gave Mann the opportunity to deal directly with that war by examining one soldier's attempt to readjust to civilian life after having lived in a world dominated by brutality and killing. *Still Life* is a strange companion to *Annulla* in that the first play draws a portrait of the victim of governmentally sanctioned genocide and the second asks us to question whether the individual following governmental orders should be viewed as an accomplice in the war crimes perpetrated by his government, or as another victim.

Chapter II

Style and Structure: *Still Life*

Introduction

For Emily Mann, dramatic structure and content are inextricably bound together. This relationship recalls Marshall McLuhan's 1963 observation about the culture of television that "the medium is the message."¹ Indeed, the tools of the documentary play are very much a part of its message, in that they are used and perceived as authentication of the information presented, making the message seem to be reality, whether it is or is not.

In this chapter I will discuss how the devices of the documentary play affect audience perception of the message, and why playwrights, specifically Mann, are drawn to employ the documentary form. In addition to discussing the history and structure of *Still Life*, I will touch on the role of film and television in the development of the documentary play as well as the way in which such plays are perceived by contemporary audiences.

Based on the experiences of a veteran, *Still Life* provides a rich field for a discussion of the interplay between stage and television treatments of a soldier's life after service in Vietnam, because of the primary role of television in presenting images of the war to the American public. By comparing the ways in which the war in Vietnam has been treated in film, on television, and on the stage, I will illustrate how similar and shared are the ways television and documentary theatre aim to influence the perceptions of the audience.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding the Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1966), 7.

The History of *Still Life*

During *Annulla*'s premiere run at the Guthrie Theatre in March 1977, Mann was asked by a woman named Nadine to meet and interview a Vietnam veteran. Nadine had been deeply moved by *Annulla* and was inspired to speak to Mann about Mark, the veteran. Mann was reluctant to conduct the interview at first, feeling that a graphic description of the war in Vietnam would be too upsetting, given her opposition to the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia. The subject of the war had particular resonance because Mann and her father held opposing opinions concerning its legitimacy. Professor Mann believed that the war was a necessary and honorable governmental action, protecting the U.S. from the spread of communism. The younger Mann disagreed:

My father, strangely enough, was for the war, and I was against the war. It caused a huge rift between us. He at one time said that, if I had been a boy, he would have sent me to war, because he was a believer in fighting for this country . . . And I said, sorry. If you sent your son to the Vietnam War, you would lose a son, because I wouldn't go . . . We had a real domestic war over it for many years.²

Their conflict reflected the country's deep division about the war.

Despite Mann's reluctance to hear Mark's story, Nadine persisted until Mann finally agreed to the meeting: "Her [Nadine's] best friend was my best friend and they put pressure on me. So as a favor I sat down in a room and listened to the veteran speak for three hours."³

In addition to raising the issue of her disagreement with her father, the interviews with Mark created another burden for Mann: the need to speak out against the war and to validate her opinions. Writing was Mann's form of political action, and with *Still Life* she

² Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* (Hanover, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2001), 290-291.

³ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on the Craft of Documentary Plays," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, (Spring 1995): 10.

aimed to justify and clarify her position to her father and others who had supported the war:

I wanted to prove something to my father about that war, and to a lot of people who were hawks on the war, a lot of people who believed in that war . . . When I gathered the material I was so shattered by it I couldn't touch it for months. I was scared of knowing what I had learned, I was frightened of the responsibility I had. I was scared of what it did to me personally. It made me physically ill.⁴

Just as the creation of *Annulla :An Autobiography* represented an important personal journey for Mann, so did *Still Life*.

Despite Mann's strong negative reaction, the interviews with Mark continued and eventually led to interviews with Mark's wife, Cheryl:

I walked out of there [the first interview with Mark] shell-shocked thinking I never wanted to see this man again—at which point the friend [Mann's best friend] called again and said, "But you've got to meet his wife. He thinks she is the real casualty of this war." I said, "But I don't want to." And she said, "Do it as a favor." So I met the wife.⁵

At this point Mann realized that Nadine, a highly educated woman of forty-three, was having an affair with Mark, a working-class man of twenty-nine. "Then the girlfriend [Nadine] called and she said, 'Oh, I am so glad that you have met my boyfriend'—the veteran—'because he's the gentlest man I have ever known.' I thought now *this* is a story."⁶ Nadine became part of the ongoing interviews and Mann ended up with 140 hours of taped interviews: "I didn't know what to do with it. So I found student volunteers at the Guthrie who loved *Annulla*, and because I was broke, I asked them if

⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 292-293.

⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on the Craft of Documentary Plays," 10.

⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on the Craft of Documentary Plays," 10.

they'd help me out. And we transcribed. Then I put it aside. I couldn't handle it at all."⁷

Nine months later, Mann began to feel "an incredible responsibility to these people.

They'd given me their story and it was important to tell. So I tried to face it again."⁸

At first Mann arranged the edited interviews in chronological order, but when the first draft was completed Mann felt the structure didn't work, and she spent two weeks relentlessly cutting and rearranging. The result was the version of *Still Life* that premiered, with Mann as director, at the Goodman Studio Theatre in Chicago in October 1980, five years after the war in Vietnam had ended. The reviews were mixed. Rick Hogan of the *Chicago Sun-Times* responded positively: "This one-act 90 minute piece of theater is a gripping drama, strikingly and effectively staged, compelling and moving."⁹ Larry Kart of the *Chicago Tribune* responded negatively: "*Still Life* fails, since the play conveys not the reality of anyone's 'own words' but the generally futile attempt . . . to bring those words to life onstage."¹⁰

Nevertheless, the play moved to New York, where it opened at the American Place Theatre in February of 1981, once again directed by Mann. The notices in New York paralleled Chicago's. Frank Rich of the *New York Times* asked in his review: "The author's heart seems to be in the right place, but what about her mind?"¹¹ while Michael Feingold of the *Village Voice* proclaimed: "I recommend it much the same way I would recommend open heart surgery—the point being that, for the heart of America, such an

⁷ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 154.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rick Hogan, "'Still Life' Probes Pain of Three Lives," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 27 October 1980, 49, 55.

¹⁰ Larry Kart, "'Still Life' Lecture-Play May Be Real, But It Sure Isn't Art," *Chicago Tribune*, 28 October 1980, 6.

¹¹ Frank Rich, "Stage: 'Still Life' by Emily Mann at American Place," *New York Times*, 20 February 1981, C3.

operation is radically necessary right now.”¹² Mann felt the play was savaged by the uptown critics.

Rich’s review did not, however, stop the play from winning six Obie Awards (including those for Distinguished Playwriting, Distinguished Directing, and Outstanding Production of the Season). Nor did the *Times* stop *Still Life* from being produced all over the world, including at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it won the Fringe First Award for Best Play (1984); in Paris, where it was put in the political context of France’s presence in Algeria; and in South Africa, where it served as a statement against apartheid. *Still Life* was produced in regional theatres across the United States, notably at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco (1983), where dramaturg Oskar Eustis and artistic director Anthony Taccone, would commission Mann’s next play, *Execution of Justice*.

Mann was invited to see *Still Life* in Johannesburg, where it was presented at the Market Theatre in 1983. It was there that Barney Simon, the Market’s cofounder, began to use the phrase “theatre of testimony” to describe Mann’s style of gathering information and presenting it in a documentary form.¹³ Simon’s use of the word “testimony” to describe Mann’s style is recalled by Athol Fugard: “In talking about Mann’s work he [Simon] used the word ‘testimony’ several times—I made him check its dictionary definition: ‘To bear witness’ according to the OED.”¹⁴ The technique of interviewing, or taking testimony, has become Mann’s signature as a method to create documentary drama, a signature in which she expresses great pride: “The payoff of course for this

¹² Michael Feingold, “Still Life,” *Village Voice*, 25 February 1981.

¹³ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 291.

¹⁴ Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), ix.

arduous process is that when the audience comes and sees and hears the piece they have to face the fact that [it's] real."¹⁵

In his book *Levitating the Pentagon*, J.W. Fenn describes Mann's play as "one of the best plays in the canon of dramatic literature dealing with Vietnam in its portrayal of the consequences of the war for the American soldier and for American society."¹⁶ *Still Life* established Mann as a documentary playwright of note. Fugard writes, "More than any other American writer of our time, the body of her work has demonstrated the central importance of theatre to the psychic well-being and sanity of a society."¹⁷ But perhaps one of the most important responses to her play came from her father. Mann recalls, "He saw it in Chicago at the Goodman Theater, he embraced me and said, 'I will never agree with you, but you have earned the right to your opinion, and I respect you for that.'"¹⁸ By creating a platform on which she and her father could respect each other's opposing positions on the Vietnam war, Mann had achieved her goal of inspiring the prowar camp to consider antiwar sentiments seriously and respectfully.

Description of the Play

Mann compares *Still Life* to a piece of music:

The rhythms are of real people's speech, but they also at times have the sense of improvisation one finds with the best jazz musicians: the monologues should sometimes sound like extended riffs . . . the acts represent movements and the play should be performed without intermission.¹⁹

¹⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on the Craft of Documentary Plays," 13.

¹⁶ J.W. Fenn, *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 222.

¹⁷ Athol Fugard, "Introduction," Emily Mann, *Testimonies*, xi.

¹⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 291.

¹⁹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 35.

As a student of music as well as theatre, Mann employs the metaphor of a jazz riff repeatedly throughout her body of work. That she likens this play to a piece of music also makes its effect on the audience analogous to the emotional or subliminal response elicited by a jazz recital.

For the 1980 production at the Goodman Studio Theatre in Chicago, Mann described the set as follows:

The setting is a long table with ashtrays, water glasses, Mark's pictures and slides upon it. Behind it is a large screen for slide projection. The look of a conference room or perhaps a trial room.²⁰

The play's three characters sit at the table facing the audience, speaking in three-part harmony with rare, and therefore intense, moments of direct reference to each other. Mark uses images projected on the screen to introduce himself, Cheryl, and Nadine. All the photographs projected are attributed to Mark. He controls the projector and narrates the images, making him both the observer and the observed.

Mark met and married Cheryl shortly after he returned from the war. He shows a picture of his wife before they met and before the war, "*young, fragile, thin, hair flowing, quintessentially innocent.*" Then he indicates his wife sitting beside him onstage approximately five years after their marriage, carrying their second child, "*six months pregnant, heavy, rigid.*" After introducing Cheryl, Mark clicks on a photograph of himself, taken, he is careful to inform us, by his mistress, Nadine: "*Face gentle. Halo of light around head.*"²¹ There are no photographs of Nadine, and neither Mark nor the playwright offers a description of her other than "This is Nadine." Finally, Mark clicks

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 39.

on a photo he took of his own foot and laughs as he explains: "I wanted a picture of it because if I ever lost it, I wanted to remember what it looked like."²²

After this introduction the women speak to the audience, their viewpoints often contradictory. Nadine thinks Mark is the gentlest man alive; Cheryl is afraid Mark may kill her. Nadine sees his anger as a cleansing and righteous emotion; Cheryl experiences his anger as destructive and vindictive. Nadine believes Mark is the most honest man she has ever met; Cheryl regards him as a master of subterfuge. Cheryl explains under what circumstances she stays:

If I thought about this too much I'd go crazy. So I don't think about it much. I'm not too good with the past. Now, Mark, he remembers. That's his problem. I don't know whether it's 1972 or 1981. Sometimes I think about divorce. God, I don't know. Divorce means a lot of nasty things like it's over . . . You know, I wasn't willing to give up on it, and I should have, for my own damn good.²³

Is Cheryl imagining everything? Is Nadine's perception of Mark completely misguided? Is it possible to forgive a man for what he has done to Cheryl because of his goodness to Nadine? These are just a few of the questions raised by the contradictions in the information the audience receives.

The stark contrast between the picture of Cheryl before her marriage to Mark and her presence after over five years of marriage illustrates the toll the relationship has taken on her. Her look of innocence is gone, replaced by a rigid mask. Mark beats her. He talks about her as if she had been at the front with him, but Cheryl's war has been her marriage to Mark. Mark went into combat and Cheryl shares the scars. It was the U.S. government's war, and yet Mark is psychologically destroyed. Mark might have refused

²² Ibid., 40.

²³ Ibid.

to go, but he was raised to prove himself in battle. Cheryl might have left Mark, but she was raised to stick to her marriage.

Nadine describes her first meeting with Mark, making clear her admiration for him, and turning a blind eye to the fact that he beats his wife:

He said that one of his major projects was to face all the relationships he'd been in where he'd violated someone. His wife is one. He's so honest he doesn't hide anything. He told me he beat her very badly . . . He's the greatest man I've ever known.²⁴

Mark's seeming honesty is more important to Nadine than what he tells her he has done. In fact, Mark is not honest with anyone and perhaps not even with himself, making Nadine's admiration of him sad and her position pitiable. Cheryl cautions the audience not to let Mark get away with the pretense that has worked on Nadine: "He blames it all on the war . . . but I want to tell you . . . don't let him."²⁵ Cheryl wants Mark to take responsibility for his actions. Nadine forgives him everything because of his remorse.

The photograph of Mark with halo and beatific expression, seen at the beginning of the play, gives the audience the impression that Mark is a martyr, the opposite of everything Mark says about himself and all that is implicit in his brutalization of Cheryl. Mark says Nadine took this photo, while Nadine indicates that Mark took it. Misleading and misattributed images signal the audience that a photograph can convey anything the person operating the camera, or the person presenting the image, wishes to convey.

Mark's photographs are central to the telling of his story, just as film footage was central to the television evening news reports on the war. It is through his photographs of Cheryl that Mark is able to rework, reinterpret, and seek absolution for his own part in the violence of the war. He takes photographs of Cheryl, naked and clothed, and places them

²⁴ Mann, *Testimonies*, 41-42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

in bottles surrounded by objects like broken glass, bullets, blood, and knives, trapping her image in a miniature, warlike hell. Mark's morbid attempt at humor concerning the imaginary loss of his foot demonstrates his detachment from his own pain and, therefore, the pain of others. It is only through the distance created by the camera that Mark can observe the events of his life. But in order to feel something through his numbness, he shocks himself and those around him with images and actions of violence and ugliness.

One by one the characters describe the ways in which they have been shaped by a violent society and have in essence perpetuated that society. Nadine had been in an abusive marriage and yet condones Mark's abuse of Cheryl. Cheryl's family life prior to her marriage to Mark was tinged with alcohol abuse and dysfunction. Mark describes himself before the war, eager to follow society's rules, prove himself in battle, make his family proud, and defend his country. Deeply scarred by his war experiences, Mark refuses to work to support himself and his family; he commits robberies and deals drugs. He beats his wife, creates a violent and unstable home for his children, and takes a mistress.

As the descriptions of the pain these three have endured become more disturbing and graphic, so do the photographs displayed by Mark. These life stories are arranged as a series of revelations, culminating in the most horrible exposure, and followed by a catharsis after which the characters (and audience) can relax, knowing that the worst is over. Mark's final confession tells of his spiteful and unjustified murder of three young Vietnamese children and their parents in Vietnam during his tour of duty.

Mark concludes, "I didn't want to see people going through another era of being so ignorant of the fact that war kills people."²⁶ It is not the ideological and economic forces that caused the United States to wage war in Vietnam that Mark wishes to expose. He does not take responsibility for what he has done, nor is he exposing the gratuitous violence encouraged and condoned by the American government and military. Mark simply wants others to know that war kills people. In other words, Mark holds "war" responsible for the mayhem, not the people or governments who wage them, and certainly not identifying the specific motivations for this particular war.

From this point and until the play's end Mark recites the names of his slain comrades while Nadine and Cheryl continue to describe their troubled lives. Mark closes with a photograph of "two grapefruits, an orange, a broken egg, with a grenade in the center on a dark background. Also some fresh bread, a fly on the fruit." He explains the significance of the arrangement of food and grenade:

My unit got blown up. It was high contact. We got hit very, very hard. The Marine Corps sends you this extra food, fresh fruit, bread, a reward when you've had a heavy loss. What can I say? I am still alive—my friends aren't. It's a still life. I didn't know what I was doing.²⁷

Nadine and Cheryl look at each other for the first time. The lights fade.

The Documentary Form and the Vietnam War in Film, on Television and Onstage

Still Life followed in the footsteps of many films, television programs, and plays written and produced in an attempt to deal with the repercussions of the war on American society. Mann chose to present the testimony of an actual veteran. Earlier treatments for stage and screen had also focused on the reintegration of a veteran—perhaps real, perhaps

²⁶ Mann, *Testimonies*, 126.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

fictitious—as a useful metaphor for the effects of the war. In the late 1970s Hollywood discovered the returning Vietnam veteran as a resource for describing the war without offending those still sensitive to the emotional and political rifts the war had caused. In his essay “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” Rick Berg suggests that network television executives, between the 1950s and mid-1980s, chose to provide the American public with reinterpretations of what actually happened “over there” through television shows and movies that presented the veteran as either a lunatic or a hero.²⁸ As Michael Klein writes in his essay “Historical Memory and Film”:

Vietnam as a subject initially returned to the Hollywood screen after the conclusion of the war, in the form of a series of coming-home films that focused on the situation of the returning veteran. Again Hollywood only seemed able to confront the Vietnam experience by situating it within an established genre.²⁹

The veteran, a personality easily invested with insane violence, shame, remorse, and suffering, separated the role of the U.S. government from the direct scrutiny of the audience. Such a vulnerable and aberrant creature as a physically or psychically wounded veteran could not but inspire sympathy in the general run of audiences.

Focusing a documentary or drama on one soldier also encapsulates the story, offering the illusion that the story is singular and audiences need not concern themselves with the multitudes of veterans and Vietnamese, but just with this “one.” The political, ethical, and social problems surrounding the war are thus minimized and localized. In “Representing the Vietnamese: Race, Culture, and the Vietnam War in American Film

²⁸ Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” ed. John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 118, 121.

²⁹ Michael Klein, “Historical Memory and Film,” ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 21.

and Drama,” David Callaghan points out that the plays of this period mirrored films in that the Vietnamese were either absented from the portrayal of the wartime experience or depicted as the “non-white other,” “the noble savage,” and thus rendered unimportant in the context the audience is asked to consider.³⁰ Callaghan links the attitude taken to the Vietnamese in American films and plays about the war with the way in which, decades earlier, Hollywood had also characterized the American Indian in Westerns, and the Germans and Japanese in films about World War II.

Recognition of the veteran’s difficulties reintegrating into a peacetime existence was given in such movies as *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Coming Home* (1978), and *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, a collection of essays on Vietnam war movies, editors Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud note that these films and others in the genre went far toward removing the war from its larger political context, making an understanding of how and what had happened in Vietnam more difficult, rather than less. The fact that the experience of the Vietnamese is ignored in a large proportion of these films makes the war a dominantly American experience. This one-sided view further complicates the possibility of accurate audience appreciation of the history being represented: “The selectivity of reiterations is itself significant—not only because repetition ascribes urgency to whatever it foregrounds, but because repeated silence on issues effectively erases them.”³¹

“Vietnam on television”—that is, a televised war perceived almost exclusively through television commentary—served as a basis, or idiom, for a large portion of the

³⁰ David Callaghan, “Representing the Vietnamese: Race, Culture, and the Vietnam War in American Film and Drama (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1998), 13-33.

³¹ Berg, “Losing Vietnam,” *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, 11.

fictional and documentary representations of the war. In choosing the documentary form, Mann employed the devices most familiar to and most effective with the audience who grew up with television and with the Vietnam War on television. She used a system of signs that were quickly becoming more familiar to audiences than the signs of the traditional theatre:

Theatre requires spectators who know how to read and decode its signs. For a media-glutted population the relatively static, linear and language-oriented world of theatre (and even the most cutting-edge theatre is often quaint in comparison to other media) is not merely boring but incomprehensible.³²

Still Life, like many of the films described above, focuses on the emotional torment of one American soldier through encapsulated photographic images and the interview format, foregrounding the American experience and ignoring the larger political context in which the war was fought.

Television documentaries produced in the early 1980s employed images of original war coverage to reawaken the visceral memories of watching the “real” war, incorporating those original pictures with images of Vietnam in the present. The older images lent authenticity to the newer material, which could then be fused with the viewer’s original memories. Even fictionalized movies employed real or simulated documentary footage to lend authenticity to their stories and stimulate audience response to reality-based images. *Still Life* premiered in 1980, after the Vietnam veteran had become a staple character on television series (such as *Magnum P.I.*, *Lou Grant*, and *Simon and Simon*) and as television documentaries revisiting the effects of the war (such as Peter Arnett and Michael Maclear’s 1982 documentary *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam 1945-1975*) began to be broadcast.

³² Arnold Aronson, “The Theatre Is Dead Again,” *New York Times Book Review*, 24 December 2000.

Television began presenting examinations of the veteran's homecoming experience as early as 1969, the year ABC broadcast the TV film *The Ballad of Andy Crocker*. Such plays as Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* (1966), Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970), Tom Cole's *Medal of Honor Rag* (1975), David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1968), *Sticks and Bones* (1969), and *Streamers* (1976), and Amlin Gray's *How I Got That Story* (1979) began to appear almost concurrently. The great degree to which media images and metaphors were used as an idiom within plays and films centered on the reverberations of the Vietnam War indicate that the subject and the conduit through which it had been perceived were inextricably bound together.

The family members in Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* are named Ozzie and Harriet, David and Ricky—an obvious allusion to the Nelsons, a model family from a 1950s television series. Ozzie's television set dominates the stage and, in a way, controls the action. David, the elder son and shattered war veteran, slowly forces his family to recognize the false facade of the "television reality" they have embraced and lived by. When Ozzie's television set breaks and "reality" is destroyed, the family structure disintegrates. In order to regain equilibrium David must be killed, or at least urged to kill himself, so that the family can fix the TV set and function as it had before.

How I Got That Story by Amlin Gray is an examination of how news reportage affects and even merges with what is being reported. The play's two characters, the Reporter and the Event, become entangled in a growing confusion about what is really happening, what is made to happen, and finally whether or not the news is the Reporter himself. Megan Terry's *Viet Rock*, while not defined as a documentary, relies heavily on audio announcements issuing instructions to the audience as well as projections of war

photographs and posters on the rear wall of the stage. In each of these plays the media have as much effect on the action as any of the characters and often control the characters and their responses. Thus these plays both portray a media society and, by using the television image onstage, mediatize the theatre as well.³³

Mann likens her work as playwright to that of a filmmaker or videographer. Subjects speak directly to the “camera” or interviewer/viewer, in this case Mann. The rough interviews are edited, shaped, and reassembled in a manner reflecting Mann’s attitudes, and visual elements are inserted to emphasize and validate the points made in the narrative:

I was like an old-fashioned film editor. I’d paste up different lines and speeches on the walls: it was like being a collage artist or a filmmaker. I’m very upset usually when I’m working, so there’s an emotional side.³⁴

The enormous emotional toll taken on Mann by the material with which she builds her plays is an indication of the deeply subjective nature of her work. The facts are true, the words were spoken, but these provisos seem to urge the audience to overlook or forget that Mann’s response is what they are seeing, not the actual subject.

The dramatic format of *Still Life* is similar to that employed by Spalding Gray, particularly in his first substantial success, *Swimming to Cambodia* (1984). Gray sits behind a desk, speaks directly to the audience and uses photographs, projected on a screen behind the desk, to authenticate his points. *Swimming to Cambodia* was made into a film without any meaningful alteration in text, performance, or treatment for the camera. Gray’s references to and use of media within his play, as well as its transfer to

³³ Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 171.

³⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 296.

film without appreciable restaging, underscore the mediatized nature of the piece.

Mann's play can be viewed similarly, because of its use of interview format, direct audience address, and photographs to move the action forward. As Nora Alter observes in her book *Vietnam Protest Theatre*, "With the use of disembodied photographs, it is as if theatre as a somatic medium had reached its maximum limit. It must turn to other media, perceived (rightly or wrongly) as more 'real' or 'truthful' or 'effective,' in order to push its political message forward."³⁵

In his book *A Shared Authority*, Michael Frisch analyzes the thirteen-part 1983 PBS film series *Vietnam: A Television History*. He describes some of the choices made by the producers in their attempt to present an accurate picture of the war. Frisch's observations about the filmmakers' choices can be applied to some of Mann's decisions in constructing *Still Life*. In order to create a three-dimensional portrait of the wartime experience, the PBS producers interpolated the spoken memories of high- and low-ranking American, North and South Vietnamese soldiers, and civilians. In *Still Life* Mann wove together the voices of one soldier, one wife, and one mistress. The effect, though more focused than the PBS documentary, aimed to create a similarly fluid mixture of viewpoints. This fluidity in the series illuminated, not the specific causes and effects of the war, but its tragic nature: "In political terms, there is a relative consensus, and not only on the left, that the overall effect of the series has been powerfully to humanize but also to depoliticize the war, to see it as a 'tragedy' without winners or losers."³⁶ *Still Life* achieves a very similar effect:

³⁵ Nora Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War On Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 119.

³⁶ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 162.

Still Life posits a view which is more similar to many plays of the wartime era which root the brutality of American soldiers in Vietnam with a larger framework of home front corruption. Given the anti-establishment mood of that period which crystallized around the war as the ultimate symbol of American wrongdoing, many of the anti-war plays sought to expose domestic evils which were then extended to other peoples and cultures via our foreign policies.³⁷

These comments offered by David Callaghan suggest that *Still Life* diffuses the polarization of the audience by making the common enemy the broad-based violence in America, not the international policies of the U.S. government and military.

John Carlos Rowe, in his essay "Eyewitness: Documentary Styles in the American Representations of Vietnam," questions the use of oral history as a basis for portrayals of the Vietnam experience because the highly emotional nature of the information inspires sympathy rather than greater understanding:

"The Vietnam experience" is now a popular phrase that refers not merely to the actual accounts of combat soldiers and other personnel in Vietnam, but also suggests a genuine *alternative* to official documents, media reports, and scholarly and popular histories. These subjective accounts clearly *compete* with these other modes of interpreting the war, and this unusual competition has produced a certain generic confusion as popular media have tried to employ the rhetoric, tone, and technical devices of the personal account. Such works remind us of how tempting it is to substitute personal experience for historical and political knowledge, especially in an American culture that has tended to mythologize the special value of direct experience, even when its impressions are uninformed or unconsciously biased.

Our attitudes toward Vietnam over the past fifteen years have been shaped significantly by a "revisionary" desire that aims to redeem the war and thus absolve us of responsibility. One of the strategies of the revisionary desire is to employ the presumably cathartic value of personal confession, anecdote, and relived experience.³⁸

The use of oral history as the basis for films or plays about the Vietnam conflict and its aftermath offers the audience a forum for public confession, forgiveness, and redemption

³⁷ Callaghan, "Representing the Vietnamese," 241.

³⁸ John Carlos Rowe, "Eyewitness: Documentary Styles in the American Representations of Vietnam," ed. John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, 148-149.

rather than understanding or clarity. Rowe emphasizes the American need to rewrite the history of the war and, in repackaging it, make it more palatable, much in the way Mark in *Still Life* attempts to justify and be forgiven for his complicity in the carnage of the war.

Factors Influencing Audience Reception

In an effort to make clear her subjective approach to her material, Mann has stated in interviews, essays for playbills, and prefaces to her plays that her aim is to recreate the experience she had in gathering information for the play, not the event described within the testimony: "The structure of *Still Life* is really my memory of meeting these traumatized people, and their traumatic event, about how traumatized I was by these people, and what they knew, and what they had gone through."³⁹ Mann states that she is not recreating the actual interviews, but rather using the transcripts to mirror her personal response to the interviews. In other words, Mann edits, arranges and structures the transcribed words in a form she feels most strongly evokes her first encounter with it:

One of my friends, who studies the brain, says that *Still Life* is to her the model for trauma, that the piece actually works the way traumatic memory works . . . And how the play is constructed is how the brain works when it deals with trauma—jumping, putting things together, but in the wrong order.⁴⁰

Mann identifies with all the characters in *Still Life* and at the same time aligns herself with the audience, thus putting the audience in the position of looking at the story through her eyes, as victim, perpetrator, judge, and jury.

³⁹ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 210.

⁴⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 299.

In discussing *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There*, a 1981 collection of oral histories by Mark Baker, Rowe describes how as an interviewer Baker provides a way for the reader to enter into the material:

As someone who did not fight in Vietnam and admits it at the outset, Baker enables most of his noncombatant readers to identify with him. It is a narrative perspective designed to bring us into a more personal relation with the veteran, but one that presumes the foreign quality of such experience.⁴¹

The structures of the veterans' narratives in Baker's book parallel those in *Still Life*. Baker weaves the various stories and voices together into a tapestry of experiences, a narrative device similar to those employed in *Still Life* and the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History*. The use of this method in these various media confirms the importance of oral history as a tool to describe the war in Vietnam to the American public. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud describe the volume of material produced in an effort to explain the war:

If anything, the rapidly growing number of histories, biographies, novels, poems, journal special issues, and other publications about the Vietnam War and its aftermath attests to an urgent, current, and deeply felt public concern. The wish to uncover, to know, and to critique is clearly at work, but so also is the wish to rationalize, to repress, and to exorcise.⁴²

In each case, the narrative form allowed the audience, still attempting to reconcile antiwar sentiments with compassion for the returning soldiers, to put individual faces to the suffering veterans and thereby forgive them without considering the larger ramifications of the war.

⁴¹ Rowe, "Eyewitness," *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, 159.

⁴² Dittmar and Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching Toward Denial," *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 1.

The struggle to reinterpret, be forgiven, and find redemption motivates all of Mark's actions, *Still Life's* central character. Toward that goal it seems that Mark will say, or do, whatever is needed. His turmoil drives the play. The contradictions between Mark's testimony and Cheryl's or Nadine's raise questions for the audience about who is telling the truth. This ambiguity increases the dramatic tension, drawing the audience into the world of the play. The shifting balance—between the audience believing in or questioning the veracity of the characters, the information presented, and the viewpoint of the author—is an important factor in the work of Emily Mann. The playwright estimates that ninety percent of the material in the script is verbatim. Mann places in the forefront of audience perception her strict adherence to the interview transcript, so that the play can be viewed as an unassailably true representation.⁴³ Yet Mann provides contradictory information within the play. There is the question of whether Nadine or Mark took the photo portrait of Mark. Which character should the audience believe? Beyond the question of internal attribution (whether Mark or Nadine shot the portrait) is the larger question of where the actual photographs used in the play come from. The portraits of Mark and Cheryl have to be of the actors playing those roles in each production. In leaving this question unanswered and even unmentioned, Mann reifies the discrepancy between perception and reality as well as rendering impossible any claim to presenting an image of “what really happened,” whether in the interview room or Vietnam.

In *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature to Reality*, Herbert Lindenberger describes four levels at which an audience can appreciate and understand a history play:

First, the historical materials which the play derives from its sources (“correct” or not) and which it purports to reenact; second, the theatrical conventions into which these materials are recast; and third,

⁴³ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, Princeton, N. J., 26 April 1994, unpublished.

the sense of historical continuity which the author gives to that segment of the past which he has dramatized. But there is still another aspect to our experience with every *older* work—namely, the influence of our present situation on our interpretation of the work.⁴⁴

To understand *Still Life* audience members have to compare the information about the war offered by Mann with information from official sources, including television. They have to decode the metaphors and form into which Mann cast her vision; to place the information in the play in a larger historical context (if possible) and concurrently consider how the time in which the play was written affected the way it portrays the subject. Finally, they have to consider how the time in which they are viewing the play affects their interpretation.

As mentioned earlier, *Still Life* premiered five years after the end of the Vietnam War, when images of the conflict were still clear and pressing, though the emotional intensity surrounding the issues had diminished. The distance provided by time allowed the audience to be a bit more contemplative. Thus the play employs all the frames of reference described by Lindenberg and created by the passage of time. It operates as a window into the time Mark spent in Vietnam, as evoked in the slide projections; as a reflection of the characters at the moment they were interviewed; as a representation of what the author felt and thought when the play was written; and as a work to be interpreted and defined in the context of the times in which it is performed.

Structures Within *Still Life*

Just as in television dramas, Mann's play provides us with a cast of standard characters: the veteran shattered by the war, the abused wife, and the adoring mistress.

⁴⁴ Herbert Lindenberg, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 10.

At the same time that Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine are portrayed as real and specific people, they can be seen as stock characters affected by the war and by violence in American culture. *Still Life* provides the audience with a classic romantic triangle, acted in the realistic style identified with the portrayal of history on television and in films, making the story familiar and understandable.

Perhaps one of the structures most immediately obvious within *Still Life* is that of Mark flanked on one side by his good nature, Nadine, and on the other by his bad nature, Cheryl. Cheryl warns us not to ignore Mark's evil side and Nadine urges us to admire his honesty and remorse. While the two women obviously have internal personalities, they are also presented as reflections of how Mark is capable of acting at different times toward different people. This triangle has shifting angles as Cheryl's arguments are much more graphic and shocking, while Nadine speaks to the audience for longer periods of time and is in general the more articulate of the two. While Cheryl's observations are based on a deeper and larger relationship with Mark, she is numb and frozen in her affect. Nadine's presentation is dynamic and passionate, though obviously full of infatuation and based on a short acquaintance. Thus Mann has created a constantly changing balance between these two women, leaving the audience to decide for itself which one delivers the more compelling portrait of "reality."

Nothing actually happens during the play; the characters remain onstage, relaying their memories to the audience for the entire ninety minutes. Only Mark exits and enters several times in anger or frustration with the audience or himself. There is no moment of revelation in which the wife finds out about the mistress (Cheryl knows that Mark has other women and she doesn't care) or when the mistress realizes her sisterhood with the

wife. In other words, the characters do not change or grow. The forward dramatic motion in this three-character counterpoint is found in the slides and the intensifying nature of the images projected on the screen, the changing rhythms of the speaking voices, the degree of pain in the words being spoken, and the ways in which each speech connects or contrasts with the speech preceding or following. J.W. Fenn observes that the play

relies on a "stream of consciousness" motif based on the reminiscences and observations of the characters. Typical of such an informing structure, the dramatic development tends not to be linear, but evolves from a montage of images and impressions. Rather than exploiting the drama inherent in face-to-face dialogue, with the associated interplay of stimulus/response and linguistic one-upmanship, the work relies instead on presentational statements, which create a multifaceted picture of the past and present lives of the characters.⁴⁵

This approach encourages the audience to view the play not so much as an exploration of the individuals and relationships onstage, but more as a presentation during which they remain the passive receptors of undocumented data. In fact, the audience can know the characters only by what they say. The audience never witnesses an actual interaction between the characters through which an independent and active evaluation of who these people really are might be made.

The photographs move the action backward and forward in time. John Berger's observation that the nature and purpose of photography is to inspire viewers' memories, which do not have a linear structure, is particularly relevant to the use of projected images in *Still Life*:

There is never a single approach to something remembered. The remembered is not like a terminus at the end of a line. Numerous approaches or stimuli converge upon it and lead up to it. Words, comparisons, signs need to create a context for a printed photograph in

⁴⁵ Fenn, *Levitating the Pentagon*, 222-223.

a comparable way; that is to say, they must mark and leave open diverse approaches. A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.⁴⁶

This non-linear structure is one particularly well suited to providing an emotionally moving experience for the audience, but not suited toward providing a firm intellectual response upon which an opinion regarding the information can be based.

During an interview I conducted with Mary McDonnell, the actress who created the role of Cheryl in the Goodman Theatre production of *Still Life*, she explained that for her the structure of the play, not readily discernible, became evident through the unfolding interplay of the characters. It was, she said,

an invisible structure because it was about the truth unfolding and revealing itself. What was so exciting about it was that its structure evolved out of being able to commit more deeply to the presence of what you have been saying. And out of that the plot came—the story.⁴⁷

For McDonnell, the play is more a description of the intersection of a moment in the lives of these three people than a story about them.⁴⁸ This experiential observation runs parallel to Berger's comments and J.W. Fenn's evaluation of the play as having a stream-of-consciousness "motif." Gary Dawson agrees with Berger and Fenn, suggesting that the play proceeds with a circular linearity through which the audience is taken on a 360-degree voyage around the subject, seeing it from almost every angle, at one moment in time.⁴⁹ In film and television documentary, a subject is examined in much the same way. Without a story line independent of the details describing the subject, the dramatic tension lies in the emotions revealed in that moment.

⁴⁶ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Press, 1980), 66-67.

⁴⁷ Mary McDonnell, interview by author, telephone, 8 December 2000, 12.

⁴⁸ Mary McDonnell, interview by author, 3.

⁴⁹ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 113.

Dawson also articulates the clear connection and cross-referencing of structural elements in stage and film documentaries, using Mann's work as his touchstone:

The relationship of the documentary play to the documentary film is one that needs to be established early in this analysis. It is made clear by director and distinguished documentary playwright Emily Mann. When people ask her to explain the form of documentary theatre she practices, she responds: 'I usually ask them if they have seen any documentary films. Almost everyone has. I say, well that's what I do.'⁵⁰

John Carlos Rowe concurs with Dawson's views on stage documentary, adding that the images represented in a film documentary follow the narrative and therefore determine the structure of the entire piece.

Indeed, it is the substitution of narrative analysis for any notion of narrative action or development that seems to distinguish the documentary from other forms of cinematic or novelistic representation. It is an *effect*, however, that is achieved by means of complicated style and by formal manipulation that goes well beyond mere selection of materials for the delivery of a simple message.⁵¹

This is exactly the structure followed by Mann in *Still Life*, a structure in which the photo images define the narrative and forward motion of the story.

According to pioneer documentary filmmaker John Grierson, the construction of a good documentary depends on the organizing principles and opinions of the filmmaker. Indeed, Grierson rightfully points out that the true value of a film documentary lies in the ability of the director to arrange and edit the material with an informed intelligence: "You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it."⁵² Grierson describes three primary methods employed by the director/editor to create specific types of documentary films: "These three methods may

⁵⁰ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 5.

⁵¹ Rowe, "Eyewitness," *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, 155.

⁵² John Grierson, ed. Forsyth Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1947), 103.

all appear in one film, but their proportions depend naturally on the character of the director—and his private hopes of salvation.”⁵³ They are: “(a) a musical or nonliterary method; (b) a dramatic method with clashing forces; and (c) a poetic, contemplative, and altogether literary method.”⁵⁴

Mann makes use of all three methods in *Still Life*, with emphasis on the poetic, contemplative, and literary approach:

(a) To translate her documents into an aesthetically and artistically pleasing experience for the audience, Mann orchestrates the voices of the characters into a verbal musical interlude. Here Mann employs what Grierson defines as the musical, nonliterary method, providing a visceral and enjoyable experience for the audience.

(b) To build the momentum required to create dramatic tension, Mann juxtaposes the clashing and disturbing information contained within each character’s presentation, building the verbal clashes to a climax. The sparks keep the audience involved and alert to finding their own sense of truth in the material. This dramatic dissonance demonstrates Mann’s use of Grierson’s dramatic clashing-forces method.

(c) To engage the audience through the use of poetry and metaphor Mann has layered metaphor upon metaphor as the very structure of the play. The title of the play is itself a metaphor. Dawson elaborates on the possible levels of meaning: “Still alive, almost alive, an illustration, realism with a documented moment, a life still.”⁵⁵ Michael L. Counts suggests in “The Twentieth-Century American Homecoming Play” that “The

⁵³ Grierson, ed. Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary*, 110.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, 271.

title *Still Life* . . . can also mean that the photographs still have life.”⁵⁶ As I will describe later in greater detail, the levels of metaphor draw the audience in and invite them to project larger or deeper meanings onto the words being spoken. Grierson’s third method of engaging the audience, the contemplative and literary approach, is thus clearly used by Mann.

Thomas M. Croak in his 1977 study, “Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century: The Neglected Resource in Historical Study,” identifies three categories of documentary play and offers a template for determining into which category a documentary play fits.⁵⁷ The categories are the tribunal, in which the audience is put in the position of having to sit in judgment over a situation of current concern and debate; the tragic, in which the play attempts to make a generalized comment on society based on a specific current dilemma; and the problem play, through which the playwright suggests social reform by presenting the facts, but in an emotional and sometimes sentimental way. A play can satisfy the definition of one or all of the categories. As do all of Mann’s documentaries, *Still Life* displays characteristics of all three. I will use Croak’s categories to examine the components of *Still Life* and then compare their use and purpose to that of similar structural components of made-for-television history and documentary films.

Perhaps the structure most immediately evident in *Still Life* is that of a trial, with the audience sitting in judgment on the characters. Mann’s play is not set in a courtroom in the traditional sense, but as Melissa Salz explains, “In *Still Life* the audience is not

⁵⁶ Michael L. Counts, “The Twentieth-Century American Homecoming Play” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1983), 193.

⁵⁷ Thomas Croak, “Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century: The Neglected Resource in Historical Study” (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie-Mellon University, 1977), 215.

really a visitor, but rather, serves as an unofficial jury. In a sense, the characters are metaphorically on trial, asking to be judged.”⁵⁸ In the tribunal documentary, according to Croak, the “actual recorded history is transcribed directly. The factual investigation assumes a high degree of thematic importance and so the veracity of the documents is crucial to the total effect.”⁵⁹ Certainly one of Mann’s greatest concerns has been to assure her audience of the care with which she adheres to transcripts and maintains the veracity of her characters’ words. Croak continues, “Characters in the tribunal form become cases. Public figures almost inevitably assume representative symbolic significance. Within the tribunal form playwrights sometimes stress personal-factual juxtaposition.”⁶⁰ In *Still Life* Mark, Cheryl, and Nadine, though very specific and particular people, come to represent all the men and women plagued by violence, if not society itself. Mann’s portrait of these characters transforms their particularity as case studies into a metaphor for the United States. Mark’s sense of being above the law parallels the government’s circumventing U.S. law by waging a war undeclared by Congress. Mark becomes the embodiment of the brutality of the U.S. military toward the Vietnamese by bringing the war home by beating his wife. The violence of the war abroad is paralleled and mirrored in the violence in American homes and on its streets. Cheryl is the “soldier” conscripted for the war between the sexes, unable to dodge the draft or desert her position. Nadine’s relationship with Mark mirrors alliances made by the government, based on exploitation (Mark exploits both Cheryl and Nadine), justified and forgiven by the money and aid supplied. But whether seen as particular or representative situations, the issues raised by the interactions of the characters are kept at

⁵⁸ Salz, “Theatre of Testimony,” 48.

⁵⁹ Croak, “Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century,” 246.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

an emotional distance from the audience. Is Mark still beating Cheryl? If he is, why hasn't Mann presented that as a more pressing issue? While Nadine's tolerance of the beating, past or present, can be seen as a personal blindness, why is the audience allowed to view the violence so blithely? *Still Life* presents these three characters and their problems as distant from the immediate concerns of the audience.

Mann edited the interviews, juxtaposing the characters' personal information with facts about the war. The slides are the documents with which Mark, and then Mann, shocks, alienates, and then captures the audience. For a moment, seeing the world through Mark's eyes, the audience can be repelled and then drawn in by sympathy for his suffering. Further, according to Croak, the tribunal documentary will employ "a new stylized aesthetic structure," such as Mann's use of the audience as the jury, judge, interviewer, and comrade of the characters onstage. Croak's final defining words on the tribunal documentary serve as a telling description of Mann's *Still Life*:

The subject of the drama is a public issue speaking directly to the real life concerns of the audience . . . struggling to understand the morality or lack of morality found in an Auschwitz or the tragedy of a Vietnam; the confusion of a society in which an individual's political beliefs or even his conscience converts him into a traitor and outcast from that society: These are the subject matter of tribunal documentaries of post-World War II.⁶¹

Viewers both identify with and judge the characters onstage, at the same time as they struggle with a confusion of conscience caused by the living issue of a devastating war.

The tragic documentary, the second of Croak's categories, closely resembles the nondocumentary, or history play. Just as in the tribunal, the tragic documentary usually centers on a subject of living relevance to the audience, and, through adhering to

⁶¹ Croak, "Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century," 247.

historical fact, will “make direct or indirect comments”⁶² on those facts. Mann sticks to the facts reported and with them fashions *Still Life* into a commentary on the violence and submission to violence prevalent in American culture. The poetic and musical stream-of-consciousness montage employed in *Still Life* demonstrates Mann’s desire to go beyond a strictly utilitarian dramatic structure that presents the facts as reported. She chose a freer form of cutting and splicing in which she could indicate her feelings about the interviews and the subjects’ feelings as well. These choices fit Croak’s observation that, “Despite the documentary foundation, these works are aesthetically conceived—the resolution of the drama occurs through stage character within the closed context of the play.”⁶³ Mark’s confession, the resolution of his personal conflict, is the resolution of the drama.

Croak points to the tragic documentary as character-driven and the most emotional of the categories. McDonnell seems to endorse a similar view when she describes how she felt while playing Cheryl: “It was very painful to play her, and Emily is brilliant at this as the director—in helping you through the painful arteries, so that you’re really fluid in them and you’re not frightened of them.”⁶⁴ Observing lifelike and emotional characters onstage, the audience can easily forget that the words in *Still Life* are historical documents. In addition, the metaphorical nature of the play allows Mann and the audience to draw conclusions about American culture, war and the relationship between the sexes, based on the material presented, though not dependent on the specific situation:

The documentary tragedy uses documents in an unobtrusive and integrated manner, incorporating them into the body of the play. The playwright in the documentary tragedy seeks to make a non-historical

⁶² Croak, “Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century,” 215.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Mary McDonnell, interview by author, 11.

statement about reality, which does not depend on the corroboration of the documents offered. The history is dramatized directly, but real events provide the convincing context in which the playwright seeks to demonstrate a timeless idea.⁶⁵

The timeless idea within *Still Life* is, of course, Mark's comment, "War kills people."

The goals of Croak's third category of plays, the problem documentary, closely parallel Mann's aim in *Still Life*, to prove to those who believed in the war that it had a negative underside:

The dramatic goals of the problem play are reformist not revolutionary. The dramatic focus wavers from an openly sentimental portrayal of the suffering of the underprivileged to the more or less militant presentation of facts and statistics in the pursuit of reform.⁶⁶

Mann wanted to raise the consciousness of the audience, to offer an understanding of the effects of the war and a sympathy for those who have suffered, not to move the audience to rise up against a government that had already ended the war. Mann's aim is aligned with Dawson's contention that American documentaries, in contrast with European ones, are geared toward inspiring reform rather than revolution.

The playwright uses Mark's slides to present the hard and often disturbing facts about wartime service. But these upsetting photographs purport to be authentic documents when they are not. The entire play is a document created by Mann of her experiences interviewing the characters; the photographs are manufactured document used to represent images of Mark's service in Vietnam; the words of each character documents their own responses to events and each other, but they conflict and remain unverifiable. The point made by the whole is that war is brutal and that the violence of war parallels the violence between men and women. But *Still Life* does not present

⁶⁵ Croak, "Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century," 215-216.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 224.

factual information about the national or international causes, nor about the residue of the war. According to Croak's definition, *Still Life* qualifies as a problem play because it employs the document "more obtrusively than in the tragedy," and yet "no systematic vision of history is presented."⁶⁷

The qualities of the tribunal, tragic, and problem documentary play that can be used to describe Mann's play can equally describe television documentary. In her book *The Movie of the Week*, Elayne Rapping describes *Days of Hope*, a television documentary detailing the murder of a Chinese-American in a Detroit bar by a newly laid-off auto industry executive. Like *Still Life*, the film is structured as a series of candid interviews in which the interviewer is sensed but never seen. Presenting many different and often conflicting portraits of the events and characters, the film engages viewers by making them the judge and jury of the people involved in the action. While adhering closely to the facts and abandoning slick television formats in order to convey a rough-hewn honesty, the film maintains a point of view and encourages the audience to point to the "system" as the major villain. Rapping says, "The viewer knows full well, by tape's end, what has happened, and why and what to feel about it—outrage."⁶⁸

Through the use of a "mosaic of elements," Rapping observes that *Days of Hope* keeps the audience too distanced from the events to be able to consider the problems being presented: the failing economy, racism, ignorance, the clash of cultures. Although the audience feels outrage at the end, the problems of the culture remain, and the passage toward solution is unknown. The tragedy of the young man's death is underscored by the onscreen words of the victim's mother, who cannot understand the culture that caused her

⁶⁷ Croak, "Documentary Drama in the Twentieth Century," 224.

⁶⁸ Elayne Rapping, *The Movie of the Week: Private Stories, Public Events* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 126.

son's death. *Days of Hope* can easily be seen as a tribunal, tragic, and problem documentary, employing the same devices as *Still Life* to achieve similar goals with the audience. Rapping concludes that despite its moving and effectively employed devices, she considers the film powerless to change the views of the audience, simply because such films usually "attract audiences who already agree with its premise and in many cases already understand the more subtle political issues raised. People who do not fit this category rarely seek out films like this."⁶⁹ This observation can be made, perhaps more strongly, about documentary theatre, a medium for which the audience actually has to buy a ticket and go to the playhouse.

From *Still Life* to *Execution of Justice*

In the golden age of Greek drama, plays about history were few, *The Persians* being the only one to survive into modern times. The Greeks had little use for history plays; factual details were too specific and therefore without the eternal and/or universal significance of classically structured tragedy. It is, however, clear that in today's world of ubiquitous factual representation, contemporary documentary playwrights are fashioning plays that attempt to convey sweeping and broad, if not eternal, comments about society, using historical details. In *Still Life* Mann's larger message is that war kills people, any war.

In her third play, *Execution of Justice*, Mann concerns herself with the inevitable mistakes of a ponderous legal system burdened by prejudice and hardened against minorities. *Execution* is, more than *Still Life*, a particular case study of a singular event. While the miscarriage of justice described in the play could represent many other similar

⁶⁹ Rapping, *The Movie of the Week*, 129.

circumstances, *Execution* does focus consciously and clearly on the trial of Dan White for the murder of George Moscone and Harvey Milk.

Emily Mann has been dedicated to the documentary as a playwright and as a director. She has directed four of her plays but not the fifth, *Greensboro: A Requiem*, and consequently she observes, "That's why I'm not sure the piece is finished. I'm quite sure it's not finished. I feel like I haven't got my hands on it the right way."⁷⁰ It seems that for Mann the structure of her plays is inextricably bound not only to their content, but to their ultimate staging as well. Without that final degree of symbiosis, the formation of the structure seems incomplete. In the next chapter, on *Execution of Justice*, I will focus on how her role as director serves her Mann's as playwright.

⁷⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 297.

Chapter III

Directing the Play: *Execution of Justice*

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine Mann's development as a director, and consider how directing her own plays, in this case *Execution of Justice*, informs her work as a playwright. I will also examine the ways in which Mann has employed television within the play and onstage: as a conduit for information, as a means of manipulating audience response, and as a tool for validating the play's viewpoint. The substantial use, by Mann, of electronic modes of communication in *Execution of Justice* demonstrates how television is used to mold public perception of news events and how integral to an event television has become in the minds of the public.

In addition to discussing the trends in directing and the directors who have most influenced Mann's work, I shall include observations on her working methods by various artists who participated in the development of *Execution*: Oskar Eustis, the dramaturg at the Eureka Theatre who, with artistic director Anthony Taccone, commissioned the play and directed the premiere, and Mary McDonnell, the actress who created the role of Mary Ann White. Having worked with Mann at The New Theatre of Brooklyn (TNT) in 1988, when she directed the New York premiere of her first play, *Annulla: An Autobiography*, I have been able to observe Mann's rehearsal process and her approach to preparing her own plays for performance.

Gary Fisher Dawson suggests, "In documentary theatre the prevalence of the performance text over the dramatic text has been established."¹ I will describe the ways in which *Execution of Justice* evolved through its seven regional productions, including one at the Guthrie directed by Mann, culminating in an eighth production, on Broadway, in 1986, also directed by Mann. It is this eighth production on which the printed version of the play is based, incorporating the stage directions and notes into the text of the drama.

Mann recognizes that her roles as playwright and director are closely connected.² By tracing *Execution*'s trajectory toward Broadway, it is possible to see that her writing and, perhaps more profoundly, her directing have also been influenced by colleagues, media images, and critical response.

Production History of *Execution of Justice*

During my interviews with Mann she described her first knowledge of the events on which *Execution of Justice* is based. One day during her tenure as resident director at the Guthrie Theatre, Mann came home to find her landlords, a gay couple, weeping on the porch.³ They told her about the murder of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk by former City Supervisor Dan White. Milk had gained national exposure as America's first "out-of-the-closet" homosexual politician. To many, the elections of Milk and Moscone represented a new era of tolerance long hoped for in

¹ Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 32.

² Jan Breslauer and Susan Mason, interviewers, "Ten Directors in Search of a Theater, Emily Mann: Interview," *Theater* 15. 2 (Spring 1984): 27-32.

³ Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 October 1999, 11.

liberal communities across the country. Witnessing her landlords' emotional response was Mann's first exposure to the ripple effects of the murders.⁴

Mann met Oskar Eustis and Anthony Taccone⁵ when they invited her to attend the Eureka Theatre's production of her play *Still Life* in 1983. According to Eustis,

Emily visited us during the production and we fell in love with each other. On the spot, we suggested that Emily write a new play for us, something that would be based on our city, something for our actors. Within minutes the conversation centered on the most traumatic event in San Francisco's recent history.⁶

Mann has noted that her plays are similar in that they all focus on the ways in which people deal with trauma and violence. In fact, Mann has commented that all of her work is, in essence, the continuous rewriting of one play.⁷

Mann, Eustis, and Taccone pored over books, news clippings, films, and news reports while also interviewing individuals directly or indirectly involved in the actual events, compiling a pool of information from which the play could be constructed. According to Eustis, he, Mann, and Taccone, interviewed more than one hundred people for the play, resulting in hundreds of hours of transcript to be reviewed, edited, and arranged.⁸ *Execution of Justice* took three years of collaborative effort to reach its final form in the production that moved to Broadway. The first draft ran to six hours of stage dialogue. Mann was able to bring the play to a running time of three hours with extensive cutting, shaping, and rearranging, while working with Eustis and Taccone, as

⁴ Emily Mann, interview by author, 19 October 1999, 11.

⁵ Eustis was at that time dramaturg at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco. He is currently artistic director of Center Stage in Baltimore. Anthony Taccone was at that time and remains the artistic director of the Eureka Theatre.

⁶ Oskar Eustis, "Dear Friends," *Trinity Reporter: Trinity Repertory Company Newsletter*, January 2000, 1.

⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, Princeton, N. J., transcript, 26 April 1994.

⁸ Oskar Eustis, interview by author, telephone, 20 October 2000, 1.

well as a number of the actors in the original company.⁹ Eustis outlines some of the goals and challenges of this refining process:

The whole problem with the trial is that the trial did not encompass what actually happened . . . We were trying to examine the nature of the justice system and the nature of justice being executed in this case . . . So what the uncalled witnesses were there to do, in a sense, was to beat the drum and to remind us all of precisely what was lost by focusing so exclusively on Dan White's point of view.¹⁰

To counterbalance the focus on Dan White, Mann placed the "uncalled witnesses," who spoke about their fears, prejudices, and anger, in direct confrontation with the audience.

In addition to supplying the testimony of many individuals involved or moved by the tragedy, Mann also aimed to combat the images of the trial as they had been portrayed on television. In her effort to comment on and reinterpret the television treatment of the material, as well as reflect on the broader implications of the event, Mann employed techniques developed by Erwin Piscator:

I was reading Piscator, you know, and saying, "Oh God, well that's the kind of theatre we are going to do it in," in fact, [that's what] I thought about while writing *Execution* . . . I would think, given all of the near facts on television, they have got stranger than fiction kinds of stories . . . all blurred on TV. You would think that a pure form of it on stage would be kind of refreshing and obvious . . . [providing] an easy leap for the public to take.¹¹

The panoramic variety of characters addressing the audience directly, the use of newscaster announcements, the overhead projection of film clips and headlines, and the swift progression of episodic scenes, all employed by Mann in *Execution*, are directly derived from Piscator's form of epic documentary theatre.

⁹ Jim O'Quinn, " 'Execution of Justice' Documents a City's Nightmare," *American Theatre* 6.1 (January 1984): 1-3.

¹⁰ Oskar Eustis, interview by author, telephone, 20 October 2000, 2-3.

¹¹ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, 26 April 1994, unpublished.

While the text of *Execution of Justice* lists forty-four characters, Mann notes in her stage directions that it can be performed by seventeen to twenty-three actors, each assuming one, two, or three parts. Mann decided to let Eustis and Taccone direct the premiere “because it [was] just so big. I [knew] I [had] to be just the writer on it.”¹²

For the premiere of *Execution*, at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville (March 1984), the play was staged, “in an all-black setting,” with screens on both sides for the projections of photo images of the actual people and events as well as the act and scene titles. Choreographing the large cast and organizing the text proved to be the greatest challenges. In the *New York Times* Mel Gussow wrote of the production, “With clarification, and a more disciplined production, this could be a play of consequence as well as one of conviction.”¹³ This same review mentions that the play’s lack of any direct representation of Mayor Moscone and very little of Supervisor Milk made the victims faceless, distant, and harder to sympathize with than the character of Dan White, who suffers onstage throughout the drama. Mann was to address both of these criticisms in later productions by adding video clips of both Moscone and Milk speaking at public events.¹⁴

For the next production, at Center Stage in Baltimore (December 1984), directed by the artistic director of that theatre, Stan Wojewodski, the play was observed by the *Sun*, a Baltimore newspaper, as “shorter and tighter than the earlier version [at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville], rendering its impact all the more powerful.”¹⁵ The *Sun*

¹² Emily Mann, Breslauer and Mason, “Ten Directors in Search of a Theater, Emily Mann: Interview,” 32.

¹³ Mel Gussow, “9 New Plays at Louisville Festival,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1984, C21.

¹⁴ These filmed segments were taken from Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen’s documentary, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*.

¹⁵ J. Wynn Rousuck, “Center Stage Playwrights 85 mounts a brilliant ‘Execution of Justice’,” *Baltimore Sun*, 21 December 1984, 1B.

also describes the stage design for this production as naturalistic, with a recognizable courtroom set in front of a Mylar backdrop, “making the audience not only jurors, but placing them—or at least their reflections—on stage as defendants and witnesses as well.”¹⁶

The *News American*¹⁷ commented that the Center Stage production employed a sparing number of sound effects; the *Towson Times*, however, emphasized the degree to which the play employed the techniques of the media:

Mann refers to her play as a “theatre of testimony,” but it might also be called a “theatre of television,” because the play borrows TV techniques to attain an impression of on-the-spot reportage and veracity. That effect is built on the same kinds of breathless “live instant-eye newswatch” reporting that convinces us we are seeing the real thing when we watch the six o’clock TV news.¹⁸

This comment, made by reviewer Elsa Solender, is particularly telling in that it came before newsreel footage was inserted into the play. Mann, in other words, had been able to simulate a television-like quality onstage without the use of television footage.

The degree to which the play text employed the techniques associated with the electronic media, as manifest in the play’s technical complexity, increased from production to production. In the Arena Stage production (May 1985), directed by its artistic director Douglas Wager, the “newswatch” quality within the play became a vivid focal point:

Its Arena Stage incarnation [was] the first to use the film clips of the actual events . . . to project not only documentary footage on the large white cube above the Arena Stage, but close-ups of moments of the live stage action. This closed-circuit hookup hovering above the action permits us to see events from one visual perspective on the stage and

¹⁶ J. Wynn Rousuck, “Center Stage Playwrights 85,” *Sun*, 1B.

¹⁷ Scott Fosdick, “New Series Takes Off With Vibrant ‘Execution’,” 21 December 1984, 5C.

¹⁸ Elsa Solender, “Footlights: Searing Controversy,” *Baltimore Towson Times*, 19 December 1984.

another on the screen, becoming a powerful metaphor for the American social confusion to which this play so eloquently attests.¹⁹

The *Washington Post* lauded Wager for his application of technology to the production, thus enhancing the play's critique of the media's effect on the actual event: "With this production, the age of video penetrates the sanctum of live theatre. In the dazzling direction of Douglas Wager, the technology becomes an organic part of the drama, reflecting the media-fueled controversies and emotions surrounding the case."²⁰ Ming Cho Lee designed the highly stylized set for Wager's production.

While the first version of the play has been described by Mann as a "howl of pain," it was during the Arena production that Mann's view of the Dan White verdict changed.²¹

At one point, I bought the radical line of the gay community—that Harvey Milk was killed because he was gay, a martyr to the cause . . . I don't believe that anymore. And I used to think that the jury was the key to the trial—that this conservative Catholic, working-class old San Francisco jury would be naturally sympathetic to Dan White, the native son, and take his side . . . Now I don't believe that's what was going on at all. The law was confusing. Dan's [tape-recorded] confession was played in the courtroom and all that raw emotion coming at the jurors was confusing.²²

Mann was surprised to discover that the audience felt sympathy for Dan White after witnessing his testimony onstage and she rewrote sections of the play to counter that response.²³ The fact that Mann could not tell how sympathetic White's testimony would be highlights that an emotional response to information can seriously affect perception. Later on Mann saw that White was a sad, confused, and emotionally unstable individual,

¹⁹ Elinor Fuchs, *Village Voice*, 11 June 1985, 61.

²⁰ Joe Brown, "Injustice and 'Justice' For All," *Washington Post*, 17 May 1985.

²¹ Rachel Shteir, "'I Became an Optimist': An Interview with Emily Mann," *Theater* 12.1 (Fall/Winter 1990-91): 20-26.

²² David Richards, "'Justice' for All," *Washington Post*, 5 May 1985, B1.

²³ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray," (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1989), 215.

as clearly demonstrated in his crime, testimony, and suicide. The miscarriage of justice focused on in the early version of the play was White's unusually light sentence for a double homicide, due, Mann thought, to the right-wing bias of the jury against the sexual preferences and liberal stances of the victims. Over time, the miscarriage of justice was targeted to be broader, and reinterpreted the system's break-down to include the neglect of White's psychological state, through an incorrect judicial diagnosis that led to his death.

Mann continued to fine-tune the play to reflect her increasing appreciation of the situation's complexity. Gary Dawson notes that her attempt to present all sides caused more problems than it solved:

The theatrical device of compressing lengthy testimony allows for expediency and heightened action. However, this treatment can also work against itself, as some believe. Mann combined collision montage, compressed testimony, and simultaneous staging, which appeared to confuse rather than explicate.²⁴

A similar sentiment was expressed by Steve Cassal, a critic reviewing the Berkeley Repertory production of June 1985: "One experiences the same confusion the original jurors must have felt."²⁵ Robert Hurwitt, at the *Berkeley Express*, pointed out that more factual information might have improved the scope of the play, comparing it with two dramas on the same subject produced in the Bay Area that had examined the forces that led to the crime and the mismanaged trial: Steve Dobbins' *The Dan White Incident* (at the Fort Mason Center in March 1983) and A.K. Bierman's *Oh Danny Boy* (at the Julian Theatre in December 1983). The *Express* notes that Mann's play does not "get out of the courtroom," whereas "Dobbins chose to focus on the political climate that produced the

²⁴ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 117.

²⁵ Steve Cassal, "'Execution of Justice' Helps Us to Better Understand the Dan White Case," Berkeley, Cal., July 1985, Lincoln Center Library, *Execution of Justice* Clippings File.

murders and the indefensible verdict rather than stick so closely to what transpired in court.” This same review emphasized the influence the directors, Taccone and Eustis, had on shaping the play and underscoring its emotional rather than informational focus.²⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* described the Berkeley production as “a good TV documentary.”²⁷

Mann incorporated into *Execution*’s text many of the design and stage directions she felt, in earlier productions, had strengthened and focused the play before it moved on to the Guthrie in Minneapolis (October 1985) and almost simultaneously to the Alley Theatre in Houston (November 1985). At the Alley, *Execution* was directed by Pat Brown, then artistic director; and at the Guthrie, Emily Mann directed her play for the first time. It was during the runs of these two productions that Dan White committed suicide. Mann and Brown conferred immediately and incorporated the new information into the script and performances:

A TV-style journalist announces White’s death by apparent suicide with a projected dateline. An image of White is also projected at the end of the play along with the images of the slain mayor and city supervisor. These changes were made almost immediately to the play.²⁸

Mann thus includes White as one of the casualties of the miscarriage of justice, by adding his photo to those of Moscone and Milk at the ending of the play. Upon hearing of White’s suicide, Mann told a Minneapolis newspaper, “No one benefits from injustice—not the victims, not the victimizers, not society.”²⁹

²⁶ Robert Hurwitt, “Oh Danny Boy,” *Berkeley Express*, 14 June 1985.

²⁷ Dan Sullivan, “White Case Re-enacted in ‘Justice’,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1985, Part VI, 1.

²⁸ “‘Execution of Justice’ Notes Suicide of White,” *Variety*, 5 November 1985, 96.

²⁹ Mike Steele, “White Suicide Meant Fast Revision of Guthrie Play,” *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 23 October 1985, 1A.

By the time of his release from prison Dan White had become a pariah in his community. Regional theatres producing, in close sequence, plays investigating the nature of his crimes contributed to an atmosphere of political and emotional polarization and inescapable judgments. The humiliation of losing his position on the City Council had triggered the earlier homicides. Five years later, plays on the subject and continuing news coverage reported and at the same time became a part of the Dan White story.

At the Guthrie, Mann worked with set designer Ming Cho Lee, who re-created the abstract set he had originally designed for the Arena Stage production. Mann used film clips of the actual event in tandem with video clips of the live performance, a device also employed by Wager at the Arena. The reflection of the audience in a Mylar backdrop, used by Wojewodski at Center Stage, was transformed by Mann and Lee into bleachers onstage where audience members could sit. The naturalistic set of Wojewodski's Center Stage production was echoed with a realistic representation of the exterior of the courthouse extending into the audience. And the filmed sequences of Moscone and Milk, called for by critics in a number of cities, were added to provide, within the drama, a more personal connection to the victims for the audience. The *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* reported:

The stage in Ming Cho Lee's evocative, abstract setting is done in a shimmering, plasticized blue with a blood red square in the center, which serves as a witness box. Bleachers have been set up across the back of the stage turning the Guthrie stage into an arena. Looming over the bleachers is the heavy, stone façade of the Hall of Justice.

Above the stage is a white cube on which will be seen films and tapes of actual events, beginning with (now Mayor) Dianne Feinstein's dramatic announcement of the murders and arrest of Dan White. Through the play, clips of Moscone and Milk in interviews or parading triumphantly through the streets are shown along with dramatic pictures of the gay protest march and eventual riots.

Most effective, however, is the use of live video. Cameras have been set up both on stage and backstage and at key times portable video cameras are pushed intrusively into the faces of actors playing principal parts and immediately flashed up to the screen. The effect is extraordinary, at once a transformation of scale, a heightening of importance and spontaneity, a pinpoint shift in focus that tears a character from context and pushes him, larger than life, into the isolation of the screen and metaphorical as private thoughts and emotions are violated and made hugely public and the video image confusingly takes over from the real person.³⁰

Mike Steele, in his review quoted above, puts special emphasis on the impact made by the simultaneous video projections of the actual event and the dramatized event onstage. The production at the Guthrie was described by Steele as riveting: "This is Bertolt Brecht taken into the electronic age and it's very powerful. And like Brecht, Mann can't subjugate her own political feelings to documentary objectivity."³¹ Recognizing the clear influences of Brecht and Piscator, Steele also makes the point that Mann had transformed the play into a discussion of the nature and effects of technology on perception, as much as it was an examination of a miscarriage of justice.

Mann's production was slated to move into the Virginia Theatre on Broadway in March 1986. Recognizing the difference between "being the director of a work brought to the stage for the first time, and one produced before,"³² Mann gave great credit in her Broadway *Playbill* to the directors who helped shape her play and who contributed to the technical elements ultimately employed in her production.³³

The restaging of the Guthrie production of *Execution of Justice* on Broadway ran for twelve performances, receiving five positive, three mixed, and twelve negative

³⁰ Mike Steele, "Guthrie Play's Power Comes from History," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 10 October 1985, 1C-2C.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Esther Tolkoff, "Top Women Directors Interpreting Their Craft," *Backstage*, 16 April 1999.

³³ Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 136.

notices.³⁴ The producers were mystified at the failure of a play that had been produced successfully at seven major regional theatres across the country (the six discussed above, and a staging of the Berkeley Rep production by the San Jose Repertory in San Jose, California). But the time and place of the various productions significantly changed its impact.

Execution of Justice was commissioned and begun in 1983, five years after the actual event. The play premiered in 1984 and opened on Broadway in 1986, only eight years after Milk and Moscone were shot and one year after Dan White committed suicide. The play was re-staged, revised and re-contextualized for six of the seven productions before transferring to Broadway, making each of those productions a slightly different version of the play, tailored for that environment and moment. For the most substantial change in venue, the transfer of the play from an intimate regional theatre to a major Broadway house, and for the production most distant from the original event, there were no major changes made in the text, the setting or the staging. While Mann struggled at the last minute to make the Guthrie production work at the Virginia Theatre, her efforts were not successful enough.

Robert Massa, writing for the *Village Voice*, felt that Mann's stage action was pale in comparison with the play's simultaneous projection of actual news footage: "The quiet candlelight memorial march that stretched across San Francisco, so moving in the film, looks corny re-created in a theatre."³⁵ Massa continues, "There's a running satire in *Execution* on the banality of TV reporters, yet the play itself has the same pseudo-

³⁴ Richard Hummler, "Poor Notices Bounce 'Execution'; 'Precious Sons' Girds for Fight," *Variety*, 26 March 1986, 99.

³⁵ Robert Massa, "White Wash," *Village Voice*, 25 March 1986, 89.

objectivity: intercut, the two points of view cancel each other out.”³⁶ Susan Letzler Cole, who observed Mann in rehearsal for the Broadway show, adds that the production was undermined by the size of the auditorium: “Mann has told the company that she is working with the staff at the Virginia Theatre to preserve the intimate setting of the play in the large Broadway house. This attempt proves to be unsuccessful, and becomes one of the many paradoxes of this production . . . Finally, it is a ‘collective witnessing’ of a public event which plays best in an intimate setting.”³⁷

Mann’s production of *Execution* succeeded at the more intimate Guthrie, most probably because of the closeness of the audience to the action onstage. According to Dawson, photomontage, used extensively by Mann in this production, can be a method of drawing the audience into the action of a play:

Its purpose is to intensify the interpretive moment to the extent that a projected visual of actuality on stage becomes a telescopic sign. The result is that a projected image becomes a sign of a sign, and therefore, telescopes additional layers of meaning in an acting moment . . . The purpose of telescoping signs is to draw the spectator further into the play’s action.³⁸

However, in order for telescoping photomontage to succeed, the audience must be close enough to the stage to allow the actors to equal, or surpass, the impact produced by the close-ups on the video monitors hanging above the action. When the actors can compete successfully with the projections, the audience can focus on the stage reality and see the projections as an alternate source of commentary rather than the other way around.

Execution of Justice worked when the audience was able to see “close-ups” of the actors onstage, in a sense much like the close-ups or intimacy provided by a television screen

³⁶ Massa, “White Wash,” 89.

³⁷ Susan Letzler Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992), 71.

³⁸ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 48.

itself. But in a large theatre, neither the stage action nor the television monitor provided the audience with an intimate experience. For the same production to succeed in a small house and fail in a large one is a demonstration of the audience's need, cultivated by television viewing, to have an intimate view of the action.

Corollary to a need for intimacy is the effect that venue, and the self-selection of the audience population had on the play's success. The audience that attends a Broadway play is not necessarily the same audience that will attend a smaller theatre where they expect to see more political and less commercial productions. The latter group, the audience for the smaller theatres, would be more sympathetic and available to the message of *Execution of Justice* since they have chosen to attend a non-mainstream institution. As Marvin Carlson notes,

In every historical period and in every culture the physical matrices of the theatrical event—where it takes place within the community, what sort of structure houses it, and how that structure is organized and decorated—all contribute in important ways to the cultural processing of the event and must be taken into consideration by anyone seeking to gain an understanding of its dynamics.³⁹

The audiences who attended *Execution of Justice* on Broadway were perhaps less able to afford the play an additional portion of understanding given the highly commercial, as well as expansive, environment. In addition, Carlson's comments also speak to the question of whether a play such as *Execution*, which attempts to make a socially critical comment, can retain its effectiveness when placed in a socially and politically ratified institution, such as a Broadway theatre. While Mann was extremely excited about and focused on the success of *Execution* on Broadway, the play had been tooled and retooled for success in smaller non-commercial venues. This must have caused some confusion in

³⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 204–205.

how the play could be perceived in that, “only an audience member of very limited experience . . . [was] likely to be unaware that the framing of the theatre experience has become a calculated part of that experience.”⁴⁰ The framing of the theatre experience had been taken into account for *Execution* and that framing was not a Broadway theatre.

Another explanation for *Execution*’s failure on Broadway concerns the evolving nature of the play and of Mann’s goals for the play. During the two years it took to travel from its premiere at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville in March of 1984 to its Broadway opening in March of 1986 the play was interpreted by five directors, each of whom put increasing emphasis on the theatre technology they felt necessary to illustrate how technology warps journalism and justice. As these interpretations built one upon the last, the emphasis of the play was altered, making it as much about the nature and effects of technology as it was about the misuse of the American system of justice; when the importance of the play’s comments on the use of technology in forming opinions equaled the telling of the story, the play became too confusing for the audience to appreciate.

It is also useful to note that as time passed and the impact of the event became less immediate, the play lost potency. And when White could no longer be seen as a vigilante and became one of the victims the play lost a central motivation: to expose the homophobic, conservative, and incompetent control of the justice system by revealing the obvious guilt of Dan White. If the audience feels sympathy for White it is understandable that the jury would feel the same way and bring in a verdict accordingly. Without White as a villain the play is no longer about homophobic backlash; it is about the diffuse nature of bureaucratic bumbling.

⁴⁰ Carlson, *Places of Performance*, 207.

The Play

The court transcripts provided Mann with the testimony of Dan White, witnesses to the crimes, police, city officials, and the citizens of San Francisco. Mann based her play on the information gathered from these accounts. The following details are taken from the text of the play. On 27 November 1978, Dan White climbed through a side window of San Francisco's City Hall with a loaded revolver, walked into Mayor Moscone's office, and asked to speak with him. During this conversation, White fired two shots into Moscone's body and two more into his head after the mayor had fallen to the floor. Proceeding to his own office, White reloaded his gun, continued to Harvey Milk's office, and shot him. White ran from the building, phoned his wife at her job, and asked her to meet him at St. Mary's Church, where he confessed to her. Accompanied by his wife, White turned himself in at the police station where he had once served as an officer.

Dan White's trial began on 1 May 1979, and concluded on 21 May. Counsel Douglas Schmidt argued for the charges to be reduced from murder in the first degree to voluntary manslaughter, based on the "diminished capacity" defense. Schmidt maintained that White had been under enormous financial, personal and professional pressure when he resigned his post as city supervisor on 10 November and then requested reinstatement on 14 November. Because White had not been sleeping and had been eating a steady diet of junk food, Schmidt argued that White was not in control of himself when he committed the murders. The argument was later dubbed the "Twinkie defense."⁴¹ The defense further maintained that Mayor Moscone had told White that his re-appointment to the City Council was assured. White "snapped" when he learned that

⁴¹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 211.

this was not to be the case. Schmidt presented White as a solid citizen, an honest man—a former policeman and fireman, a father, and a husband—highlighting his sense of civic responsibility. White was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to seven years and eight months in prison.

There were riots in the city as liberal and gay citizens expressed their outrage at the light sentence. White was released from prison on 6 January 1984, after serving four and a half years. On 21 October 1985, he was found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage of his estranged wife's home in San Francisco.

The projected subtitle of Act I, "Murder," is followed by projected photo images of San Francisco, George Moscone, and Harvey Milk, and music. Actors crisscross the stage (creating the sense of urban crush), until they are interrupted by the now-famous television news footage of Dianne Feinstein, president of the Board of City Supervisors, officially confirming to the press and public the news of the assassination of Moscone and Milk. The actors stop, gasp, and cry in response to the shocking news.

Mann's strong directorial vision is included in the stage directions, which include sound effects, light effects, costume specifications, descriptions of moments like the crowd's reaction to the opening news footage, Mary Ann White's "crumbling" when she hears her husband confess to the shootings, and the "hyperrealistic sounds of mumbled Hail Marys; of high heels echoing, moving fast; of breathing hard, running."⁴² Mann integrates hyperrealism with a close-cutting collision montage to convey subjective emotion in much the manner described by Paget: "Although montage at its lowest level denies itself in order to construct realist narrative, collision montage can present an event

⁴² Mann, *Testimonies*, 152.

and an attitude to it simultaneously.”⁴³ Mann evokes the external and internal experience of a moment by mixing the real sounds of footsteps and the sound of heavy breathing, with its implicit tension. She juxtaposes the emotional devastation of Mary Ann White when she hears that her husband has killed two men with the responses of people on the street: an antigay cop who feels Dan White was justified and a drag queen in heavy makeup, spike heels, and a nun’s habit, who voices anger and desire for revenge against all that White represents. Thus Mann establishes the city’s polarization and forces the audience to consider the points of view of the gay and liberal populations and the conservative working class at virtually the same time. Mann paints a portrait of the turmoil outside the courtroom, and in so doing includes testimony not “on the record.”

Act I jumps forward to the selection of the jury that will try White for the murders. Assistant District Attorney Thomas F. Norman exercises only three of his twenty-seven vetoes of jurors, allowing a pro-White jury to be approved. Interspersed with the courtroom scenes are statements made to the audience by “people on the street,” a scene from White’s first confession in the police station, a television newscaster reporting on the events as they happen as if live on air, and friends of Moscone and Milk talking to the audience about the emotional effect the murders have had on their lives. The audience is treated as a jury to which all evidence is presented, especially that not encountered in the actual courtroom, such as photographs. The act ends at a midpoint created by Mann within the format of the trial. At the act break, the judge instructs the jury, and the audience, to refrain from discussing the trial and/or reading any material on the subject.

⁴³ Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 41.

The subtitle of Act II, "In Defense of Murder," is projected and followed by news footage of Moscone talking about his opposition to the death penalty and Milk describing his experience of being in politics and being gay.⁴⁴ The courtroom proceedings continue. The defense witnesses, guided by White's lawyer Douglas Schmidt, describe White's pitiful emotional condition while the prosecution, headed by Norman, attempts unsuccessfully to build a case against White, both arguments repeatedly interrupted by testimony from the "uncalled witnesses." Speaking directly to the audience from outside the action, Joseph Freitas, Jr., the district attorney at the time of the trial, tries to explain the decisions and mistakes he made that resulted in White's reduced sentence. The fact that Freitas was voted out of office after White's verdict and his public career ruined is projected above the action. From a future perspective, Freitas addresses the audience watching the trial in progress behind him onstage.

There are projected titles for scenes as well as acts (for example, "The Psychiatric Defense" title introduces the scene in which Schmidt builds the case for White's diminished capacity).⁴⁵ During this scene, testimony is heard from Mary Ann White, Dan White himself, the psychiatrists from both sides, and White's jail guards, with continued interruptions from "uncalled witnesses." The trial concludes, and after the summations but before the verdict, the television reporter announces Dan White's suicide, which took place six years later, on 21 October 1985. Then the verdict and White's sentence are read to the court. White speaks the last lines of the play, "I was

⁴⁴ Mann, *Testimonies*, 189. The footage of Milk and Moscone was taken by Mann from Epstein and Schmeichen's film *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

always just a lonely vote on the board. I was just trying to do a good job for the city.”⁴⁶

These directions follow his words:

*(Long pause. Audio: Hyperrealistic sounds of high heels on marble. Mumbled Hail Marys. Rustle of an embrace. Sister Boom Boom [the transvestite nun] enters. Taunts police. Police raise riot shields. Blackout. Screen: “Execution of Justice.” Gavel echoes.)*⁴⁷

White’s closing words echo the last lines of Mann’s previous play, *Still Life*, uttered by Vietnam veteran Mark, “I didn’t know what I was doing.”⁴⁸ Audiences for *Still Life* left the theatre with a feeling of compassion for Mark, the murderer, just as audiences felt sorry for White, an effect Mann initially felt she needed to counteract.

As mentioned earlier, Mann had decided against directing the premiere of *Execution* because of the play’s size and complexity. As playwright, Mann wanted to be available for the revisions and consultations necessary in preparing a difficult script for production. Until *Execution* was picked up by the Guthrie Theatre Mann kept her role as playwright her primary relationship to the play. After having lived with the play and polished it through seven productions Mann was ready to step away from the script as writer and approach it on her own as director.

Mann as Director

Mann aims at a collaborative rehearsal process in which actors, designers, technicians, and director work in synchrony to create an integrated production: “I find that theater is a great collaboration. You bring out the best in the designer, the writer, the

⁴⁶ Mann, *Testimonies*, 245.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 132.

actor, and you put that all together and make a living thing.”⁴⁹ Mann describes her approach to opening the rehearsal process:

I come up with something very simple. With *A Doll House* I simply said that I thought it was as much Torvald’s tragedy as it was Nora’s, as much the children’s, as much Doctor Rank’s. Christina and Krogstad were the hope. That was all we started with.⁵⁰

Mann’s flexibility, and her desire to inspire as well as guide her creative team, is an attitude shared by many of her colleagues, such as Zelda Fichandler and JoAnne Akalaitis.⁵¹

At TNT, where Mann directed Linda Hunt in *Annulla*, I was able to observe the collaborative nature of Mann’s directorial approach. Marjorie Kellogg and Diann Duthie, the set designers, and Jennifer Von Mayrhauser, the costume designer, were longtime colleagues of Mann who joined her at TNT despite the small compensations: “I have my own informal company, and we are like gypsies and we go where we can do our work together.”⁵² Mann and Hunt worked as equals to create the character, spending days simply discussing *Annulla* and the nature of the world in which she lived. They spent hours searching for the perfect brooch for her dress, the right pot in which to make the chicken soup, and the exact typewriter on which *Annulla* would work. Sometimes it was

⁴⁹ Emily Mann, interview by Breslauer and Mason, “Ten Directors in Search of a Theater,” 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Fichandler, the founding/artistic director of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., says: “The goal is to open up the universe further so the collaborators can make it specific in terms of their own special domains: light, sound, environment, behavior, and so on” (Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice* [New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988], 114). JoAnne Akalaitis, whose directing career grew out of her association with the uniquely collaborative theatre company Mabou Mines, observes: “The tech rehearsals should be a continuation of the community that, hopefully, was built during rehearsal. It’s important that the community include designers in a central way” (Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice*, 16). Fichandler describes how she begins the rehearsal process in this way: “I have only a few images when I go into rehearsal, key moments that have led to the particular design for the set. I know the climactic or most excavated moments and how they are visualized” (Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice*, 113). Akalaitis says, “To begin, I will say, ‘Let’s read the scene we’re going to rehearse.’ We read it and then I say, hopefully, ‘Does anyone have an idea?’ Sometimes—usually not. So I say, ‘Okay, let’s try and figure out how to do it.’” (Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice*, 8).

⁵² Emily Mann, interview by Breslauer and Mason, “Ten Directors,” 30.

difficult to tell who was directing and who was going to perform, as the two worked so equally on each detail. Even though Mann claims that she refines her writing until opening night, Oskar Eustis describes her as an ultimate director, even of her own work:

She is almost more a director than she is a playwright . . . She may be watching a rehearsal of her play, but the first place her mind goes to is how she would direct that scene. She's got a very, very strong director's consciousness, which is appropriate, because she's a terrific director.⁵³

Nevertheless, while directing the plays of others, Mann strives to be “invisible”—to serve the playwright rather than her own ego.⁵⁴ In working with Anna Deavere Smith, however, on Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles*, Mann remembers “constantly giving editorial advice, constantly giving ordering advice, constantly giving advice about how to construct the whole.”⁵⁵ While Smith's work as a playwright is often likened to Mann's, Mann herself is clear on their differences:

Anna works totally differently. She's a mimic . . . So though what I did [was] more directing Anna, [I] was helping her construct the piece. I gave her some acting notes, but basically she does her own stuff with the acting. I gave her staging . . . but within the stuff she has her own technique, she goes off in a room by herself and studies those tapes, listens to it by ear. She wants to have the exact same inflection. When I work with actors on documentary materials I do the opposite, I say throw away those tapes, I don't want that. But Anna, that's her signature. She and I are totally different.⁵⁶

Mann and Smith are often cited as the two major contemporary American proponents of the stage documentary. Mann postulates that the field of documentary or political playwriting is not more popular in contemporary American theatre because the two primary practitioners are women. Mann also recognizes the political nature inherent in

⁵³ Oskar Eustis, interview by author, 10 October 2000, 5.

⁵⁴ Amanda Somers, “Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work as a Playwright and Director” (B.A. thesis, Rutgers University, May 1997), 45.

⁵⁵ Somers, “Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work,” 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

all drama: "I like to direct Chekhov and Tennessee Williams and Ibsen. Now, is putting *Doll House* on the stage a political act? I don't know. For me it was an artistic choice, and I have a hard time separating those things. I don't separate those things, you see."⁵⁷

In addition to Chekhov, Williams, Smith, and Ibsen, Mann has directed works by Franz Xaver Kroetz, Harold Pinter, Federico Garcia Lorca, William Shakespeare, and Sam Shepard. In comparing her own directorial approach to Pinter's *Betrayal* with her approach to Ibsen's *A Doll House* Mann explains,

As emotional as *Betrayal* was, it's eventually so much about language, you see. It's a poem that you have to bring to life. So I'm always dealing on emotional terms with very precise language. In a way that's easier to have, that precision of language, because it controls and encapsulates the emotion so that there is a container for it. You can't really get sloppy. Whereas, if you're doing Ibsen, for example, it can get very sloppy . . . Look at the action in each of Ibsen's scenes, then you begin to find a way to illuminate the words and the subtext and what's really going on in the scene. And the action often does not have to do with the language.⁵⁸

In the same 1997 interview Mann says that she looks forward to working on a play by British playwright Caryl Churchill: "I still want to direct one of Caryl's plays, Caryl doesn't do straight ahead documentary. She does the same kind of research that I do and then she goes ahead and writes a fiction piece."⁵⁹

More recently, Mann muses on the new places her directing has taken her: "I would say I am at a crossroads as a director. I am beginning to think more physically, in terms of physical action. I had a great time with *Fool for Love* [by Sam Shepard] for that reason . . . I think I'm wanting to work less realistically at the moment."⁶⁰ The fact that

⁵⁷ Amanda Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work," 28.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰ Emily Mann, interview by author, 19 October 1999, 12.

Mann considers Churchill a great influence is in accord with her desire to move away from nonfictional subjects, as she was able to do while directing Shepard's play.⁶¹

The degree to which writing and directing mesh in Mann's approach to her theatre art is perhaps best illustrated in her unfinished relationship with her most recent documentary, *Greensboro: A Requiem*, the only one of her plays that she has not directed: "The director and I did not see eye to eye so I never felt I finished the piece."⁶² In another interview Mann concludes, "I'm quite sure it's not finished. I feel like I haven't got my hands on it the right way."⁶³ Without directing this play Mann could not feel that she had finished writing it.

In her effort not to impose herself upon the plays of other playwrights, to remain invisible to the audience, Mann has not necessarily employed her version of the Piscatorian/ Brechtian epic theatre beyond the direction of her own plays:

Nobody works the same way. You are all going for the same results but you can all get there differently. And that's gotten to be great fun for me . . . I don't force them [the actors] to work the way I work. I don't think there is one way that I work except that it is very rigorous.⁶⁴

This ecumenical approach is reflected in the number of influences Mann cites: Piscator, Brecht, David Edgar, David Hare, Caryl Churchill, and Samuel Beckett.

This directorial split personality can explain the fact that Mann can "like about Brecht what he didn't like about himself,"⁶⁵ and follow Piscator in his directorial approach but "not as a writer in terms of thinking about epic and political work."⁶⁶ Mann

⁶¹ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, Princeton, N. J., 26 April 1994, unpublished.

⁶² Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work," 39.

⁶³ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays* (Hanover, N.H., Smith and Kraus, 2001), 297.

⁶⁴ Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work," 36.

⁶⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Gavin Schulz, February 1991, unpublished.

⁶⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, Princeton, N. J., 26 April 1994, unpublished.

adopts the emotional, nondidactic approach she feels Brecht did not like in a number of his own plays, and attempts to show both sides of a political story, unlike Piscator.

Nevertheless, the performance history of *Execution of Justice* illustrates that for Mann the author, the experience of watching the evolving performance text of her play was essential to completing the play, with each director and production adding and refining the stagecraft essential to the Piscatorian character of the drama. According to Gary Dawson, *Execution* is one of the best American examples of “the unity of Piscatorian stage devices.”⁶⁷ As discussed earlier, these devices include direct audience address; short, nonlinear scenes arranged in compact and colliding montage; stage technology to maintain a fluid and rapid transit from one scene to the next; and film, photograph, and title projections, as well as sound, to enhance the reality base of the events in the drama.

Working with Actors

Mann leans toward the use of an American hybrid style of acting, favoring Stanislavsky and Method acting rather than the more presentational style advocated by Brecht:

You know, I’m a great lover of American actors’ style. I don’t believe in the abuse of the method. But what I love is gut-emotion-based work that is informed by a great intelligence. That is the best of American acting . . . When you combine a nice heavy dose of real technique with internal acting style which is Stanislavskian-based, you’ve got great American acting.⁶⁸

According to Mary McDonnell, who played Mary Ann White in the Broadway production of *Execution*, Mann created a world unto itself for the play: “In *Execution of*

⁶⁷ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre*, 115.

⁶⁸ Rachel Shteir, “‘I Became an Optimist’: An Interview with Emily Mann,” *Theater* 12.1, (Fall/Winter 1990-1991): 21.

Justice I felt . . . that we were in a world on the stage, with each other, creating the moment of truth together.”⁶⁹ For McDonnell the experience of doing this play had “a more traditional quality” in which a fourth wall separated the action from the audience.⁷⁰ This sense of separation from the audience is precisely what epic documentary attempts to eliminate by maintaining the audience’s sense of its own presence and participation in the theatre experience through direct audience address, nonlinear scenes, and the use of projections interrupting the action, devices well used in *Execution*. McDonnell, along with many of the New York critics, felt that the size of the Virginia Theatre did much to destroy the intimate relationship between audience and actor, confirming that Mann’s form of epic documentary, in a way similar to television, depends on an intimacy unnecessary in Piscator’s version of the form.

McDonnell also echoes Mann’s description of the type of acting encouraged during rehearsal as deeply emotional, internal, focused, and realistic. The experience of creating her character was so intense that McDonnell was actually caused discomfort:

It was very painful to play her [Mary Ann White], but once you’ve gotten used to the pain part, you could go there as an actor. Emily is brilliant at this, as the director—in helping you groove through the painful arteries—so that you’re really fluid in them and you’re not frightened of them. And that frees you up.⁷¹

Piscator, who influenced Method actors such as Rod Steiger and Marlon Brando and theatre artists such as Tennessee Williams, Julian Beck, and Judith Malina, employed,

⁶⁹ Mary McDonnell, interview by author, 8 December 2000, 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

like Mann, a more emotional acting style in his form of epic/documentary than did Brecht.⁷²

But the realistic characterization Mann aims for with her actors seems to be even closer to the type of naturalism often associated with television acting: "Television documentary drama tends to be inflexibly naturalistic, depending on that convention through which it purports to show what is happening, *naturally*."⁷³ Mann describes her process with actors as layering:

I have a method of working with actors I like to call emotional layering whereby you're always working from intention, from the truth of the moment. By using an internal emotional process you make that person you're playing real . . . It's more raw, more emotionally volatile.⁷⁴

This quality affects the audience in a specific way, pulling them into the swirl of the action. Mann recognizes that she has certain methods, both as playwright and director, to capture her audience, "to always having them sitting forward."⁷⁵ She observes that she designed the opening of *Execution of Justice* as she has all her shows, with a Hollywood "grabber" to confront and engulf the audience with the intensity of the opposition of the dramatic conflict: "*Execution of Justice*, which I wrote and directed, opens with the Cop and Sister Boom-Boom, the two extremes of that city."⁷⁶

Mann's use of television and film techniques in order to capture her audience finds a parallel in David Edgar's observation in describing his own large body of work:

What became clear was that the images the audiences related to (in the sense of those that they remembered and commented on afterwards)

⁷² John Willett, *Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in Theatre* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979), 166.

⁷³ Paget, *True Stories?*, 25.

⁷⁴ Larry Steckling, "Emily Mann's 'Hedda'," *Drama-Logue*, Hollywood, 2-8 July 1987, 6.

⁷⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Leigh Buchanan Bienen, "Emily Mann," ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, *Speaking On Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 209.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

were not those that were drawn from popular-cultural traditions. It was rather those images that we drew from bourgeois populist culture (films and television) that created the greatest resonance.⁷⁷

It is Edgar's contention that playwrights wishing to make "strategic penetration" into the status quo should pay close attention to the power of television because of its hold on the public sensibility. The problem, Edgar notes, is that, "on commercial television, the problems of 'strategic penetration' are even more acute, as the experience is itself strategically penetrated back by raw capitalist propaganda at twenty-minute intervals."⁷⁸ Edgar continues, describing the paradox inherent in the fact that most politically biting drama is produced in "custom-built buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle-class,"⁷⁹ another form of retaliatory strategic penetration vitiating the point of the play. To some degree, this undoubtedly happened to Mann's play at the Virginia Theatre on Broadway.

Directing for Stage/Directing for Television

Susan Cole notes that "in Mann's rehearsals of *Execution of Justice*, to an extent uncharacteristic of any other director I observed, there is an emphasis on thinking rather than on the free play of feeling or impulse."⁸⁰ This comment goes somewhat counter to Mann's stated desire to build raw and emotionally volatile characterizations with her actors, but it underscores the difference between rehearsal methodology and the finished performance. Cole goes on to question the degree to which rehearsals are attempts at re-creating the text or attempts at examining what the rehearsals are in themselves:

⁷⁷ David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 36.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁰ Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal*, 59.

Is a playtext a map of its own terrain and, at the same time, of the means by which that terrain can be explored and populated? How mimetic, in relation to particular texts, are particular rehearsals, and to what extent is rehearsal's way of exploring a playtext a way of exploring the nature of its own activity? In the rehearsal script, but not in the published version of *Execution of Justice*, the setting is defined as "a series of reflective surfaces." To what extent and with what effect is the director herself one of the "reflective surfaces"?⁸¹

The suggestion that rehearsals can become as much about themselves as they are about the play can be extended to the nature of the performances as well. A confusing quality of *Execution of Justice* was that it was about itself almost as much as it was about Dan White's trial, with its self-conscious juxtaposition of video of the actual event and stage action.

Cole describes Mann as the "ideal audience," reflecting every emotion and gesture she witnesses onstage, much as does a television camera capturing the action through its lens. It is because of her visibility and connection with the company that Mann becomes a part of the action. Cole carries this idea a step further when she notes that in addition to being attuned to Mann's every reflected reaction to their performances, the actors must also deal with the actual television monitors broadcasting images of the real events above their heads, along with "instantaneous images of themselves," as they attempt to build their characters and performances for more public exposure.⁸²

During the rehearsal of *Execution*, says Cole, Mann herself became confused or split between the images she saw onscreen and onstage: "At one point in rehearsal, Mann says to actors Mary McDonnell and Jon De Vries, 'I like what you're doing on camera; I don't like the stage picture.'"⁸³ The use of video to project images of the actual events

⁸¹ Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal*, 57-58.

⁸² Ibid., 60.

⁸³ Ibid.

and the reenacted events side by side implies that the two are equally valid representations.

In attempting to illustrate the degree to which media images translate and become our reality, this production of *Execution* employed so many layers of media(tion) that the actor's work onstage became a disassociated enterprise. For Cole, as well as for many of the critics and perhaps the audience, "There is a distracting array of simultaneous images competing for attention: the live actors performing communal actions; the over-familiar, seductive images of the faces of the actors on closed-circuit television as they perform; [and] the footage of the actual events in San Francisco."⁸⁴

Director George Schaefer describes the difference between directing for stage and television:

In theatre, I start small, usually meeting in the intimacy of a rehearsal room, searching for truth, for honesty and for motivations. But when I finally get the play on the stage . . . I'm forced to expand on whatever reality I've found. At that point I can't help thinking about what television can do—I'd love to have caught some idea with a tight close-up or made sure everybody in the audience was watching the exact detail that I was showing and not the whole stage.⁸⁵

While Mann's directing/playwriting style is similar to Schaefer's in nurturing the intimate nature of the actor's performance in the rehearsal hall, Mann is able to actualize Schaefer's fantasy of bringing the television close-up onto the performance stage. The television camera and onstage screen allow Mann to focus audience attention where she wants it to be, just as a television director might. But the cost, as described by Cole, is that the actors and action seemed dwarfed in the large space of the Virginia Theatre. The stage reality created by Mann's troupe in the rehearsal hall did not expand to fill the

⁸⁴ Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal*, 60.

⁸⁵ Jack Kuney, *Take One: Television Directors on Directing* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 29.

theatre because the production was depending on the television monitors to focus the audience.

Schaefer adds that for television the director must “forget the total picture, and remember that you’re dealing in small segments—in close-ups.”⁸⁶ When questioned about the multiple layers of action she creates onstage and the short, clipped scenes, Mann comments,

I like having a lot of images at once, having things overlap, things happening simultaneously . . . It’s a complicated event. Theatre is based in time; you have a finite amount of time to get your story across. And if you take the complicated stories that I like to take, it’s a question of how you can get the complexity that each one demands crammed into that amount of time.⁸⁷

As Dawson has succinctly observed, “Documentary theatre, of all the dramatic arts, is closest to film.”⁸⁸ In comparing the observations of these two directors it is possible to see that the technical demands of directing in each medium have somewhat merged. For both, the whole is built upon a conglomeration of smaller images, forcing the director, as well as the audience, to base their interpretations on “small segments” that can best be appreciated within intimate settings (in some way similar to the television screen).

Marc Daniels, another theatre and television director, describes an experience he had in the early days of television in which a play was to be broadcast on television and open on Broadway at the same time. Funded by Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, this project was aimed at audiences impressed by the prestige of a Broadway play. The play, an historical drama about Sacco and Vanzetti by Robert Noah called *The Advocate*, opened at the ANTA Theatre in New York City on 14 October 1963, and closed the same

⁸⁶ Kuney, *Take One*, 29.

⁸⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 294.

⁸⁸ Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 53.

night. Conversely, it received great praise in all of the fifty cities to which it was broadcast. Daniels offers a telling explanation for this paradox:

We had advantages on television that they didn't have on Broadway. We could keep the play going; we could build on the impact of it. They were bound by certain physical limitations . . . it was a fragmented play, and they were in the position of having to make frequent set changes.⁸⁹

By 1986 Mann could do onstage what Daniels was only able to do on television. With sophisticated stage technology Mann could mimic the techniques of television and build on the impact of simultaneous action, keep the short scenes moving, focus audience attention on small details, and magnify subtle acting moments: "Intercutting and juxtaposition are very modern. We're talking, and then I'm hearing a conversation here, and then if the jukebox came on that wouldn't be something we couldn't process. So much is coming at us."⁹⁰ The very lack of these resources in the theatre explains why, according to Daniels, *The Advocate* failed as a stage play. The way in which new theatre technology is used by playwrights and directors to please the audience has been greatly influenced by the pace and format of television production.

While television dramas still have a predominantly linear naturalistic form, the dream sequences, the commercial interruptions, and the constant intrusions of the surrounding environment make the whole experience of producing television an attempt at capturing all of the layered perception of which the audience is capable. In constructing her plays Mann attempts to create a similar experience:

I hear lots of voices at once in my head, often . . . They're answering each other even if they're not directly talking to each other. That happened in court [in San Francisco] . . . So you have real time and

⁸⁹ Kuney, *Take One*, 51.

⁹⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Michael Henry Brown and Liz Wright, "Theatrical Justice: An Interview with Emily Mann," *New Dramatists*, (Spring 1986).

court time . . . I think that happens to people a lot more than they'll admit to.⁹¹

The two experiences—those of watching television and of experiencing a play by Mann—have a degree of similarity in that both ask the viewers to allow their concentration to bounce back and forth between contrasting, conflicting, and sometimes different realities.

In speaking directly about what differences exist between directing for the stage and for the small screen, Mann says that the stage is “more dangerous, more volatile. In the kind of theater that I like to make, there’s a conversation going on between the actors and audience.”⁹² The importance of the active and direct communication between her audience and the stage seems to be primary for Mann. Furthermore, it seems that the influence of television—the use of television methodology and technology—within Mann’s plays seems to have become in her estimation deadening rather than enlivening, distancing rather than involving.

Mann is far from being the only playwright of her generation to use video and monitors onstage, as well as experiment with non-linear montage, and the use of television technique in text and performance, to comment on the effects of contemporary electronic communication. JoAnne Akalaitis created in 1978 (*Dressed Like an Egg*, *Southern Exposure*) and 1980 (*Dead End Kids*) a number of plays inspired by real people or events employing projections, film clips, and news reports. *Dressed Like an Egg*, about the writer Colette, and *Southern Exposure*, about exploration of the South Pole, deconstruct received realities (i.e. the male interpretation of history and the romantic reportage of history) by superimposing images from the history books against

⁹¹ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 296.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 287.

the contrasting reality onstage. *Dead End Kids*, centering on fear of nuclear holocaust, illustrates with striking starkness the chasm between what is reported about events and what the effects of the events might be.

Mann shares more with contemporaries Akalaitis, Spalding Gray and Laurie Anderson, all of whom experiment with the use of video and television technology onstage, to comment on politics, history, and the distortions effected by the electronic media on what the public “knows,” than she does with Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, both of whom concern themselves with the effects of technology on the individual’s relationship with the outside world. Foreman and Wilson have employed film and television scene montage to construct dream-like presentations primarily concerned with the effects of the technological world on the internal psyche.

But Mann has not stood still in relation to the form of epic documentary implemented in *Execution of Justice*. In one of my interviews with her she comments,

I’ve been asked to do a number of documentaries for theatre, and I’ve turned them down. I think one of the reasons is that I’m not sure how to do it now. Given how inundated we are with the semifactual nature of an event on the news, in the tabloid news, how do you tell the story today, compellingly, when you are truly digging into the questions that are particular and important to ask?⁹³

Mann goes on to observe that the images promoted by television have inured audiences to the seriousness of the information being presented on the news, rendering ineffectual her use of the methods and materials of that medium:

I think that to draw people out of themselves in their now habitual way of viewing these events—I need to find something different than the way they see it on television in hyper-real clips, reality-based clips that are put together in quick-cut form, so they think they know what they’re seeing, but really don’t. You don’t want to do anything like that onstage, because now the audience is going to have a sort of

⁹³ Emily Mann, interview by author, 28 September 1999, 11.

habitual response to it, and they are not going to be taken some place new and far and deep.⁹⁴

In order to challenge her audience it is clear that Mann feels forced to reinvent her mode of communication and turn away from the theatricalization of television techniques, once so effective onstage.

While 1984-6 (the years during which *Execution of Justice* was first playing in theatres across the country) is less than twenty years ago, it is useful to remember that it takes a relatively short amount of time to become dependent on and take for granted many technological advances. It was on 1 June 1980 that Ted Turner launched Cable News Network (CNN), all news, all the time:

By offering a twenty-four-hour news service, with often live and lengthy coverage of events from around the world, CNN has had a major impact on how we think about political and social events. CNN *World Report*, which offers unedited, three-minute pieces from about ninety different television organizations around the world, provides an inflection to political discourse, to our sense of news, which simply was not possible before. It was, in particular, the crisis which led to the Gulf War [1991] which elevated the importance of CNN, if only because in the first instance it was the one place that one could see and hear at length the competing positions.⁹⁵

In 1986 only CNN was covering the launch of the Challenger and only CNN carried images of the exploding spacecraft moments after lift-off. CNN began its climb to setting the standard for the “inundation” of the television audience with news approximately five years before the premiere of Mann’s play. But the images and techniques, the thrill accompanying the knowledge that you are seeing something as it is happening, had already become valuable and familiar. In the mid-1980s the use of television monitors and imagery onstage was still new and exciting, the saturation of the

⁹⁴ Emily Mann, interview by author, 28 September 1999, 15.

⁹⁵ Michael Tracey, “Non-Fiction Television,” ed. Anthony Smith, *Television: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 146.

audience with constant news reportage and reality programming was just beginning to accumulate. In 1994, during an interview with Gary Fisher Dawson, Mann observed, "*Execution of Justice* seems so dated now. We were one of the first, I think, to use that kind of video on the Broadway stage and to bring in that kind of political and contemporary awareness."⁹⁶ By the time of my interviews with Mann in 1999, the saturation of the air waves with news and reality programming that had dated the play, at least by 1994, was even more effectively swamping the perceptions of the audience.

Execution of Justice to Having Our Say

In 1990, four years after *Execution of Justice* closed on Broadway, Mann accepted the position of artistic director of the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. During her first season as A.D. she produced a musical theatre piece she had written in collaboration with Ntozake Shange, with music by Baikida Carroll, titled *Betsey Brown*. This play, centered on the story of a young black girl coming of age in the early part of the twentieth century, was a fictional story and therefore an unusual piece for Mann. Nevertheless, the play did contain some earmark characteristics of Mann's work. Mann has often structured her plays as musical pieces, forming the conversations and scenes into specific tempos and rhythms. The script for *Betsey Brown* is overtly poetic, with conversations and thoughts expressed in lyrical chants that blend with the music written for the show. The story concerns a girl whose middle-class family is in crisis because one parent has abandoned them. That parent is not the father but the mother, suffocated by the restrictions put on her by a closed and rigid society. The young girl dreams of her own liberation and in her innocence and lack of guidance almost falls prey to the trap of early

⁹⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, 26 April 1994, unpublished.

parenthood. The play celebrates this young girl's fight for selfhood despite the emotional scars of her childhood.

Betsey Brown did not prove to be a great success but it does provide a bridge, for the purposes of this examination of Mann's work, from *Execution of Justice* to *Having Our Say*. Mann's next two documentary plays were to be about the struggle of African-Americans to achieve equal recognition and status as citizens of this country. This topic was an important one in Mann's home during her childhood, as it was one that concerned her father greatly. *Betsey Brown* not only signaled Mann's first interest in working outside the documentary dramatic form, it also introduced the beginning of her dramatic treatment of the American civil rights movement as it had affected specific individuals.

Having Our Say premiered under Mann's direction and artistic direction at the McCarter in 1994. The play was an enormous success, and its trajectory toward Broadway illustrates the effectiveness of commercial transfer in protecting the health of the nonprofit regional theatre. In the next chapter I will discuss the effect heading a theatre has had on Mann's playwriting and directing, simplifying her need for an artistic base and making more complicated the number of jobs to be done before she can get to her art.

Chapter IV

Artistic Directorship: *Having Our Say*

Introduction

Emily Mann became artistic director of the McCarter Theatre in 1990, and during her tenure the McCarter has become one of the leading regional theatres in this country. In this chapter I will discuss the history of the McCarter and how Mann, as artistic director, has responded to the financial pressures inherent in the nonprofit arena. The most commercially successful of her plays, *Having Our Say*, will provide a rich base for an examination of how artistic directorship has affected Mann's choices as a documentary playwright. In addition I will investigate the ways in which nonprofit theatres and their artistic directors struggle with the effects of television and film on the nature and size of their talent and audience pools.

Having Our Say was developed from the best-selling book of the same name, a memoir of centenarian African-American sisters Bessie and Sadie Delany, published in 1994. The play is more optimistic than any of Mann's other dramas; it is also the most commercially successful. According to Judith Rutherford James, coproducer of the Broadway production of *Having Our Say*, the goal was to develop the material for the commercial arena: " 'An Off Broadway play about the black experience? No thank you,' says James. . . . 'This [play] is a statement. And doing it at the Booth—right there at the corner of Shubert Alley—*that's* a statement.'"¹ Mann and coproducers Camille Cosby (a television producer and wife of Bill Cosby) and Rutherford James initially perceived *Having Our Say* as a possible television miniseries. When they approached the

¹ Jeremy Gerard, "Having their 'Say'," *Variety*, 20 February 1995, 7.

Delaney sisters for permission to dramatize their book, Mann remembers that she and her partners thought, "It doesn't automatically look like a play or film; it looks a bit like a miniseries."² According to Mann, the sisters preferred the idea of making their book into a play. Because this artistic team envisioned the material as a television vehicle and developed it for the stage as part of a progression to the screen, the play demonstrates the ways in which regional nonprofit theatre, the commercial theatre sector, and the media of television and film depend on each other for survival.

The Regional Theatre Movement

Martha LoMonaco, in her essay "Regional/Resident Theatre," credits Margo Jones's 1951 book *Theatre-in-the-Round* with inspiring a generation of would-be artistic directors:

"Every town in America wants theatre!" she wrote. "it is the duty and business of a capable theatre person to go into the communities of this country and create fine theatres." Go out they did, and what had been a handful of theatres in the 1950s grew to sixteen by 1961 and over 300 by 1996. Regional theatre was born.³

Protégé of Jones and cofounder of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Zelda Fichandler agreed that it was important to bring professional theatre to audiences outside New York City. Fichandler's career exemplifies the goals and ambitions of many of the founding artistic directors across the country. She believed that New York should not be the single center of theatre in the United States and that theatre artists across the country should have more outlets in which to work. She understood the pressures of the

² Gerard, "Having their 'Say'," 7.

³ Martha LoMonaco, "Regional/Resident Theatre," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume 3: Post-World War II to the 1990s*, ed. Don B. Wilmet, and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 224.

commercial theatre and wanted to build a place where artists were free to experiment without the fear of destroying their careers. But perhaps just as important to Fichandler as an individual artist was her personal need to control a theatrical enterprise in which she could work as a director, since at the time men dominated the commercial theatre, often excluding women from positions of artistic and financial control.⁴ Outside New York, in the regional theatres where money for the arts was scarcer, women were far more represented in positions of power than in the commercial theatre.

Russell Lynes, in his 1985 book *The Lively Audience*, suggests that the abundance of theatre artists looking for work in the 1950s was a result of the post-World War II economic boom, which allowed greater numbers of young adults to pursue college and university training in drama: "There are many who believe that the extraordinary proliferation of regional theatre in the last two decades can be attributed to actors, directors, and playwrights trained in university drama schools."⁵ LoMonaco supports Lynes (and Fichandler) by acknowledging that the need for artistic homes was a primary inspiration for the regional theatre movement.⁶

Emily Mann was in the second generation of university-trained theatre professionals whose careers started and were nurtured in the regional theatres. Mann acknowledges her debt to the founders of the regional theatre movement, both as a playwright and as an artistic director: "We have to remember that our 'mothers' really formed and started the nonprofit theatre movement and that without them none of us in the nonprofit community would be here. It feels extremely good to be part of such an

⁴ Zelda Fichandler, interview by Arthur Bartow, *The Director's Voice: Twenty-one Interviews*, ed. Arthur Bartow, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 110.

⁵ Russell Lynes, *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 429.

⁶ LoMonaco, "Regional/Resident Theatre," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 3:244.

illustrious tradition.”⁷ It is ironic that Mann ultimately became artistic director of a regional theatre founded in 1923 by Thomas McCarter, a wealthy lawyer and graduate of the then all-male Princeton, to house dramatic revues. The McCarter became a nonprofit in 1973, after having served for a number of decades as a stopover house for Broadway-bound commercial shows.

It is also ironic that the regional theatre movement was born out of two opposing needs: to have venues free of commercial pressure available for experimentation with controversial artistic and political messages (as Piscator, Jones and Fichandler advocated), and to have places where talent could be showcased, as a stepping-stone to more lucrative work in television and film. “It is rare to achieve fame and fortune in a regional house; if an artist has ambitions for wide exposure and substantial earnings, the lure to film and television is powerful.”⁸

On the other hand, Gloria Foster, who played Sadie Delany in *Having Our Say* at the McCarter and on Broadway, describes the difficulty faced by young black actors who did not have the opportunities to move into film and television enjoyed by their white colleagues:

A dark side to the '60s was that Black actors only had theater as a vehicle. Foster said, “Today, TV and film are more accessible to the young Black actor. It has always been accessible to the young white actor. But it’s a new experience for the young Black actor. It is not necessary for their lives to center around the theater, as it was for us. All young actors gravitate towards film. That wasn’t accessible to us.”⁹

⁷ Emily Mann, “The New Artistic Directors: Indomitable Women Making Indelible Marks,” *Backstage*, 3 August 1990, 22.

⁸ LoMonaco, “Regional/Resident Theatre,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 3:244.

⁹ Gloria Foster quoted by Linda Armstrong, “Importance of ‘Having Our Say’,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 September 1995, 30.

Without television and film opportunities, the community of black artists suffered economically. Today, with greater access to those mediums, individual black artists have the opportunity to be “discovered,” thereby creating a pool of commercially attractive acting talent.

The free movement of theatre talent into television and film, described by Foster as a positive opportunity won by black actors in the 1970s and 1980s, continues to be one of the most serious threats to the continuing health of regional theatre. While work in television and film allowed actors to support themselves with their craft, the exodus of artists turned nonprofit theatre into a training ground that was constantly losing access to experienced professionals. Todd London, in *The Artistic Home*, describes the way in which one nonprofit has responded to the talent drain: “To combat this problem when planning its repertory series of new plays, Baltimore’s Center Stage made sure to schedule [auditions] after the television pilot season, in hopes that fewer actors would resist an extended stay in Maryland.”¹⁰

Emily Mann found, just as had other artists, that while the regional theatres could provide her with venues for her work, they could not provide her with a decent living: “One year I worked every day and I ended up below the poverty line.”¹¹ Joanne Akalitis echoes Mann’s experience: “One of the things that impressed me about working at the Guthrie was that it was one of the few places I had worked where I met married actor couples who lived in houses like regular people.”¹²

¹⁰ Todd London, *The Artistic Home: Discussions with Artistic Directors of American’s Institutional Theatres* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 27. While regional theatres feel that television and film drain talent away from their stages, when that talent returns, the fame and recognition achieved through television and film is useful in selling tickets.

¹¹ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Word: Contemporary American Playwrights*, David Savran (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 159.

¹² Joanne Akalitis, interview by Arthur Bartow, *The Director’s Voice*, 19.

During these same years I also worked in the nonprofit theatre, first as a technician and then as a director, and I had similar experiences. There did not exist a place in which I could earn a living and do satisfying work at the same time. In 1980 I founded TNT, a nonprofit theatre, much as in the tradition of the regional theatre movement. But as Mann observed in a 1984 interview, the choice came at a high price: "You can become an artistic director but I'm afraid you cannot run a theater and write and direct. You can do one or two but you can't do three."¹³ At TNT, a grass-roots institution without a wealthy board, and in a poor community, keeping the theatre open, clean, solvent, and publicized, most often precluded directing. In fact, one of Mann's primary motivations to take on the directorship of the McCarter, was the demand made by her personal life: "I used to be on the road most of the year, but I have a marriage and a child now and I just can't do it."¹⁴

For the artistic director, the job of keeping a nonprofit theatre funded, so that salaries can be paid and work accomplished, has presented itself as a financial burden and, in a sense, a pressure to produce commercial material. According to Lynes, it was clear from the beginning that nonprofit theatre was not going to be able to support itself on earned income:

By the 1950s it could be flatly stated that the performing arts could not continue to exist with only the customary sources of support—the sale of tickets, the drives for local funds, the tax abatements given for donations to nonprofit institutions. It was in the 1950s that two new forms of patronage (or forms in a new guise), not only for the performing arts but for other arts as well, stepped in, slowly at first, but effectively. These were the foundations and the business corporations.¹⁵

¹³ Emily Mann, interview by Jan Breslauer and Susan Mason, "Ten Directors in Search of a Theater, Emily Mann: An Interview," *Theater* (Spring 1984): 32.

¹⁴ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Words*, 159.

¹⁵ Lynes, *The Lively Audience*, 429.

Most artistic directors report that cultivating and maintaining earned and unearned income does not compromise their artistic choices. Mann concurs: "Nobody influences what happens at our theater. Not foundations. Nobody."¹⁶ But at the 1985 Theatre Communication Group (TCG) Artistic Director group discussion series, many artistic directors wondered whether they had so completely accommodated themselves to the restrictions of their positions that they no longer recognized when they were compromising:

On the one hand, they were saying they do the work they want to do; on the other hand, they worry that they have gotten so good at accepting limitations on their work—such as the need to "fund-raise at the box office" by choosing plays with popular appeal, and to accede to the budgetary restrictions which limit cast size and the scale of production—that they may have lost track of what they want to do.¹⁷

It has proven impossible to remove the nonprofits from the pressures of the commercial economy, and therefore impossible for the nonprofits to ignore what is required of them to survive and succeed in the commercial culture.

McCarter and the Pressures on Regional Theatres

Mann has indicated how important public funding is to the McCarter: "McCarter gets a lot of funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. If the NEA went under, the state arts council would go under, we'd be a very different theater, if we survived."¹⁸ In another article about the McCarter published in *Theater Week*,

¹⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Scott Hamlin, "Out of Danger," *Theater* 27:1 (Spring, 1997): 101.

¹⁷ London, *The Artistic Home*, 47.

¹⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Scott Hamlin, "Out of Danger," *Theater*, 100.

celebrating a large NEA matching grant awarded to the theatre just as *Having Our Say* was being prepared for its move to Broadway, Leslie Hoban Blake notes that

at the end of February, the NEA bestowed the largest of 44 highly competitive Challenge Grants (\$450,000) on the Princeton theater. Disbursed over a three-year period, the theater must raise three dollars for every NEA dollar received, which would allow McCarter to eliminate its existing operating deficit while creating a cash reserve. "As a result," notes *TW*'s Peter Filichia, in his *Star Ledger* Centerstage column, "the nature and scope of projects . . . for mainstage productions will no longer be dictated by financial constraints."¹⁹

According to Blake and Mann herself, the McCarter did have to make certain artistic decisions based on debts to be paid, income to be earned, and grants to be cultivated so that the theatre might survive.

Often, foundation and government support is awarded to institutions whose artistic excellence is matched by their ability to raise other monies. It seems tautological to say that money is given to institutions good at raising money, but underlying this reality is that in order to be good at raising money, an institution needs to know how to do the kinds of work grantors want to support.

An NEA grant was awarded to the McCarter because Mann produced several notable and financially successful plays, demonstrating an ability to attract star talent, generate effective news coverage, and garner positive public recognition. In this way Mann was able to distinguish the McCarter as a theatre able to raise the requisite three dollars to every NEA dollar awarded. The McCarter could be free of financial constraints because it was able to raise money, and it was able to raise money because it could please the marketplace. And in order to please the marketplace the McCarter, like

¹⁹ Leslie Hoban Blake, "Having Her Say: After Five Years, Emily Mann Has Put the McCarter on the Map," *Theater Week*, 3-9 April 1995, 21.

many regional theatres, had to compete with other forms of entertainment (the electronic media) for their audience.

The conflicting reality, in my experience as artistic director of an institution receiving both public and private funding, is that while artistic directors strive to remain free from the influence of economic need, it is virtually impossible to be completely independent. In 1991 the Philip Morris Tobacco Company, a major source of funding to arts institutions across the country, was reported in the *New York Times* as implying that they expected all the institutions they funded in New York City to support them in their battle to protect the right for people to smoke in public places. Arts institutions protested this public coercion, and the conflict of interest was never tested, but the clear indication of Philip Morris's sense of control makes evident the subtle threads attached to all forms of funding.

As noted above, in addition to attracting and maintaining grant support, artistic directors are faced with the challenge of pleasing their public and sustaining robust ticket sales to increase earned income and encourage philanthropic giving. The problem of attracting younger and more diverse audiences to augment the existing older audience is one of the primary challenges for artistic directors of nonprofit theatres. It has been the goal of many regional theatres to broaden their audience base by choosing a more diverse slate of artistic offerings—by mounting multiethnic events, using nontraditional casting, and presenting music and dance as well as theatre. In his discussions with artistic directors across the country, Todd London reports that some artistic directors go so far as to contend that an increased use of technology onstage will serve to attract a younger, hipper audience: “Several artistic directors argued that only by doing more challenging

work, including work that integrates new technology with theatre design and performance, can theatre draw younger audiences. Many theatres have already found this to be true.”²⁰ Peggy Phelan notes in her book *Unmarked* that the pressure on live performance to employ recorded material jeopardizes what is most precious about live theatre—its being live and ephemeral:

The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the “now” to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.)²¹

In essence theatre competes with television and film by borrowing from the electronic experience in order to attract the audiences more accustomed to electronic entertainment.

Having Our Say met a number of the challenges described above for Mann and the McCarter. It is a play about the African-American middle-class experience, drawing in a white and black middle-class audience. The play was also an excellent tool for outreach into other socio-economic and youth communities surrounding the McCarter.

At the time Mann noted:

We’re working hard to build and diversify our audiences. I have been working with the churches in Trenton and Camille Cosby and I went to speak at the Federation of Negro Clubs there. We spoke at the two biggest Baptist churches and at the Y. The word is out and people are coming. We’ve been working very hard to get the middle level executives in their 30s and 40s who have the money but not always the time or interest, and we’re trying to interest them in what’s right in their own backyard. And we’re really doing a push on young people.²²

The age of the Delany sisters and the technique of projecting historical family pictures around the actresses made the play appealing to older audiences, and it was also easily

²⁰ London, *The Artistic Home*, 49.

²¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 146.

²² Emily Mann, interview by Scott Hamlin, “Out of Danger,” *Theater*, 99-100.

promoted to schools and colleges as an “educational experience,” allowing the McCarter to cultivate the multi-ethnic audiences of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Mann describes budget concerns as one of the most pressing inhibitions to artistic experimentation and risk-taking: “With a 1,100 seat house, I’m not going to be putting a beginning artist on the mainstage. I have five plays a year. I have 12,000 subscribers. I have to sell 18,000 tickets to make ends meet. And I have a varied audience.”²³ London, in his description of the dilemma of artistic directors across the country, makes reference to the various factions one unnamed artistic director felt he was obliged to serve, “1) themselves as artists, 2) other artists, 3) their audiences, 4) the community at large and 5) the art form in general.”²⁴ This artistic director overlooked two additional constituents—those individuals who maintain the institution, and the funders who make the salaries and institution possible. In order to serve all of these constituents, the artistic director must produce hit shows that generate rave reviews and have great publicity.

If the publicity for a theatre is not effective or positive, that theatre will lose audiences and income. It will also lose prestige and therefore a chance at attracting the best theatrical talents. These factors begin a downward spiral, only reversible with good reviews, good publicity, renewed income, and better talent. To maintain an upward trajectory, the regional theatre must have a strong and congenial bond with the local media, television, and publications.

David Edgar, in writing about the contradictions inherent in a radical political theatre’s attempting to achieve economic stability, notes that such stability automatically cuts that theatre off from the wellspring of its original intentions: “The thesis presented is

²³ Emily Mann, interview by Scott Hamlin, “Out of Danger,” 101.

²⁴ London, *The Artistic Home*, 45.

that recent developments have been a reformist retreat from the original revolutionary principles of socialist theatre, a retreat brought about by an increasing reliance on subsidy from the state.”²⁵ In a vein similar to Edgar, John Wesley Ziegler writes that regional theatres, once having achieved stability, began to work toward recognition by the New York theatre establishment they had so assiduously claimed to reject:

In the beginning, the creators of regional theatre considered New York's unique power to be its unique perverseness. Philosophically rejecting New York as a cultural Gomorrah, they sought to save American theatre by decentralizing it . . . As the 1970s approached, nearly everyone was caught in the dilemma: the noble mission on the periphery versus the attraction of ultimate power which was available only in the center . . . Long banished Broadway had become the final frontier of the revolution.²⁶

The regional theatre movement was based on the desire of artists to create homes for unorthodox, perhaps anti-establishment art and to make New York a less powerful epicenter for artistic production and recognition. In recent years, however, regional theatres have become a primary source for the plays that move to Broadway. It remains to be seen if Broadway will bend to the values of the regional theatres or the other way around.

In her first years as artistic director, Mann and the McCarter followed the path described earlier, a downward spiral reversed through rapid application of media-associated talent and attention. At the beginning of her tenure, McCarter supporters were concerned about Mann's radical ideas. Funding for the theatre faltered:

It was known [that Mann] had a political agenda, and as a theater insider explained, “the risk is while theater people may love it [a political play], the money people [who provide financial backing]

²⁵ David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 30.

²⁶ John Wesley Zeigler, *Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), 207-209.

may not” . . . The first year was disastrous. Subscribers dropped off, taking a wait-and-see attitude toward what the new artistic director might do and leaving McCarter in a precarious financial state . . . According to Liz Fillo, president of McCarter’s Board, the possibility loomed that McCarter might close.²⁷

In her first season Mann presented three untried contemporary plays (albeit written by renowned playwrights)²⁸ and only one classic, with disastrous results. But Mann brought the McCarter back from the brink by producing a well-loved classic and casting it with film stars. Her production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, mounted in her second season as artistic director, proved to her constituency that she was not “radicalizing” the McCarter. On the contrary, Mann was bringing in star names and awards conferred by the media and commercial theatre community, a validation that far outweighed the mixed reviews garnered by the production:

The turning point came with Mann’s 1992 production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. Not loved by all, it nonetheless attracted a record audience by bringing well-known actresses Mary Stuart Masterson, Linda Hunt and Frances McDormand together. Two years later came national recognition with the 1994 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theater.²⁹

The very next season, *Having Our Say* surpassed the *Three Sisters* audience attendance record, moved to Broadway, and won three Tonys, adding “further stamps of approval from the theater world that the artistic director and the theater [were] on the right track.”³⁰

This approval and attention gave Mann the freedom to balance her seasons with comic and tragic, contemporary and classic, multi-ethnic and European, established and

²⁷ Maria LoBiondo, “Profile: Emily Mann, Artistic Director of McCarter Theatre,” *Princeton Patron Magazine*, <http://www.Princetonol.com/patron/emann/>.

²⁸ Mann’s first season at McCarter (1990–91) included *Those The River Keeps* by David Rabe, *Betsy Brown* by Emily Mann and Ntozake Shange, *The Film Society* by Jon Robin Baitz and *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Only Rabe’s play was a premiere, and the season was not at all overtly political. But the preponderance of new plays in the first season proved too challenging for McCarter audiences who had not yet gained confidence in Mann.

²⁹ LoBiondo, “Profile: Emily Mann.”

³⁰ Ibid.

adventurous plays. In subsequent seasons with five play slots, Mann shifted the balance of her season toward well-known works, programming three established plays, classic or contemporary, and two new, unknown, or political plays.

From Nonprofit Theatre to Commercial Theatre

Emily Mann's predecessor as artistic director at the McCarter Theatre was Nagle Jackson. When McCarter's Board of Directors chose Mann to succeed him, he applauded the choice and the artistic excitement Mann would bring to the theatre:

Emily is an adventurous artist. I can say specifically that she will bring exceptional intelligence to this theatre and her job. Emily Mann comes to McCarter filled with vigor, which the company needs at this point. I stepped down when I sensed that energy waning. Mann is exactly the right person to restore that fundamental impetus to this theatre.³¹

Mann transformed the McCarter from a quiescent institution into one that was thriving by mounting highly publicized and often critically acclaimed productions of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1992-1993, starring JoBeth Williams and Pat Hingle), *A Doll's House* (1995-96), and *Electra* (1998-1999, starring Zoe Wanamaker), as well as American premieres of plays by Athol Fugard and new works by Joyce Carol Oates, Adrienne Kennedy, Wendy Wasserstein, and Anna Devereaux Smith.

In 1994, the year the McCarter won a Tony Award as Outstanding Regional Theatre, Mann's sister Carol, a literary agent, sent her a prepublication copy of *Having Our Say, The Delany Sisters' First One Hundred Years*. Mann read the book and put it aside until Judith Rutherford James, a friend and theatrical producer, visited the McCarter. Mann recalls that almost immediately Rutherford James began to organize a team to dramatize the story:

³¹ Nagle Jackson, "Nagle Jackson on Emily Mann," *Asides: The McCarter Newsletter* (Winter 1989): 1.

When producer Judith Rutherford James—with whom I worked on a movie project about Winnie Mandela—came to see a play at McCarter, I mentioned that Carol . . . had given me this wonderful book. As soon as Judy looked at it, she was saying to me, “We’ve got to do this,” I was still saying, “What do you mean, do it?” when she went to her car phone and called my sister to find out who the Delany’s agent [was]. And more about the co-author.³²

Rutherford James asked Camille Cosby, with whom she had worked before, to join the project as coproducer.

According to Mann, the Delany sisters chose to have their book adapted into a play: “Because the Delanys themselves were the ones who were most intrigued by the notion of a play, that’s what it became.”³³ By the time the play was in development, the book had become a best-seller and the Delany sisters had become celebrities themselves. The producers harnessed their established public recognition and used it to build prestige for the play in the Broadway market: “I don’t know when a book buyer turns into a ticket buyer, but we’re going to find out,” said James prior to the Broadway opening.³⁴

As a pioneer and veteran playmaker of oral histories, Mann was well equipped to adapt the Delany story, and the sisters agreed: “Actually Bessie said to Mary Alice [the actress playing Bessie in the Broadway production]: ‘I couldn’t have done it better myself.’”³⁵ Producing the play at the McCarter, a nonprofit theatre, served as a test for a move to the Booth Theatre on Broadway, a booking that was planned before the McCarter production opened. A newspaper notice read: “Performances begin Tuesday at the McCarter in Princeton . . . The production is then scheduled to open on Broadway in

³² Peter Filichia, “Living History,” *Sunday Star-Ledger*, 5 February 1995, section 4, 1, 31.

³³ Peter Filichia, “Stagestruck,” *Theater Week*, 23–29 October 1995, 10.

³⁴ Gerard, “Having Their ‘Say’,” 7.

³⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, “Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deveare Smith and Spalding Gray” (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 212.

April.”³⁶ A run at the McCarter would also provide the pre-Broadway buzz and reviews that could boost early ticket sales and bolster the financial resources of the commercial run. In addition, it gave Rutherford James and Cosby time to raise more money to pay for increased advertising and school programs.

It is a clear reflection of the “wholesomeness” and universal appeal of the play’s story that Chrysler, a major American industrial corporation, felt comfortable underwriting large portions of the education and outreach programs.

“Listening to the Delany sisters takes us all back to the fundamental teachings of our childhood—the importance of education, integrity, respect for elders and caring for one another. These lessons are all the more valuable today as we struggle to rediscover the American ideal,” said A.C. (Bud) Liebler, Chrysler’s vice president of marketing and communications. “This is truly wisdom for the ages, and Chrysler is proud to help speak the lessons these two amazing women impart and to further the education of the next generation of all Americans.”³⁷

Having Our Say’s gentle and positive message enabled Chrysler to enhance its image as a socially responsible and caring corporation. Russell Lynes explains, “The corporation, in other words, had caught on to a truth that the founders of the Metropolitan Museum had made much of when they were seeking support of New Yorkers in the 1870s. The arts, they had declared, were good for business.”³⁸ The support of Chrysler confirmed that *Having Our Say* was a solid commercial property, one that would appeal to audiences and American corporations.

As Gloria Foster commented after *Having Our Say* opened on Broadway, “People have been looking for something to feel good about, for a sign that not everybody is cruel

³⁶ Filichia, “Living History,” 1.

³⁷ “Chrysler Ties *Having Our Say* to Educational Wisdom for Ages,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Saturday, 15 April 1995, 38.

³⁸ Lynes, *The Lively Audience*, 436.

and mean and ill-mannered and hurtful.”³⁹ For Mann, *Having Our Say* represented a unique portrait of black life in the United States in that

these ladies [were] middle-class professional women, highly educated. It’s sad that there are many white people who have never had the opportunity—never mind the experience—they don’t have the opportunity to meet black people like them with similar interests, with similar educational background, similar finances.⁴⁰

Mann’s observation was correct. The play gave the predominantly middle-class audience a feel-good story, with dramatic characters with whom they could identify and sad, troubling moments always resolved by triumphs over adversity. *Variety* reported, “It’s the gentlest and most sentimental in Mann’s more typically politicized canon. It’s also the likeliest to reach a wide audience.”⁴¹ It played to full houses on Broadway and was finally transferred to television, the largest market of all.

Having Our Say opened at the McCarter in the winter of 1994 and at the Booth on 6 April 1995. It ran on Broadway for nine months and had two national touring companies, in 1996 and 1998, the latter playing at historically black colleges and universities. The first touring company traveled to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa. The reviews on Broadway and in the regions were overwhelmingly positive, although some critics noted the television-like quality of the script and the performance: “Camille O. Cosby is one of the play’s producers, and the Delanys, in their lighter moments, could easily have been characters on *The Cosby Show*.”⁴²

Even the casting of this play demonstrates how the fortunes of the nonprofit theatre, commercial theatre, and the electronic media are intertwined. While the actors

³⁹ Gloria Foster quoted by Timothy Nudd, “The Actors Say,” *Village Voice*, 18 April 1995, 86.

⁴⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, “Theatre of Testimony,” 212.

⁴¹ Gerard, “Having Our ‘Say’,” 53.

⁴² Margo Jefferson, “It’s All in the Family, But Is That Enough?” *New York Times*, Sunday, 16 April 1995, sect. 2, 5.

cast in the original production, Gloria Foster and Mary Alice, were not big-screen names, they were well-known and highly respected stage actors. Judith Rutherford James had been one of the producers of the 1963 premiere of Martin Duberman's groundbreaking documentary play, *In White America*, in which Gloria Foster appeared and won an Obie (Off-Broadway Award for excellence). Not long afterward, Foster guest starred on the television series *I Spy*, where she met Camille Cosby, the wife of series star Bill Cosby. Foster introduced Cosby to Rutherford James.⁴³ Mann had first worked with the two women on a teleplay based on the life of Winnie Mandela titled, *You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock*. Completed in 1990 the script was never produced.

From Page to Stage

In adapting the Delany's book, Mann's challenge was clear. She had to transform the anecdotes of two endearing but not dramatically compelling old women into a drama with action, tension, and resolution:

You know we still have two old ladies talking all night, what are we going to do? So I decided to make it [a] really quick three acts and two intermissions. Make it go by so fast that you just can't believe it, just quick snatches of conversation . . . and it flew. It took a lot of time to boil that book down to its essence, its best stuff.⁴⁴

To make the stories of two one hundred-year lifetimes into compelling drama, Mann arranged the stories in rising and falling patterns of serious and lighthearted anecdote. Just as with the character of Annulla, Mann put the sisters in the kitchen and gave them some cooking to do (in this case the task of making a dinner to commemorate their

⁴³ "[Rutherford James and Cosby] have been friends since the '60s, introduced by actress Gloria Foster, a guest on *I Spy*—the series that launched Camille's husband into superstardom." Gerard, "Having Our 'Say,'" 7.

⁴⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony," 214.

father's birthday), providing a physical goal for the action and actors. Mann acknowledges the similarity between *Annulla* and *Having Our Say*, citing the comfort inspired by food preparation and the ease with which difficult subjects, such as racism and anti-Semitism, can be tackled in such an environment:

I think putting both *Annulla* and *Having Our Say* into the kitchen is obvious feminist aesthetics. To me the kitchen, and watching older women cook food, is where I learned some of the most important truths of life, and where most people, male and female, used to go and put their little elbows up on the Formica table and smell all the food and be in a very close and secure place and learn about the world.⁴⁵

It was very important to Mann that the safety, security and familiarity of the scene for both *Annulla* and *Having Our Say*, counteracted any possibly disturbing moments within the text.

As described by Mann, the set of the Delany home in Mount Vernon, New York, where the sisters lived from the 1950s until their deaths, is compact, detailed, and realistic. In the stage directions the Delany home is framed by screens on which images of Sadie and Bessie's past are projected—photographs of their homes, family, and friends. As each individual or location is mentioned, the image is projected on the screens, not only giving a face to the subject being discussed, but also placing the present squarely in the middle of the past from which it springs. The projections transform the stage into a "split-screen," a format most often associated with television. The live action occupies the center of the screen and the photographic projections surround that action, giving it context.

While the core of the play is simple, the technical requirements are complex, including the photographic projections and a stage turntable advancing the action from

⁴⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays* (Hanover: Smith and Kraus, 2001), 306.

one location to another without pause. The play's use of direct audience address and sophisticated theatre technology are clearly devices of the Piscatorian epic documentary theatre from which Mann's work derives. The acting style employed in *Having Our Say* is designed to draw the audience into the world and emotions of the characters onstage, also following Piscator in his desire to engage and inspire empathy within his audiences. According to Susan Bennett, in her book *Theatre Audiences*, "Not unlike the Hollywood/Broadway practitioners, Meyerhold and Piscator relied on the complete emotional involvement of the audience, albeit with the intention of political action rather than the economic motivations of the former."⁴⁶ Mann has also recognized the power of "Hollywood" technique, which she employs to capture the attention of her audiences: "You know that horrible Hollywood term 'the grabber'? I realize that I do that in every single show I direct or write."⁴⁷

The Play

Act I, subtitled *Sweet Sadie and Queen Bess*, acquaints the audience with the Delany family structure and history. The personalities of the two sisters are quickly established, so that the audience will be able to understand their respective positions in their family history. Sadie is the sweet, feminine, older sister, and Bessie is the gruff, blunt, younger sister. From Sadie we hear the nostalgic side of most stories, and from

⁴⁶ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 27.

⁴⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Leigh Buchanan Bienen, "Emily Mann," *Speaking on Stage*, ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 208.

Bessie, the anger and frustration inspired by a lifetime's experience of prejudice and bigotry: "It's been a little harder for me, partly because I'm darker than [Sadie] is, and the darker you are, honey, the harder it is."⁴⁸ Sadie tells us that her mother was beautiful, and Bessie tells us that she was smart. Sadie tells us where her parents were married, and Bessie tells us where her parents worked. Sadie mentions that her mama was an issue-free Negro, and Bessie will tell us that an issue-free Negro was a person with Negro ancestry whose mother was not a slave. Bessie also tells us that her mother, who looked white, was proud to be colored and never tried to "pass."

Between the two of them, one finishing sentences for the other, we learn that the sisters are descended from slaves, whites, and Native Americans. Their parents were strong, well educated, and ambitious for themselves and their children. The Delany family remained intact and provided a stable home for ten children, each educated, productive, and long-lived. The children were taught to be generous, to support themselves, and to stand by their religion. The two sisters never married. Sadie calls herself an old maid, but Bessie corrects her to say "maiden ladies." Sadie and Bessie clearly love their country "even though it didn't always love [them] back."

Act II, subtitled *Jim Crow*, details the sister's experience of race hatred and their struggle to build a better life for themselves and their community. Sadie and Bessie start with a description of the Jim Crow laws:

SADIE. America has not ever been able to undo the mess created by those Jim Crow laws.

BESSIE. The beginning of Jim Crow in North Carolina was the day that everything changed.

SADIE. We already knew we were second-class citizens but those Jim Crow laws set it in stone.

⁴⁸ Emily Mann, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1996), 11.

BESSIE. At that time, many white people didn't think Negroes had souls. They wanted to believe that.

SADIE. And powerful white people were getting more and more nervous with the way colored people, after the Civil War, were beginning to get their piece of the pie.

BESSIE. The pecking order was like this: white men were the most powerful, followed by white women.

SADIE. Colored people were absolutely below them.

BESSIE. And if you think it was hard for colored men, honey, colored women were on the *bottom*. Yes, sir! Colored women took it from all angles!⁴⁹

While speaking, the sisters move out of the living room to the dining room, where they set the table, then to the kitchen, where food preparation begins as the narrative continues.

In this act we learn how the sisters managed to move to New York City and get their advanced degrees. Sadie went to Pratt Institute and became a high school teacher of domestic science, capturing a coveted position by failing to appear at the interview prior to her appointment. The school could not reject her by the time they discovered that she was Negro, making her the first African-American woman to teach in a New York City "white" public high school. Bessie enrolled at Columbia University and became a dentist. Sadie triumphs over prejudice by getting around it, infuriating Bessie, who preferred to meet the problems head on:

BESSIE. Sadie is more like Booker T. Washington.

SADIE. And on the other hand, you had W.E.B. Du Bois, a militant. More like Bessie.⁵⁰

But just as Bessie is angered by Sadie's passive resistance, Sadie is also deeply resentful of the chances Bessie has taken with her own life and safety.

⁴⁹ Mann, *Having Our Say*, 23.

⁵⁰ Mann, *Having Our Say*, 38.

After the sisters describe the Harlem of their youth, and the intellectual and political movements they participated in or witnessed, the act closes on an upbeat note, with the joy they felt when women received the right to vote. Bessie says, “Negroes, more than anyone, need to make sure they vote, to make themselves heard in the system.”⁵¹

Act III, subtitled *Ties That Bind*, ties up the loose ends of the sister’s stories. As they finish preparing dinner, they relate the deaths of various family members, the dark hours and triumphs of the civil rights movement, and their perspective on their own advancing age. The loss of their parents, particularly their mother, was hard, as was the passing of their brothers and one particular nephew, Little Hubie. They speak of their admiration for Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, and Eleanor Roosevelt. The triumphs of their lives far outweigh the defeats, and the play ends on a very optimistic note. The sisters revel in having outlived the “Reby boys,” in being Delanys, and in being American. At the end of the play the sisters invite the audience to stay for the dinner they have been preparing. When the invitation is implicitly accepted the sisters show their great pleasure at having made a new friend.

Playwright and Artistic Director

When the whirlwind of writing and producing *Having Our Say* captured her focus and energy, Mann had been writing a play about the 1979 massacre in Greensboro, North Carolina, in which the American Nazi Party and Ku Klux Klan ambushed an anti-KKK demonstration: “Mann’s next work, which she has put aside for the Delany sisters

⁵¹ Ibid., 39.

(‘These ladies are old, their time is now’) is, not surprisingly, about violence and racism in America, this time a dramatization of the infamous 1979 Greensboro, North Carolina, march against the KKK.”⁵² The play about the Greensboro massacre, originally titled *To Know a Monster*, was much more in keeping with the nature and tenor of Mann’s earlier documentary plays than was *Having Our Say*. Mann added that she needed to do both plays, to balance one with the other: “All I know is that I’d feel mad if I were just doing *Monster*. I probably wouldn’t be tough enough if I were just doing the Delany sisters without the knowledge of what I learned dealing with the Klan.”⁵³ This comment reflects Mann’s need as a political artist to balance optimism and pessimism, or the hopefulness of the Delany sisters’ lives and the lethal perspective of the KKK.

Mann, as artistic director, supported and strengthened her theatre with a commercial hit that made it possible to produce a play that no one else would touch: “I don’t know if *Greensboro* will be traveling to other theaters. It scared some people off in terms of money, even though it doesn’t have to be done with a huge production, like the one [we did] here.”⁵⁴

The pressure to complete *Having Our Say* quickly was substantial. The Delany sisters were old, and the popularity of their book was at its height. It took seven drafts to distill the play from the book:

The first time I heard the piece it was dreadful. I knew what I needed to do. The next time it was an hour and a half shorter. Eight days later, after working ten or twelve hours a day, there was another draft and I heard it and it was getting to where it should be.

⁵² Blake, “Having Her Say: After five years, Emily Mann has put the McCarter on the Map,” 22.

⁵³ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, 26 April 1994, unpublished.

⁵⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Scott Hamlin, “Out of Danger,” *Theater*, 100.

There was a deadline, and that was a little punishing, although it's good for me to have that kind of pressure.⁵⁵

In order to capitalize on the publicity already circulating through print, radio, and television, it was optimal for *Having Our Say* to be written and produced with great speed: "The shape of *Having Our Say* has evolved in just over one year—a relatively short time for the development of a new play. And already its future is set beyond its world premiere in Princeton: the show moves to Broadway in April."⁵⁶

Having Our Say opened on Broadway on 6 April 1995. The show ran for nine months, closing on 31 December 1995, having logged in twenty-four previews and three hundred and two performances.⁵⁷ Production for the television film began on 18 January 1999 and was broadcast on CBS on Sunday, 18 April 1999. For the film, Gloria Foster and Mary Alice were replaced by film and television stars, Diahann Carroll and Ruby Dee. The film also featured Amy Madigan, Lonette McKee, Audra McDonald, Richard Roundtree, and Della Reese, making it a film and television star event. According to Mann, "We had the third-highest rating the week we were on. People didn't tune out after 10 p.m., they weren't frightened away by more complex, challenging material—they were hungry for it."⁵⁸ While the action of the teleplay incorporated actual dissolves back into the earlier lives of the sisters, the dialogue of the play moved easily from stage

⁵⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on Documentary Plays," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* (Spring, 1995): 10-18.

⁵⁶ Larry S. Ledford, "Emily Mann has Her Say—And the Delanys Premiere," *Backstage*, 10 February 1995, 5, 37.

⁵⁷ Producers Cosby and Rutherford James opened the production in Chicago, with Francis Foster and Lizan Mitchell assuming the title roles, for a five month run beginning in February of 1996. The first National Tour of the show ran from 1 November 1996 to 15 May 1997. In 1998 a second National Tour traveled primarily to college and university campuses. This tour, starring Lizan Mitchell and Micki Grant also traveled to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa where it played for eight weeks.

⁵⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Gus Rogerson, *Lincoln Center Theatre Magazine*, May 1999, *Having Our Say* Clippings File, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

to screen. Located in the Delany home, the stage production had aimed at being realistic and natural, just the kind of dialogue most often employed successfully on television.

The natural and realistic qualities of *Having Our Say* as a stage play were readily adaptable to the conventions of historical drama on television. Mary Alice studied videotapes of Bessie Delany so that she could base her performance on the real person: "Now if the character is a real person, like Dr. Bessie, I don't have to depend so much on my imagination . . . With a real person, again, I start with the given."⁵⁹ Mann was very happy with Mary Alice's portrait of Bessie, and while respectful of Foster's rendering of Sadie, felt that Foster never "got" the character because she didn't study the tapes:

Mary Alice found things like the walk and the hands from the tapes and where the anger resided in her body, I would say. Those are the three things she got. I'm sad Gloria didn't study the tapes because I think she could have learned about where that serenity lay in Sadie. She never really to my satisfaction found it.⁶⁰

These characterizations, originated for the stage, moved easily in the hands of television stars to the small screen.⁶¹

In tracing the development of *Having Our Say*, it is clear that the play was born out of television-theatre connections, with commercial viability in the largest possible market as a goal. The drama did not dwell on the darker portions of American history,

⁵⁹ Mary Alice, interview by Roy Harris, *Eight Women of the American Stage: Talking About Acting* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1997), 72.

⁶⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Amanda Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work as Playwright and Director" (B.A. thesis, Rutgers University, May 1997), 37.

⁶¹ As mentioned in Chapter III, David Edgar acknowledges the efficacy of the use of television formats in plays attempting to deliver political messages to audiences: "What became clear was that the images the audiences related to (in the sense of those that they remembered and commented on afterwards) were not those that were drawn from popular-cultural traditions. It was rather those images that we drew from bourgeois populist culture (films and television) that created the greatest resonances." (*The Second Time as Farce*, 36.) Edgar, however, also points out that there are problems inherent in political theatre adopting the standardized forms of television realism and naturalistic acting. If the political message is encased in the forms of mass entertainment, "the countless other drama serials, series, and plays that are part of a television audience's experiential baggage will lead them to take an individual-psychological view of events," rather than build a factual and political understanding with which they can think critically about their society. (*The Second Time as Farce*, 39.)

moved lightly and rapidly, and contained a great deal of humor, so that the audience could be comfortable and hopeful throughout. Without these light touches the play would have been more troubling and possibly more difficult to sell in a mass market.

According to Mann:

The truth is Bessie [Delany's] life is not at all sweet. At one point she talks about how she really hates white people, and then a nice white person comes along and she has to eat crow. There's nothing cute about that. Bessie was an angry woman. She knew the other side, you see. Now, she talks about it in a way that's screamingly funny, but if she was 20 years younger, you wouldn't find it so funny. [When] two old ladies over a hundred years old are recounting these stories, they suddenly become very undangerous.⁶²

As Foster had noted, audiences were looking for something to feel good about, and this play could meet that need. Facing economic realities, artistic directors across the country often respond by attuning their artistic goals to the values of the marketplace.

The Commodity Culture

In writing about the erosion of boundaries between commercialism and the criticism of commercial culture in contemporary performance, Philip Auslander contends that

it is not that the cultural has deteriorated but, rather, that the social and economic have become cultural. This conflation of the cultural and the economic renders traditional notions of "critical distance" impossible: the cultural can no longer presume to stand back from the economic/political and comment on it from without.⁶³

It is perhaps from this vantage point within the system that Mann has attempted to create a play that is both critical of American history and, at the same time, celebratory of it.

⁶² Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 288.

⁶³ Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 10.

The Delany sisters were thrifty and rejected commercialism. Yet the play was designed to succeed commercially, was heavily marketed, and was celebrated for tickets sold and for its high television ratings. The Delany sisters railed against the Jim Crow laws and yet believed in working within the system, in the same way that the regional theatre hoped to break the Broadway monopoly and yet have always worked toward transferring productions to Broadway. The sisters had no telephone and distrusted technology, yet their story is told through projections and stage technology. The story of their lives, described as a revelation of a harsh and often ignored portion of American history, is comfortable and easy to accept because it confirms the value of the positive ideals and goals of the same society.

Auslander believes that “the postmodern political artist has no choice but to operate within the culture whose representations he or she must both recycle and critique.”⁶⁴ But the inherent danger is not lost on Auslander who observes: “It is true that, in attempting to mount a critique of mediatized commodity culture from within, these artists run the risk of being co-opted, of wrongly ‘imagining’ as Brecht put it, ‘that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them.’”⁶⁵

According to Vincent Canby, “The most provocative and entertaining family play to reach Broadway in a long time has a cast of two, a single set and a time span of something less than two and a half hours.”⁶⁶ This sentence from the review of *Having Our Say* for the *New York Times*, the paper of record, encapsulates the information necessary to engage the prospective ticket buyer and outlines the requirements for success in the commercial realm. Canby confirms that this is a family play—

⁶⁴ Auslander, *Presence and Resistance*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁶ Vincent Canby, “A Visit with 2 Indomitable Sisters,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1995, C1.

comfortable, warm, and appropriate for sensitive palates; it is provocative, but entertaining. It is short, at less than two and a half hours, and for the producers, low-cost, with only two actors and one set to maintain.

In order to support the overhead of their theatres, artistic directors have to sell tickets and often fill their main stage with plays that have a solid chance of appealing to enough subscribers and single-ticket buyers to keep the theatre in the black. And in order to keep their artistic mandate alive, they expand the budget to create second stages where more adventurous work can be produced. Russell Lynes notes that the nonprofit theatre community “fears the vitiating influence of the mass market, at the same time that it woos it with missionary zeal. Since the industry is in the business of losing money (when it doesn’t, it is suspected of having surrendered to the philistines) it must constantly expand its overhead.”⁶⁷ According to Mann, it is on the second stage that the artistic directors of regional theatres allow themselves to experiment and take chances. Mann has experienced this type of safety-net artistic/financial planning in the theatres where she made her name as a playwright. *Execution of Justice* was produced on Center Stage’s Second Stage, where, says artistic director Stan Wojewodski, “The play’s controversial indictment of the criminal justice system could not sustain the box-office demands of Center Stage’s regular five and one half week engagement,” even though he was lauded “for bringing such a gritty and important play to the area.”⁶⁸ *Annulla* also premiered at Guthrie 2, that theatre’s second stage.

In a sense, the second stage has become to the main stage what nonprofit theatre has become to commercial theatre. The unfettered artistic choices on the second stage

⁶⁷ Lynes, *The Lively Audience*, 439.

⁶⁸ Hap Erstein, “The Center Stage’s Art of Juggling,” *Washington Times Magazine*, 14 December 1984, 2M.

can be presented only if they are supported by the more lucrative and commodity-driven work on the main stage. The material from the second stage, once it has proven to draw audiences, often moves to the main stage. Likewise, the main stages of nonprofit theatre supply commercial theatre with talent once it has proven financially viable. Increasingly, stage and screen serve as interdependent mediums, with profitable plays becoming screenplays and successful films becoming plays. (In the 2000-01 season alone, two successful films, *The Full Monty* and *The Producers*, were transformed into Broadway musicals.) *Having Our Say* proved to be a similar vehicle moving in the other direction.

It is, however, impossible to predict whether a play or a television program will be a hit. Ien Ang observes, "Despite television's apparently steady success in absorbing people's attention, television audiences remain extremely difficult to define, attract and keep."⁶⁹ Indeed, if theatre artists or television programmers could tell what will succeed, all plays and programs would be successful. Since it is not possible, television companies spend an enormous amount of time and money on surveys studying audience-viewing patterns. Commercial and nonprofit theatres joined in with their audience surveys as long ago as 1969.⁷⁰ In his book *Dynamics of Drama*, Bernard Beckerman suggests that modern audiences are evolving into a different quantity than hitherto understood because of the effect mass media has had on determining the place entertainment occupies in their lives.⁷¹

Yet even for the television industry, targeting and understanding the audience's tastes has become more difficult, as the very definition of "viewing" has changed.

⁶⁹ Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), ix.

⁷⁰ Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 89.

⁷¹ "The random audience, nourished by the mass media and universal education, may be evolving into a new communal type. If so, the theater artist will have to learn what its predispositions are and how to deal with them." Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1970), 136.

Television audiences no longer watch one particular show, but instead engage in constant surfing, mixing television with a host of other domestic and social activities:

The television industries and the governments that support them are taking aggressive worldwide initiatives to turn people into ever more comprehensive members of "television audience." At the same time, television audiencehood is becoming an ever more multifaceted, fragmented and diversified repertoire of practices and experiences.⁷²

The effects of these altered habits are not lost on the artistic directors of regional theatres, where audiences can no longer be depended upon to subscribe, come on time, remain quiet, or remain seated. Mann herself has commented on this problem:

I want an article written about [poor audience behavior] in our newsletter and sent to every ticket buyer. I want to remind them that this is live. They are not at home watching TV. They are not in a movie theatre. Actors spill their guts for their audiences, live!⁷³

In her desire to educate those who attend her theatre Mann is also one of the many artistic directors who actively engage in audience cultivation by designing special programs to attract non-theatre-goers to her theatre.

As well as outreach programs into the multi-ethnic community, Mann's educational programs and flexible ticket packages reflect the national trend toward catering to prospective attendees who do not yet have a driving need to experience live performance, but are more accustomed to the flexibility, multitude of choices, and easy access of television and film viewing. Artistic directors "are looking for a way to make theatre more attractive to people who don't want to subscribe, without weakening the

⁷² Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 170.

⁷³ Emily Mann, interview by author, 28 September 1999, 11.

appeal for those who do. Holding on to the audience they have is a prime concern among artistic directors.”⁷⁴

Mann is very proud of McCarter’s growing subscription audience. She is encouraged by the increase in single-ticket buyers who are attracted to the theatre by culturally diverse programming, nontraditional casting, interdisciplinary offerings, and flexible and reasonably priced ticket-buying policies. By demonstrating her ability to mix art with good business practice, Mann has won the confidence of her funders, as well as her growing audiences. With that support Mann has also won the freedom to program more challenging plays on her second stage and, even two out of five times a season, on her main stage.

Mann’s last documentary play, *Greensboro: A Requiem*, represented just such a challenging program choice. *Greensboro* is the kind of play regional theatres had been self-mandated to create and produce, a political and socially critical drama, dark and uncompromising, that could never have been born into the contemporary commercial theatre. Mann positioned *Greensboro* in the middle of a balanced season featuring *Private Lives* by Noel Coward, *Valley Song* by Athol Fugard, *The Misanthrope* by Molière and *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen. Surrounded by classics and a new Fugard play, *Greensboro* had a chance to do well with an audience happy with the McCarter’s growing reputation and eager to consider themselves on the cutting edge of adventurous theatre. Nevertheless *Greensboro* faltered and, in a sense, died.

In the next chapter I will discuss the direct impact of the media on this contemporary documentary play. What the media say about the play as well as how much coverage is broadcast, the impact of the subject on critics, and the way in which

⁷⁴ London, *The Artistic Home*, 49.

audiences have been primed by television for happier endings and more pleasant details will form the basis for examining the life of *Greensboro: A Requiem*.

Chapter V

Dramatic Criticism: *Greensboro: A Requiem*

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the effect of critical reception on the dramatic life of Emily Mann's play *Greensboro: A Requiem*. Because this documentary play was originally commissioned as a teleplay, it is possible to illustrate the ways in which the two mediums contrast with and influence each other. In addition, my discussion will focus on how television documentary drama has affected the preferences of contemporary audiences and theatre critics in relation to different forms of the documentary stage play.

Mann, and most Americans, did not hear about the Greensboro massacre as breaking news on 3 November 1979. The next day, on 4 November, American hostages were taken in Iran, and the news media concentrated on that international crisis. Greensboro media coverage was minimal and could not compete for public attention with the ongoing hostage situation. In the absence of media attention it was almost as if the massacre in Greensboro had never happened, "and what could have been a raw case-study of the rift in American culture since the 1960s was forgotten."¹ Audiences increasingly dependent on the news to assess what information is vital to their lives could not appreciate the significance of what had happened, in the absence of media coverage. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that many in the audience of the 1996 *Greensboro* premiere could not relate to the importance and immediacy of the issues raised by the play. It is not unusual for long past events to resurface into the public

¹ Michael Scott Moore, "Greensboro: A Documentary," *SFWeekly.com/stage/Greensboro: A documentary*, 11 March 1999.

limelight, and such attention may still be afforded to the Greensboro massacre, but it seems that the lack of original coverage contributed to audiences' continuing lack of interest in the story.

Greensboro proved to be the least commercially and critically successful of Mann's documentary plays. Perplexed by this, Mann has ruminated on the possibility that the play suffered for her not having directed and therefore "finished" the play, that Mark Wing-Davey's (the director of the McCarter production) had a vision of the play that diverged from her own in size and complexity, and that she had veered too far toward trying to present the two sides of the story fairly and so unbalanced the play's dramatic goal. It is also possible that Mann, who had been recently diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis, was less able to keep a sharp eye on the production of the play when it premiered at the McCarter.

History of the Play

In 1992, NBC asked Emily Mann to be one of the writers for a series of television documentary dramas on important but little-known American political trials. According to Mann,

They pitched some stories by me, and trials by me, and one of them was the Greensboro story. I didn't realize it ever had happened. I vaguely remembered it, but not really. And then they put me in touch with some of the survivors. And I was just so moved by them, and so astonished by them that I said, "Yes, I'll do this."²

² Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 October 1999, 5.

During the writing of *Execution of Justice*, Mann recognized clearly the naturally dramatic power of trials.³ The structural similarity between the theatre and the courtroom fascinated her, and she recognized that the Greensboro civil trial provided exciting and provocative material with which she could build an intense drama.

The massacre took place at an anti-Klan demonstration in Greensboro, North Carolina, on 3 November 1979, at approximately 10:30 a.m. The demonstrators, members of the Communist Workers Party, had a police permit to assemble, which should have ensured them police protection. According to reports, however, the police took an early twenty-minute lunch break just before the shooting began and arrived at the scene just as the shooting ended. Five demonstrators were killed and eleven others wounded by Klan and Nazi Party members. The verdict at the criminal trial acquitted the defendants on the basis of their claim that they were acting in self-defense against threats imperiling their lives—the demonstrators' chant, "Death to the Klan." In the civil trial, the verdict held the Klan, the Nazi Party, and the Greensboro police liable for the deaths caused by the shooting. They were ordered to pay damages to the survivors in the amount of \$350,000.⁴ No one served prison time for the murders. It was the civil trial that Mann was asked to dramatize for NBC. In addition to speaking with a number of the survivors, viewing local television tapes of the massacre, and reading trial transcripts and the few newspaper accounts, Mann was able to interview some right-wing extremists, including Eddie Dawson, Klan organizer for the massacre, and David Duke, former Klan

³ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Word: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 156.

⁴ The city of Greensboro paid the entire fine. The survivors contributed the bulk of this money to establish the Greensboro Justice Fund. Marty Nathan, M.D. and Paul C. Bermanzohn, M.D., "Justice and the Greensboro Massacre," *Greensboro Justice Fund: Legacy of the Greensboro Massacre*, <http://www.Gjf.org/Klansmen.html>, 7.

Grand Dragon turned politician. One of the Greensboro survivors, Sally Bermanzohn, wrote her doctoral dissertation on the event, and that document provided Mann with the greatest number of eyewitness reports, interviews, conversations, and written documentation.

The survivors were happy to have Mann working on a dramatization of their story. Sally Bermanzohn told me:

Basically it was good that Emily was writing this teleplay. It was going to bring the Greensboro story to a whole lot of people that we [hadn't] reached. Even if we [had] problems with it, overall it [would] be a good thing. It's like getting a review in the *New York Times*; it's a good thing even if the review is bad.⁵

Through having their story told, the survivors hoped to create public interest in the re-examination of the court verdicts, leading to the individuals responsible being held properly accountable.

Early in 1993 the group was invited to a reading of the first version of Mann's teleplay, *To Know a Monster*. This working title was taken from a comment made by Paul Bermanzohn (Sally Bermanzohn's husband) and quoted in the script that "the biggest mistake the post-war generation made, I think, was teaching their kids the Nazis were monsters, like they were a different species from us. The Nazis weren't 'monsters.' They were people—that's the problem."⁶ Paul's point was that seemingly likable people could be led to do great harm, making it imperative to oppose the forces that encourage racism and bigotry. This point became a central one for Mann as she constructed the play.

⁵ Sally Bermanzohn, interview by author, Brooklyn, N. Y., 11 June 2001, 5.

⁶ Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 293.

According to Sally and Paul Bermanzohn, the teleplay, which centered on the transcripts of the trial, offered a fair picture of the event. Since the outcome was a landmark triumph against the Klan and Nazi Party, the argument of prosecuting lawyer Lewis Pitts was considered an important part of their story and was given prominence in the original script. But the trial transcripts were not enough for the network executives. NBC felt that the relationships between the characters needed enhancement for the drama to be successful with television audiences. Mann described NBC executives urging her to make changes after seeing the first draft: "And then they [NBC] realized, 'Oh, no, no. We think this should be a buddy picture.' And I said, 'Who are the buddies?' They said, 'Nelson Johnson, the minister, and a lawyer, maybe. Or it could be a romance between Lewis Pitts, the lawyer, and his girlfriend.'"⁷ Mann was not comfortable with these suggestions and withdrew the project: "I'm not really interested in writing a romance. So basically we had a huge blow-up and I left, and I decided to make it into a play."⁸

In 1994, Mann and the McCarter received an \$80,000 grant from the New American Plays program of the W. Alton Jones Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia, to support the writing and production of a stage play based on the Greensboro massacre. Mann had hoped to premiere the play in 1994, to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the massacre. But the project had to be put on hold so that Mann could research, write, and direct *Having Our Say*, first at the McCarter and then on Broadway (in February and April 1995). When she returned to work on *To Know a Monster*, Mann felt that a fresh approach and additional research were required:

I realized that the people themselves were more interesting than the trial and telling the story through the trial. What their journey had been

⁷ Emily Mann, interview by author, 19 October 1999, 6.

⁸ Ibid.

from when they decided to become activists through the trauma of November 3 and the trials to now. That's what the new piece is about.⁹

Mann's concept was to create a requiem honoring those who had lost their lives. She hoped to inspire audiences to consider the ramifications of the extremist movements still at work in this country. In an interview Mann describes the play as

"a memorial to the tragedy that occurred 15 years ago." She says "the play is optimistic," adding that she believes the bombing in Oklahoma City "woke up a lot of people to the rhetoric of hate, to hate crimes and the violence of the right wing" in our society.¹⁰

Mann changed the title of the play to *Greensboro: A Requiem* to reflect her new focus.

In June 1995 Mann arranged for a reading of the first draft. The survivors, including Sally and Paul Bermanzohn, were invited. Their responses were not positive. Sally reported, in my interview with her, that she was distressed about the new focus of the script.

Despite her desire to create a requiem to honor those who had died at Greensboro, it had also become very important for Mann to present both sides "fairly," the Klan and Nazis as well as the Communist Workers Party demonstrators:

It is extremely important not just to preach to the converted. I want to reach the conservative Republicans. I want to meet them with respect. I am not manipulating them. I want to hit audiences with different life experiences, different interracial experiences.¹¹

Sally sent Mann a letter after the reading, and while she remained respectful, warm, and supportive, she conveyed her concerns clearly:

⁹ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 211.

¹⁰ Larry S. Ledford, "Regional: New Jersey," *Backstage*, 8 September 1995, 15.

¹¹ Emily Mann, interview by Marty Nathan, "'Greensboro (A Requiem)' at the McCarter: An Interview with the Playwright," *Greensboro Justice Fund Newsletter*, 1996, 10. Nathan is also the Coordinator of the Greensboro Justice Fund.

Dear Emily, I have serious problems with this draft of the play . . . I hope I can communicate these problems with you because I value our friendship . . . I see three basic problems in this draft: (1) how the right is portrayed; (2) how the survivors are portrayed; and (3) the message of the play.¹²

Mann had worked closely with many of the individuals portrayed in her prior plays, but the survivors from Greensboro developed the closest editorial access to her creative process. In an interview with Marty Nathan, whose husband was killed at Greensboro, Mann described the difficulties created by her connection to her subjects:

There was incredible pressure—these were real folks and they could say forget it. I had that worry with Winnie Mandela too [Mann wrote a screenplay based on Mandela's life]. In *Still Life* I cared about them [the real individuals] and had utter license. But this was the hardest one. Really good people are hard to make dramatic.¹³

The survivors felt that the new script questioned their motives and tactics and justified, in its "fairness," the position of the right-wing extremists. In the same letter Sally wrote,

In essence, this play uses the Greensboro Massacre to look at the rise of the right wing. If that is what the play is about, fine. But don't raise all kinds of questions about us [the demonstrators/survivors], our views, our actions, who instigated the murder of our fellow workers, and then have no response from us. It is not fair.¹⁴

In order to address these criticisms, Mann asked the survivors for more material. Sally responded immediately: "I talked into a tape recorder about the things that really bugged me. And then I told about how we made mistakes but did not commit crimes."¹⁵

In October 1995, four months after the first play reading, the survivors were invited to hear the second draft, and this time the response was positive, as reflected in this comment made by Marty Nathan:

¹² Sally Bermanzohn, letter to Emily Mann, 21 June 1995. Ms. Bermanzohn gave me the letter she wrote to Mann with the full knowledge that portions of it might be quoted in my dissertation.

¹³ Emily Mann, interview by Marty Nathan, "An Interview with the Playwright," 10.

¹⁴ Sally Bermanzohn, letter to Emily Mann, 21 June 1995.

¹⁵ Sally Bermanzohn, interview by author, 6 June 2001, 2.

At the reading, Emily had managed to capture the political significance of what happened and incorporated into the play all the horrible collusions between the police, federal agents and the Klan, and the impact on the black community as well as the personal impact on the people either injured or who had lost loved ones.¹⁶

With this approval, Mann felt able to say, "Well, it's time to do [produce] my play now."¹⁷ The McCarter put *Greensboro: A Requiem* into its 1996 season.

Mann had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1994 and in an effort to conserve and focus her energy she decided not to direct *Greensboro*. Mann chose Mark Wing-Davey to direct in her stead:

I felt that from the standpoint of my own stamina, and my ability to see clearly and make the kind of adjustments that one needs to make with a premiere, that it was the wiser choice. And Mark [Wing-Davey] is the perfect director for the work [because of] his great theatrical flair and, perhaps most importantly, his sense of the orchestration of language.¹⁸

An English director, Wing-Davey was also known for his work with renowned English playwright Caryl Churchill, a writer much admired by Mann.

As McCarter press releases proudly announced, "A company of acclaimed actors with impressive stage, film and television credits has been assembled for the world premiere production of *Greensboro*."¹⁹ The play opened on 9 February 1996, to respectful but unenthusiastic notices, and closed as scheduled on 25 February. The New York Theatre Workshop, a well-respected Off-Broadway theatre company known for its eclectic and award-winning productions, subsequently held a reading of *Greensboro*. But interest in the play did not lead to a New York production, as it was not deemed a

¹⁶ Gretchen C. Van Benthuyzen, "Dramatic Reunion for Survivors of Greensboro Massacre," *Asbury Park Press*, 9 February 1996, A1, A10.

¹⁷ Emily Mann, interview by author, 19 October 1999, 15.

¹⁸ Larry S. Ledford, "Emily Mann: Remembering 'Greensboro' at McCarter," *Backstage*, 9 February 1996, 15.

¹⁹ "Casting Announced for World Premiere of *Greensboro*; A New Play by McCarter Theatre Artistic Director Emily Mann," McCarter Press Release, 31 January 1996.

commercially viable script. According to Paul Bermanzohn, “They [the New York Theatre Workshop] were looking around for another big hit.”²⁰

Greensboro: A Requiem has been performed on a number of university campuses and at small regional theatres since its premiere at the McCarter, but the most notable production was staged in 1999 on the twentieth anniversary of the massacre. It was presented by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as part of a conference commemorating the tragedy. The published version of the play, included in *Testimonies: Four Plays by Emily Mann*, is based on Wing-Davey’s production at the McCarter.

The Play

These words are projected on a screen before anything happens onstage, proclaiming the authentic nature of the material about to be viewed:

The play consists entirely of verbatim interview material, courtroom transcripts, public record and personal testimony. All of the play’s characters are real people.²¹

A lone voice begins the gospel song “It’s So Hard to Get Along.” Slowly other voices join in and the projection scrim covering the stage opening is raised, allowing the audience to see the singers. At the end of the song one man stands and says to the audience, “Something happened in Greensboro, North Carolina, I think you should know about.”²² The actor is representing Nelson Johnson, a political activist and survivor of the massacre, speaking from the present, as minister of a congregation in Greensboro. The time and place of the massacre is displayed onstage as a projection, “November 3,

²⁰ Paul Bermanzohn, interview by author, Brooklyn, N. Y., 11 June 2001, 9.

²¹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 257.

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

1979, Greensboro, North Carolina.” This information is followed by the projected words “Eighty-eight seconds,” the time it took for the shooting and murders to occur.²³

What follows is an eighty-eight-second dramatic interpretation of what happened when the nine-car caravan of American Nazi Party and Ku Klux Klan members drove into and shot at an anti-Klan demonstration organized by the Communist Workers Party, killing and wounding demonstrators. The actors (who create the 33 characters in the play by doubling roles) stand in partial darkness facing the audience in a single line at the lip of the stage. They supply the screams, calls for help, shouted instructions, and exclamations of disbelief in a performance collage including sounds of gunshots, sirens, screeching car tires, and projected photographic and film images of the actual event. This scene is the play’s only re-creation of the massacre. Nelson explains, “In eighty-eight seconds, the Klan shot thirteen people. They killed five of us. No Klansman was shot.”²⁴ A projection indicates where and when the rest of the dramatic action takes place: “Greensboro, North Carolina. The Present. Reverend Nelson Johnson and Interviewer.”²⁵

Greensboro is the only play of Mann’s in which she appears as a character.

The new draft of *Greensboro* is the first time I have ever put myself in [a play]. I’m going to see what that’s like . . . I’m interviewing Eddie Dawson, the head Klansman, and Nelson Johnson, now a minister, but then a black activist who joined the Communist Party and was there that day, on November 3. I found that our conversations were more interesting than monologues and I thought it was an honest and interesting way to go—so now I’m in it.²⁶

All of Mann’s interviews took place in the early 1990s, more than ten years after the massacre.

²³ Mann, *Testimonies*, 263.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, “Theatre of Testimony,” 209-210.

Dawson, who led the caravan and was a former member of the Klan, served as an FBI informant before and during the time of the massacre. He describes his work as that of an informal liaison between the Greensboro police and the Klan, scheduling the police absence from the scene of the attack. The Dawson interview is broken up and interspersed with scenes from Mann's interview with Nelson Johnson, who explains that the Communist Workers Party had organized to protest the prejudice and violence aimed at nonwhite workers and perpetuated by the Klan.

The play includes the testimony of a number of demonstrators and Klansmen, but Mann does not limit the story to what happened in Greensboro in 1979. By including an interview with David Duke, a former Klan leader turned politician, and speeches delivered by the head of the Nazi Party—neither directly involved in the massacre—Mann attempts to draw a portrait of the larger political hierarchy that allowed and then covered up the tragedy, as well as the continuing civil rights movement.

Some of the characters speak to each other, and others directly to the audience. Sally Bermanzohn describes her youthful desire to organize and unite people of various social, racial, and economic classes to combat the exploitation and intimidation of nonwhite workers by the politically entrenched Klan and Nazi Party. It is through Sally's voice that the audience is led to understand the mistakes made by the demonstrators in their slogans and presentation. Marty Nathan, Signe Waller, and Floris Cauce Weston—activists and widows of men slain on 3 November 1979—describe the pain of their losses, their guilt, and the sense of hopelessness that has permeated their lives since the tragedy. Other survivors speak about how the violence at the demonstration has silenced their political activism.

On the side of the Klan, the play portrays Dawson as having no sense of guilt or responsibility for the five deaths to which he contributed. Virgil Griffin and David Matthews, also members of the shooting party, further represent the views of the Klan as they explain during brief representations of their court testimony that the fight for white supremacy is necessary to avoid being “obliterated” by the “colored masses.” David Duke, portrayed onstage during a telephone interview, explains that the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), of which he is a leader, is not racist but promotes racial pride, just as does the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

As the perspectives shift within the play, the audience receives impressions of what happened on 3 November in a form historian Richard Evans refers to as “a *pointilliste* method, which would compose a picture out of unconnected dots.”²⁷ The audience is expected to draw conclusions from these impressions, much as it does from interviews in a news report or from the unconnected dots that together form newspaper photographs.

The play ends with Nelson Johnson explaining the direct connection between his political work and his religious calling. Johnson describes a meeting he arranged with the Greensboro chapter of the Ku Klux Klan (in the early 1990s) to discuss the reasons for uniting rather than continuing to fight. At the end of their meeting Johnson and the Klan members prayed together. A projection of the words “First Step”²⁸ appears above

²⁷ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 116.

²⁸ Mann, *Testimonies*, 330.

the stage and Johnson says, “Now it’s up to you—up to all of us—we got to turn these people, your people, *around*.”²⁹ A projection overhead reads:

In 1985, for the first time in American legal history, local police and the Ku Klux Klan were found jointly liable in a wrongful death. The city of Greensboro paid the judgement for the police. No Klan or Nazi member has paid the judgement.³⁰

The lights fade on the actors as the house lights come on.

Form: The Living Newspaper

When Mann entered the theatre as a young woman, she remembers, “My father thought that if I were going to go into the theatre, I should become Hallie Flanagan.”³¹ In *Greensboro: A Requiem*, Mann found consensus with her father, as she had tried in *Still Life* to resolve her long-standing conflict with him over the Vietnam War. Here she wrote about the civil rights struggle that had been so important to her father and, perhaps inadvertently, employed the form of the Living Newspaper, championed in this country by Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project established as part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, whom her father had so admired.

Gary Fisher Dawson makes clear the structural link between Mann’s play and the European work of Erwin Piscator and the Federal Theatre’s Living Newspapers, pointing out that Vincent Canby considered the play “reminiscent of the FTP [Federal Theatre

²⁹ Mann, *Testimonies*, 330.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Emily Mann, interview by author, 19 October 1999, 4.

Project].³² Dawson goes on to draw the connection between the forms developed by Piscator, and embraced by the Federal Theatre Project, and those employed by Mann:

Where *Annula*, *Still Life*, and *Having Our Say* exemplify Mann's living history style of documentary theatre in the form of dramatized oral histories, *Execution*, and more recently *Greensboro (A Requiem)*, contain her trademark stagecraft made up of an assortment of Piscatorian stage devices to achieve her documentary play status.³³

But Dawson also points out that the documentary form, still in evolution, is little recognized on the American scene: "In spite of its persistent, enthusiastic presence, the form continues to escape, for the most part, the awareness of the theatre community, the interpretive community, and the theatergoing public."³⁴ Could lack of familiarity with the techniques of the Living Newspaper, techniques specifically designed to strengthen the impact of the issues and events depicted, account for much of the difficulty contemporary critics and audiences had with Mann's play?

To appreciate the significance of *Greensboro*'s similarity in form to that of the Living Newspapers, it is useful to examine what Flanagan hoped the Federal Theatre might achieve with them during the 1930s:

All such plays [Living Newspapers] focused, with variations, on a struggle hitherto infrequently stressed in the drama of our country: not the physical conflict of slapstick; not the predestined struggle against fate; not the sex battle of two women for one man or of two men for one woman; not the psychological conflict of elements within a human soul; and not the oversimplified collision of workers and bosses. These plays [the Living Newspapers] showed rather the struggle of many different kinds of people to understand the natural, social, and economic forces around them and to achieve through these forces a better life for more people. Thousands of people throughout the country considered such themes dramatic. Sixty thousand people in

³² Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

New York City bought tickets for *Power* [a Living Newspaper] before it opened.³⁵

Milton Meltzer offers another description of the Federal Theatre Project, one that complements and expands on Flanagan's vision and goal:

Swiftly the Living Newspaper moved, with one brief sketch following another, unfolding the farm problem, as it grew worse from the twenties into the thirties . . . The Living Newspaper, as its name implies, was a form of reporting—but not a literal record of facts. The artist imposed form through selection, argument, emphasis, point of view. The effectiveness of the Living Newspaper was achieved by careful editing and full use of technical resources. The information and evidence were gathered painstakingly by research and were given a conscious, theatrical design.³⁶

According to Flanagan, the Living Newspaper avoided character development in its aim to deliver large amounts of information. And, as Meltzer points out, the Living Newspapers were fast-paced, carefully shaped and edited from authenticated information, and delivered to the audience using some of the most advanced theatrical technology available. These descriptions might easily be applied to *Greensboro*, with its speedy scene changes, detailed exposition of the problem, minimal characterizations, and highly shaped text based on carefully gathered, authenticated information.

Mann wanted *Greensboro* to be about racism in America, not just about what happened on 3 November 1979. She wanted to tell her audience about events that they hadn't heard of and to inspire them to say, as she herself had said, "Oh my God, this is happening now, right around the corner. It's my equal protection under the law that is at risk. These people could target me."³⁷ Mann wanted her audience to consider the

³⁵ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), 184.

³⁶ Milton Meltzer, *Violins & Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 31-32.

³⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Leigh Buchanan Bienen, "Interview with Emily Mann," ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, *Speaking On Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 209.

workings of the entire American justice system, not just the legal problems of a few specific people. This aim is one she shared with Flanagan, who described the Living Newspapers as vehicles: “to dramatize a new struggle—the search of the average American today for knowledge about his country and his world.”³⁸

Patterned after the Soviet Zhivaygazeta, the Living Newspaper was born during the Great Depression, in the 1930s, a time of great political and social upheaval. Produced entirely with public funds as part of the Federal Theatre Project, the Living Newspapers were designed to have a rallying effect on audiences and they were a way, in the pre-television era, to provide information for large audiences compellingly and dramatically. While the Living Newspapers were strongly associated with social reform, the ultimate point was to unify the audience behind the social reforms being established by the government. When the Federal Theatre strayed too far from the sanctioned governmental aims, it was closed.

To rally her audiences to recognize the need for civil rights reform within the governmental, social, and legal systems, Mann set aside the documentary form of her earlier plays, in which personal struggle was the focus with a backdrop of social turmoil. Instead, in a manner similar to the Living Newspapers Mann focused her play directly on that social turmoil, confronting the audience with an epic amount of data in the foreground and leaving the stories of the individuals far in the back. It is probable that Mann was not conscious, at least initially, of the similarity between *Greensboro* and the form of the Living Newspaper. It is not unusual for artists to miss a large portion of the significance found in their work by their audiences. Without recognizing the departure

³⁸ Hallie Flanagan quoted by Milton Meltzer, *Violins & Shovels*, 33.

she was making with *Greensboro*, Mann was not able to prepare her McCarter audience for the leap they would be asked to make to find resonance in the production.

Unfortunately, as Derek Paget notes, “documentary theatre’s power is most obviously located in ‘confrontation’; the degree to which it is able to confront is, however, conditional upon its audience’s capacity to accommodate confrontation.”³⁹ Unlike their 1930s counterparts, American audiences in 1996 had been conditioned by daily exposure to the brief segments and sound bites offered on television and did not have either the ability or the desire to contemplate stage representation of epic historical movements. In order to keep audiences coming to the theatre, the experience offered by the stage documentary could not be too confrontational, too unpleasant, or even too global.

In describing the impact of television on the daily lives of today’s population, Ien Ang contends that

television audiencehood is a pervasive social and cultural reality in the late twentieth century. In a multitude of ways, sometimes routine, sometimes exceptional, television plays an intimate role in shaping our day-to-day practices and experiences—at home but also outside it, at work, at school, in our conversations with friends, family and colleagues, in our engagements with society, politics and culture.⁴⁰

Bernard Beckerman further suggests, in his book *Dynamics of Drama*, that “the random audience, nourished by the mass media and universal education, may be evolving into a new communal type. If so, the theater artist will have to learn what its predispositions are and how to deal with them.”⁴¹ Throughout this thesis I have illustrated the ways in which

³⁹ Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 48.

⁴⁰ Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 153.

⁴¹ Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 136.

theatre artists have incorporated the forms and idioms of film and television into stage plays and performance in an effort to capture the attention of an audience thus tempered.

With *Greensboro* Mann strayed from a television driven dramatic approach in an effort to supply her audience with more information, a larger context and an intellectual understanding of the present dangers of American racism. In so doing Mann eliminated from *Greensboro* the central characters with whom her audience might identify, as well as the organizing principle inherent in the telling of a story from a central perspective. *Greensboro* might still have had a central organizing theme, even without assuming the structure of Mann's earlier plays, but it did not, perhaps due to Mann's inexperience with this dramatic approach. And so, in addition to *Greensboro*'s inability to appeal to an audience that needed a human interest story as the dramatic center of the drama, the play suffered from lack of a dramatic center, an organizing dramatic goal that might have more offered a more clear intellectual message in the absence of an emotional one.

The Reviews

A preponderance of the reviews in the dailies covering the premiere, and even subsequent productions, questioned the play's lack of dramatic characterization, the quick scene shifts, and the enormous volume of material covered—all components of the Living Newspaper form. While this sort of dramatic criticism may be valid, it is also ironic when aimed at a dramatic form developed specifically to educate the audience about large social issues without psychological characterizations.

John E. Booth, in his book *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, underscores the lack of training, experience, and understanding with which most theatre

critics take on their job: "Things haven't changed that much in the last century. Critics are still, all too often, critics by accident. Preparation for becoming a critic is very much undefined."⁴² It is not difficult, then, to understand why some critics who review contemporary stage documentary have trouble interpreting and recognizing the significance of the form. Without knowledge of the work of Piscator, Brecht, and Flanagan, a critic might certainly find the plays of Mann unprecedented and even, as in the case of *Greensboro*, indecipherable. A lack of familiarity with the form is exacerbated by the critic's constant exposure and acclimation to the television documentary drama, in which realism and psychological analysis of the central characters are essential and ubiquitous elements. In Paget's words, "Television documentary drama tends to be inflexibly naturalistic, depending on that convention through which it purports to show what is happening, *naturally*."⁴³

To a growing extent, adds Booth, contemporary audiences "consist less of theatregoers than of hit-goers, and it [contemporary theatre] appears increasingly to be dedicated to the less-than-demanding attention span of television than to serious drama."⁴⁴ It therefore becomes the contemporary critic's job to tell an audience of television viewers that they should see a play not because they might enjoy it, but because they are eager to buy a commodity that is in demand—in itself a reflection of commodity-driven television programming.

In an effort to present all sides of the event fairly, *Greensboro* offered the audience different perspectives on the political and social issue. However, this effort did

⁴² John E. Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 61.

⁴³ Paget, *True Stories?*, 25.

⁴⁴ Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 31.

not provide the audience with enough structure to make them comfortably sure of what to think. Reviewer John Istel wrote of the premiere, "At the end of the play, Johnson offers a weary audience hope . . . Then the words *First Step* appear in huge letters, the houselights rise slightly, and we're no longer witnesses, but the accused. The play becomes a call to action—but what action?"⁴⁵ Mann has said that her desire to show both sides of the story in a balanced fashion sprang from her attempt to meet the opposition on its own ground and not be dismissed as a crank liberal. To this end, her effort to strike a balanced journalistic attitude is similar to the mission of the television news; in a sense, Mann tried to provide the coverage the media never gave Greensboro in 1979.

However, *Greensboro's* failure to garner rave reviews, a long run, and transfers to commercial or other nonprofit theatres cannot be wholly attributed to the possible obsolete opacity of its idiom. Just as a play needs to be more than good to succeed, a play needs to be more than bad to fail; said another way, good plays can fail and bad plays can succeed given the correct external conditions. It is clear from reading the general run of reviews that the critics understood neither the history of this documentary play's form nor the appropriateness of that form to the material Mann wanted to relate.

The historian E. H. Carr advised the reader of history, first, to know the historian. The same advice holds true for the reader of dramatic criticism, especially considering the control the critics have over what the public sees and doesn't see. Booth says,

The most compelling force in analyzing the performing arts is the knowledge that criticism shapes the arts in important ways throughout the country . . . Critics can affect the survival and the destiny of arts institutions. They have power over the trajectory of a career, sometimes even over the professional survival of the creative or performing artist.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ John Istel, "You, the Jury," *Village Voice*, 12 March 1996, 72.

⁴⁶ Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, xiv.

More may be revealed about what went into *Greensboro*'s "failure" by examining the reviews of its premiere.

Vincent Canby, writing for the *New York Times*, and John Istel, writing for the *Village Voice* and *American Theatre Magazine*, are the two critics who made evident their familiarity with Emily Mann's past work and with the documentary form itself.

Canby was more able to appreciate the *Living Newspaper*, saw the worth of Mann's play, and gave it a positive review:

Greensboro: A Requiem . . . is an ambitious, panoramic theatrical documentary that has the potential to become a theatrical event . . . [This play] is an example of the kind of activist theater that flourished for a time in the early 1930s when, under the sponsorship of the left-wing Federal Theater Project, the genre was known as the *Living Newspaper*.⁴⁷

Istel, on the other hand, preferred the style of Mann's earlier works and was confused by her treatment of the *Greensboro* material.

[Mann] always found the poetry in everyday speech and managed to translate it into poesy for the stage. However, the McCarter production of *Greensboro* too often asserts its own attempt at poeticism—the flashing lights, a slew of slides, an exploding television set. Mann's words demand less production, more acting.⁴⁸

Two critics, both educated and familiar with dramatic history and form, disagreed completely on the quality of the production. Istel, the younger critic and therefore the one more acculturated to electronic media technique, made evident in his review his predilection for the more intimate characterization of Mann's earlier dramas, the type of characterization associated with television documentary, rather than the *Living Newspaper*.

⁴⁷ Vincent Canby, "When Communists Clashed With Nazis and the Klan," *New York Times*, 12 February 1996, C11, C14.

⁴⁸ Istel, "You, the Jury," 72.

All the other critics questioned Mann's treatment to differing degrees, though none questioned the importance of the subject. Alvin Klein, who along with Canby wrote for the *New York Times*, deemed the play "like a workshop production."⁴⁹ Thus two critics writing for the same paper had opposing views of the same production. Robert L. Daniels wrote for *Variety* that *Greensboro* was "an unwieldy and numbing docudrama . . . informative but static."⁵⁰ Aaron Mack Schloff, writing for the *Jewish Week*, felt that "He [Mark Wing-Davey] and Mann haven't quite found how to shape all the dramatic action."⁵¹ And writing for another small-market periodical, *Citypaper.net*, Toby Zinman said:

Despite knockout stagecraft, despite a large cast of 11 highly respected actors playing multiple roles, despite the risk-taking director Mark Wing-Davey, despite the feeling of excitement generated by an important American playwright offering a new play on an interesting and weighty subject, *Greensboro* disappoints.⁵²

These reviews show that whatever their differences in experience, the importance of their periodical, or circulation, critics generally believed that *Greensboro* didn't quite work onstage.

I cannot suggest that the play failed simply because the critics could not understand or respond to the idiom of the Living Newspaper. I believe, however, that Canby's familiarity with and admiration for the Living Newspaper form contributed to his enjoyment of the play, and that tastes cultivated by television documentary made the format seem "dated" and contributed to other critics' dislike of the play.

⁴⁹ Alvin Klein, "Now, a Few Words With the Audience," *New York Times*, 18 February 1996, sect. 13, 11.

⁵⁰ Robert L. Daniels, "Greensboro: A Requiem," *Variety*, 26 February 1996, 181.

⁵¹ Aaron Mack Schloff, "Requiem to a National Trauma, Emily Mann Throws Light on the Dark Side of History of the Klan's Massacre of Civil Rights Activists in Greensboro, N.C.," *Jewish Week*, 23 February 1996.

⁵² Toby Zinman, "Greensboro: A Requiem," *Philadelphia City Paper*, 15-22 February 1996.
<http://citypaper.net/articles/021596/article007.shtml>.

Participant Assessment

While the Bermanzohns expressed support for the production, they felt that the play did have shortcomings, albeit ones that can be seen as parallel to traits of the Living Newspaper:

I myself [Sally] felt that there were some weaknesses in the play. It was a very confusing play to watch . . . There was just a lot thrown at you, and it was hard to keep track of the characters, and keep track of what was happening . . . It was not something where you got to know a character or two and traced them through . . . So that's why I was hoping that the play would do really well, but not really surprised when it didn't.⁵³

How could Mann, who had been so in tune with her audiences for so many years, have overlooked the production's confusing cross currents and lack of emotional center?

The answer is that Mann also perceived shortfalls in *Greensboro: A Requiem*, in its McCarter incarnation. Before the play opened, her doubts lay with the script, causing her to focus on remedying the textual weaknesses rather than the production problems, less evident in the rehearsal hall. She was concerned with the wisdom of putting herself into the action: "I don't know if I will stay in—but the new draft of *Greensboro* is the first time I have ever put myself in."⁵⁴ Mann also debated whether or not she had confused her message by trying too hard to present the Klan and Nazis fairly:

Sometimes I go too far. In one draft you understand the Klan and Nazis and the extreme right wing guys better than you understand the civil rights workers and the people that got mowed down. A part of me wants to make sure that I don't tip my hand . . . I just recently found out how to make the good guys more interesting. It's hard—the devils are always easier to write.⁵⁵

⁵³ Sally Bermanzohn, interview by author, 11 June 2001, 10.

⁵⁴ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony," 209.

⁵⁵ Emily Mann, interview by Buzz McLaughlin, "Emily Mann on Documentary Plays," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* (Spring 1995): 11.

Although Mann didn't want the play to let anyone off the hook, neither the political right nor the left, she still hoped it would inspire the audience to side with the demonstrators and oppose the racists. But even on this point Mann had some questions. "In fact, at the reading I had of the last draft, one of the older men in the room, Alan Swift, listened to the David Duke monologue, and said, 'You can't do that Emily. He's too persuasive, it's too scary.' Whoa. I have to think about that."⁵⁶ Mann's concern over the political clarity of the play was coupled with concern over basic plot confusion:

It's so complicated a story. I'm not sure the exposition works actually. I'm not sure how much is needed. In fact, everyone was really pushing me to put more exposition in, and that's what I did. I'm not positive they were right. And I think it shifted the balance of the interview, too.⁵⁷

Mann even voiced some concern about the fact that she had not been as demanding during some of her interviews as she should have been:

I actually sat in the room with Eddie Dawson, the Klansman who led the caravan and was responsible in my eyes, him and the police, for the murder of five people. If I knew that I was going to put this in I would have been tougher with him. I wanted a story and I wanted him to trust me when I was interviewing him, but now I think I would have had a confrontation with him because that would have been more dramatic.⁵⁸

Questioning the strength with which she had approached her subjects as an interviewer reflects an even deeper conflict evident in Mann's appreciation of her material.

It is possible that had Mann stuck to the actual transcripts of the event as it occurred in 1979, and not become immersed in her own experience of meeting some of the participants, the play might have maintained perspective, as well as the intellectual and emotional power Mann was striving to manufacture. All of these concerns and

⁵⁶ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony," 215.

⁵⁷ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* (Hanover, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2001), 297-298.

⁵⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony," 210.

uncertainties, together with her realization that she could not artistic direct, write and direct the play herself, must have added to the pressure Mann already felt to please the survivors who had criticized the first draft of the play. All things considered, it is not surprising that Mann lost sight of how the production might fare in front of an audience.

Having felt that Wing-Davey's production worked in the rehearsal hall, Mann understandably felt it would work on the stage. "I was pleased with it before it went upstairs to the main stage, before it was teched . . . It really worked in the rehearsal room."⁵⁹ It was only after the play opened that her doubts transferred to the production values. Just as she had questioned herself in regard to the viability of the script, she also questioned the role the staging played in the failure of the play: "I thought that all of that technical design got in the way of the piece."⁶⁰ Perhaps, as director, Mann might have shaped the play to resemble more closely some of her earlier directorial work: "It was originally written to be staged very differently. More like the set I had for *Twilight*, which was two big signs on either side with the video in the center and then moving props on and off. That's what it was supposed to be, real simple."⁶¹ Nevertheless, Mann incorporated into the published version of the play most of the stage directions developed by Wing-Davey for the McCarter production.

A small but illustrative example of how Mann might have come to miscalculate the degree to which her vision differed from Wing-Davey's was the way in which the opening sequence was handled. In attempting to depict the chaos, confusion, and horror of the actual massacre, Mark Wing-Davey had orchestrated an impressionistic collage of

⁵⁹ Emily Mann, interview by Alexis Greene, *Women Who Write Plays*, 297.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Emily Mann, interview by Amanda Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work as a Playwright and Director" (B.A. thesis, Rutgers University, 1997), 36.

flashing photographs of the event up, around, and across the entire stage proscenium. He said, "What I wanted to do was try to have a kaleidoscopic sense of the event, as if it is the traumatic memory of the character."⁶² One of the recurrent themes for Mann throughout her career as a documentary playwright has been her desire to recreate, for the audience, her own traumatic experience of listening to the testimony of the individuals she has interviewed. In essence the opening sequence was Wing-Davey's attempt to envelop the audience in Mann's traumatic perception of the Greensboro massacre as she experienced it through the description of others. In the discussions that normally pass between artistic director and director, director and playwright, this aim would clearly have led Mann to believe that Wing-Davey was working in tandem with her own thinking. But Mann miscalculated. The quick flashing images common to television and film, the sirens and competing impressions surrounding the audience, made the McCarter opening, by her own estimation, "alienating."

According to the Bermanzohns, the 1999 Greensboro production at the University of North Carolina was less skillfully acted but more easily deciphered and more emotionally affecting. Performed by students on a stage without turntables or intricate sound or light plots, the university production, as Sally described it, "was just simpler. It was only one photograph at a time, and just the titles. You looked at the stage, and you could focus."⁶³ The elimination of the highly theatricalized special effects used in the McCarter production to evoke the experience of a traumatic memory allowed the audience to focus more closely on the characters in the drama. Evidently the Greensboro

⁶² Mark Wing-Davey, interview by Steve Janas, "Recalling a Tragedy of the Past Through the Lens of the Present: Images of Greensboro," *Time Off*, 9-18 February 1996, *Greensboro: A Requiem* Clippings File, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶³ Sally Bermanzohn, interview by author, 11 June 2001, 6.

production was closer to Mann's original vision—a play that was more intimate and more akin to her earlier work.

Paul Bermanzohn agreed: "It was much better in Greensboro. And the impact of doing it in Greensboro on the twentieth anniversary with all the victim principals there (the Klan was not there to my knowledge) was a very heavy experience all the way around."⁶⁴ The Greensboro production enjoyed the powerful advantage of an audience and cast immersed in the subject, being on the site of the massacre and marking the anniversary of the event itself. Had the original event been covered in the news, the entire country might have shared this sort of resonant connection.

In addition to providing information and setting the scene for the drama, television documentary is most usually based on events "hot off the press." In *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem emphasizes that simultaneity is crucial to an event in producing documentary theatre:

"Docu-drama" and its closely related forms of stage realism, however, are not primarily interested in drawing attention to the time-lag between the "real" events and their theatrical enactment. They are more like newspapers, which report events as closely as possible in time to their occurrence.⁶⁵

And as Susan Bennett notes in her book *Theatre Audiences*, " 'Hot' issues in the media can also bring box office success," and it is quite probable that unless it is "hot" off the press, an issue or event will bring less box office success.⁶⁶

In the student production, Marsha Paludan, director and faculty member at Greensboro, simply used the videotape of the actual event, projected on the one screen

⁶⁴ Paul Bermanzohn, interview by author, 11 June 2001, 6.

⁶⁵ Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 7.

⁶⁶ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1987), 97.

placed onstage. According to Paul Bermanzohn, "Where [Mark Wing-Davey] does the shooting scene, Marsha played the actual videotapes in slow motion. My own experience was so much like that, it was the real thing."⁶⁷ Wing-Davey had attempted to create an artistic interpretation of the actual event, but by Paul's standards the television record was more compelling and easily assimilated. For Paul, and perhaps for the rest of the audience, television has become so synonymous with reality without being difficult to digest, that all else repels or pales in comparison.

Documentary Theatre: Changing Form and Impact

The Living Newspaper form, with its slim characterizations and its emphasis on the transmission of socially relevant information, is rarely employed on the contemporary stage, and not simply, as Mann suggests, because "political theater doesn't have a tradition in this country."⁶⁸ As Paget notes,

Any dramatic work which tries to confront *issues* without first passing them through that most important mechanism, characterization, runs a risk of being immediately branded as "unentertaining." It is as if our full engagement with a dramatic work is deemed impossible until and unless our understanding and our capacity for feeling are united through identification with a "performance other." This is not *necessarily* the process of alterity it appears to be on the surface, it can also be one more refinement of egoism, for in order to identify at all, our sense of self is being flattered and inflated—comp-li-mented rather than comp-le-mented.⁶⁹

One of the primary criticisms of *Greensboro* was its lack of character development. And indeed, a lack of character development has been noted as a central trait of the Living Newspaper. It is clear, if we apply Paget's analysis, that *Greensboro* failed to some

⁶⁷ Paul Bermanzohn, interview by author, 11 June 2001, 6.

⁶⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Jan Breslauer and Susan Mason, "Interview with Emily Mann," *Theater*, 15:2 (Winter 1985): 29.

⁶⁹ Paget, *True Stories?*, 83-84.

extent because it did not pass the issues through “characterization” and provide a “performance other” with whom the audience could identify.

This reasoning suggests that what will repel an audience is not a charged political subject, but the form in which the subject is delivered. In other words, as Marshall McLuhan has imprinted on contemporary consciousness, “the medium is the message”—or at least, an overwhelming influence upon its reception. Freddie Rokem offers confirmation of this analysis, suggesting that contemporary theatre discusses itself as much as it does the subject of the drama:

The notion of performing history can, I believe, illuminate certain more general aspects of the theatre after the Second World War. In struggling to overcome the realistic heritage while at the same time trying to say something relevant about the world we live in, it has developed aesthetic discourses whereby the performances become transformed into a critical and frequently even theoretical examination of the theatrical medium itself.⁷⁰

Contemporary political plays can offer a less confrontational experience when they deflect the audience’s attention away from the subject of the drama and toward the nature of the theatrical form. And as Susan Bennett points out, citing Brecht as her reference, a successful political play will be the one that supports the social instincts of the audience rather than confronting them: “Not all challenges to the mainstream, are, of course, accepted. Brecht suggested that innovations which require a repositioning of cultural markers will only be accepted if they rejuvenate rather than undermine existing society.”⁷¹

Despite Mann’s efforts to assert the redemptive, healing, and even humorous qualities of *Greensboro*, the play was perceived by critics as apoplectic (Istel), static

⁷⁰ Rokem, *Performing History*, 7.

⁷¹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 97.

(Daniels), dark and pessimistic (Schreiber), and neutral (Zinman). Wanting to “rejuvenate rather than undermine existing society,” Mann voiced her desire to arouse critical awareness of the growing American extremist right wing, while still affirming the system by presenting the subject in a healing format. The paradox of Mann’s situation—wanting to criticize the society that she also wishes to support—is not unique.

Using the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre as an example, Paget observes, “In 1930s USA, the whole documentary project tended eventually to validate the effectiveness of the political *status quo*.”⁷² Paget adds that a social power structure can and often will accept and therefore disarm politically critical art forms and messages, once again describing the trajectory of the political theatre of the 1930s: “Trusting in the historical conditions of the Depression, and in the gathering menace of European Fascism, to politicize their proletariats, theatre of the Left tended to misread the capacities of the capitalist hegemony to recuperate, marginalize or suppress their critiques.”⁷³ Presenting the critical forms in establishment-organized or ratified institutions effected a good portion of this “recuperation.”⁷⁴

Indeed, says Paget, “some True Stories can be seen as coach tours for the privileged,”⁷⁵ during which the audience is allowed to feel “an attitude of concern, a quasi-religious moral feeling partially assuaged at the point of production.”⁷⁶ Paget also offers the observation that because cultural production relieves the audience from

⁷² Paget, *True Stories?*, 56.

⁷³ Paget, *True Stories?*, 57.

⁷⁴ If the National Theatre in England presents a play criticizing the government and the government funds that play, how critical can the audience perceive the play to be? And yet David Edgar, playwright of political documentary as well as a writer of dramatic theory, has observed that it is “paradoxically true that the most potent, rich, and in many ways politically acute theatrical statements of the past ten years have been made in custom-built buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle class.” (David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce* [London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988], 41.)

⁷⁵ Paget, *True Stories?*, 89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

discomfort over the “problem,” it “may contribute as much to keeping a ‘problem’ in place as it does towards shifting it.”⁷⁷ In fact, it was *Greensboro*’s inability to provide just this sort of catharsis, this release from social burden, that John Istel deemed one of the play’s primary flaws: “If Mann and Wing-Davey had heeded their own warnings about the power of words, the evening might have been more cathartic than apoplectic.”⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, Istel had also complained in this review that the play ended by implying that the audience was responsible for political action but neglected to indicate what that action might be. Without catharsis and without a call to a clear action, the play provided neither relief from responsibility nor clarity concerning how to improve the situation.

While *Greensboro*’s large scope and open-ended presentation denied the audience a catharsis, Mann’s earlier successes had provided such a sense of emotional release. *Still Life*, as representative of Mann’s earlier works, placed the emotions and sufferings of one or two people with whom the audience could identify in front of the central political issue or problem, deflecting the audience’s concern away from that central issue and allowing relief when Mark makes his final confession. This, according to Paget, “forecloses political debate and ensures that the hegemony’s version of events remains largely unchallenged.”⁷⁹

I feel that if Mann had retained the trial format initially developed for television, she might have had a better chance of telling the story of the Greensboro massacre in a more compelling way and to a larger audience. The clear and naturally dramatic structure of the trial would have kept the story tightly focused around the exciting and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁸ Istel, “You, the Jury,” 72.

⁷⁹ Paget, *True Stories?*, 161.

easily followed court proceedings. With a limited cast of characters onstage for the entire play, a story that had a beginning, middle, and end, the audience might have begun to recognize and identify with one or two of the personalities. The trial format would also have provided the audience with a much clearer moral choice. In a trial there are two sides, set in unmistakable opposition to each other. The two sides argue back and forth, placing all thoughts in parallel order and providing the audience with a series of straightforward choices as to which side is in the “right.” But Mann expanded the play to include a larger portrait of the civil rights movement and bigotry, racism, and violence present in American culture through the decades. Mann described the play as “really about white racism, and white supremacy and anti-Semitism through this one particular event in American culture.”⁸⁰

Having discarded the trial format, Mann did not replace it with a structure that vivified the directly oppositional positions held by the civil rights movement and American bigotry. In *Greensboro* bigots and civil rights workers are presented side by side, expressing their beliefs; the play can thus be seen as an example of how American freedom of speech is exercised (in the way a defender of the Constitution might fight for the right of someone to make an argument repugnant to all enlightened citizens) more than it might be seen as an indictment of racism. Without a distinct image of how these two social forces impact each other, the simple fact that they exist does not require that the audience make any moral decisions. In this way, as well as by foregrounding the political issues and backgrounding the characters involved, and forcing the audience to deal with an enormous amount of information without an emotional attachment to any of

⁸⁰ Emily Mann, interview by Gary Fisher Dawson, 26 April 1994, unpublished.

the characters, Mann pulled the rug out from under her ability to rally her audience to action.

To assert that this play would have been more successful in its earlier form is clearly conjecture. But it is conjecture based on the fact that Mann's four earlier plays, all of which succeeded more completely with critics and audiences, did center the dramatic story on a character or characters and their personal response to a public event, in a manner more like the television documentary. Mann's teleplay based on the Greensboro civil trial provided a closer look at a smaller group of people. The participants remained in front of the audience for the entire action, their concerns, personalities, and anxieties clearly visible. For audiences who, in large numbers, watch live court proceedings on television, such a stage representation could have proven quite compelling.

It is also telling that Mann's original teleplay, which had a more contained story, was rejected by NBC not because of the subject, the teleplay's message, or the form of the treatment. As Elayne Rapping, in her book *Movie of the Week*, emphasizes repeatedly, television producers discovered in the 1970s that social issue drama was financially remunerative:

While TV movies were not originally seen as a part of this commitment to FCC mandates, but only as moneymakers, over the years the networks began to see them differently . . . [S]ocial issue movies quickly garnered popular approval. With money as a bottom line, the executives could readily see how their own interest as capitalists would dovetail neatly with their need to serve the people.⁸¹

Television producers found that they could present charged issues without threatening their audience base if the television movie emphasized the personal side of a social

⁸¹ Elayne Rapping, *Movie of the Week* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 16.

problem rather than the larger political ramifications. Rapping specifies that television “insists on human-interest stories of limited scope that focus on the individual, personal struggles and triumphs.”⁸² It is therefore not surprising that the teleplay *To Know a Monster* was rejected by NBC because the network wanted a love story in addition to the trial. In order to be different from court TV, a dramatization needed more human interest.

While a stage adaptation that retained the focus of the courtroom might not have proved to be a better play, it might have been more easily understood and accepted by the public. Such a play might also have provided a clearer message regarding the role racism has played in undermining the American system of justice. And interestingly, by description, the teleplay resembles to some measure Mann’s earlier plays in which she does foreground the personal and background the larger political issues.

Greensboro: A Requiem is, thus far, the last of Mann’s documentary plays. After *Greensboro*, Mann adapted for the stage a short novel by Isaac B. Singer titled *Meshugah*. The play, which retained Singer’s title, was produced to warm reviews at the McCarter and traveled to the Trinity Repertory Theatre, in Providence, Rhode Island, where it was directed by that theatre’s artistic director, Oskar Eustis, an old friend and colleague of Mann’s. Although Singer insisted that all of his writings were based on actual events and people, his work is commonly accepted as fiction, and so Mann’s adaptation of his book can be considered fiction as well. This play marks a change in Mann’s professional direction and in her views on the power of documentary drama.

⁸² Ibid., 30.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century the popularity of television documentary has continued to grow. During these same years, however, the draw of the documentary form on stage or as feature film has not been equally strong. During a 1995 interview with Melissa Salz, Mann observed that theatre critics “are suddenly extremely nervous [about] documentary as a form. Now Hollywood is getting very nervous about documentary as a form.”¹ Evidently audiences, having become so thoroughly accustomed to receiving reports of real events on television, do not wish to have that material reiterated in film or as theatre.

After writing five documentary plays and directing four of them, Mann’s doubts about the use of the form have grown, to a great degree because of audience preference for television documentary. At the conclusion of my second interview with Mann in Princeton in October of 1999, she commented that while she felt that her documentary drama was valid and strong it was probably not the form in which she expected to continue.² She expressed a desire to explore other dramatic forms with which she would not be confined by facts or feel pressured to compete with images already implanted in the television-saturated sensibilities of her audience:

I think that to draw people out of themselves in their now habitual way of viewing these events—I need to find something different than the way they see it on television in hyper-real clips, reality-based clips that are put together in quick-cut form, so they think they know what they’re seeing, but really don’t. You don’t want to do anything like that on stage, because now the audience is going to have a sort of habitual response to it, and they are not going to be taken some place new and far and deep. I might require going into a poetic level where it has all these other resonances

¹ Emily Mann, interview by Melissa Salz, “Theatre of Testimony: The Plays of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray” (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1996), 7.

² Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 October 1999.

that may not even be on a logical, realistic level, but takes them into a different state of understanding. This may be what is needed. We're not only hitting them in a visceral way, through language and stories, we may also be needing to hit the audience through image. Not image like Hollywood image . . . I mean by transforming something real to another level of imagery.³

For Mann, the audience comes to the theatre with attitudes, values, and expectations molded by television, and in essence, wants the same experience in the theatre as they have when watching a television documentary. This is not what Mann sees as her purpose as a dramatist or as a socially aware artist. Since the replication of the television experience is not possible, the theatre experience is often unsatisfying or less compelling in comparison; and when a documentary play does succeed in approximating a television experience, it obfuscates and manipulates as much as any of the electronic media.

According to Peggy Phelan, maintaining a boundary or difference between television and stage presentation is a losing battle: "Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength. But buffeted by the encroaching ideologies of capital and reproduction, it frequently devalues this strength."⁴ Phelan identifies the influence the mass media has on what the audience will see, not just on what will or won't be broadcast, but on what is produced and valued onstage. In other words, it is the mass media that will dominate the taste and response of the entire community and thereby control the nature of what will be seen onstage and how it will be interpreted. Phelan's observations support Mann's experience and conclusions.

I have argued in my thesis that the primary influence of television on the work of Mann, and by extension others working in the same field, has been the assimilation of

³ Emily Mann, interview by author, Princeton, N. J., 19 October 1999.

⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 149.

television technology and techniques into their own theatrical practice. Therefore, it is clear that to some extent the stage documentary, as practiced by Mann, has attempted to parallel the television experience in an effort to attract audiences and influence audience perspective on the same topics reported to them originally by television. I suggest that instead of alerting the audience to the fact that their opinions and emotions are being manipulated by the way in which the electronic media presents information, the use of the same techniques onstage, by playwrights and directors, has ultimately extended the audience's unquestioning consumption of those same forms of electronic technological presentation.

As a young playwright, Mann felt that building a drama out of "real words" and "real experiences" provided a more affecting theatre experience than anything that could be imagined. Ironically, the emphasis on authenticity coupled with the use of television techniques and electronic forms of reporting within her plays (as with the plays of others) has focused more attention on how the message is transmitted than on what the message actually is. While Mann's perception of the information spoken to her is extremely valid and deeply affecting, she has also attempted to make clear to her audience that neither her perceptions nor the perceptions of the people to whom she has spoken can be viewed as objective or comprehensive. However, the tendency of the audience to mistake what they see as a total reality coupled with the layers of subjective observation (first that of the interviewee and then of the interviewer) add so many perceptual variables that it would be difficult to calculate how much the received images have strayed from the actual event. In addition, the emotional power of Mann's plays provides the audience with a clear picture of how the historical moment affected this person but much less on the who,

what, where, how, and why that might allow the material to be put into a larger perspective.

Philip Auslander has commented incisively on the problems that arise when political art appropriates the language of the electronic media:

Just as postmodernist political art cannot place itself outside the object of its own critique, it also cannot claim to depict "alternative" social visions. Because postmodernist political art must position itself *within* postmodern culture, it must use the same representational means as all other cultural expression yet remain permanently suspicious of them. If it is to critique those means by using them, it cannot claim that its use somehow possesses greater truth-value than any other use . . . it must interrogate the means of representation themselves as structures of authority . . . and by so doing, to expose the ideological discourses that both define and mediate between images and their audiences.⁵

While Auslander is referring specifically to the work of performance artists Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray, and the Wooster Group, his observations are relevant to the documentary drama of Emily Mann. Mann has aimed at exposing the manipulation of the news by the media by using the same techniques employed by the media: "I was playing with how the media made Dan White . . . What I came to understand writing and directing *Execution* was the power of the courtroom as theatre. You put the defendant in a blue suit and people like him, you put him in a brown suit, they don't . . . They're dressing for the camera."⁶ She designed her plays to critique the "spin" of the media news culture by inserting herself into the plays either as a visible or invisible interviewer, visitor, or listener, providing the audience with a television-like host with a politically liberal perspective. But the result has not necessarily been a questioning by the audience of the forms being employed onstage or on television. By

⁵ Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 23.

⁶ Emily Mann, interview by David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 156.

encouraging her audiences to approach her plays as authentic and faithful to the truth, these plays can be seen as claiming the type of credibility they simultaneously seek to debunk.

Annulla presents Annulla's words describing her life, but the play is just as much about Emily Mann watching herself interviewing Annulla and thinking about her own life in relation to Annulla's. In this long one act Mann did not have the stage-time to establish the character of the older woman, insert the musings of her younger self and also include some perspective on Annulla's memories and attitudes for the audience. The absence of this perspective makes the two endearing voices onstage the sole signpost available to guide the audience through a much larger topic.

Still Life attempts to expose the lies perpetuated in American society by men, women, fathers, mothers, and the American media and culture, all of which collectively perpetuate violence and victimization. But this focus, the source of *Still Life*'s great dramatic strength and one lauded by critics, could not also include a broader perspective on the actual war, the nature of U.S. presence in Vietnam, why we were there, and what effect the war had on the Vietnamese. The result is, therefore, similar to that achieved by *Annulla*. The audience, without a larger context, must depend on their emotional responses to the characters onstage to draw political conclusions on a much more complicated historical scenario.

Execution of Justice points audience attention toward the social damage done by prejudice based on reports issued by biased sources. To dramatize the pain and confusion springing from citizens on the political right and left, the stage is filled with individuals overflowing with feelings of love, hate, and despair, all inspired by the shooting of

Mayor Moscone and City Supervisor Milk and the trial of Dan White. Mann's great success in capturing the mood of San Francisco, a decided aim of the play, left the nature of the injustice of the event undefined. Is the execution of justice the killing of Milk and Moscone, or Dan White's short sentence, or the flaws of an entire system in which individuals are often destroyed? To a great extent Mann wants the audience to have the burden of deciding for themselves where to focus their sympathies, just as a journalist presents the facts and leaves the citizens to draw their own conclusions. But in this play and the others mentioned above and below, the audience is provided with a limited context for considering a large historical event, in a manner quite similar to that offered by the television news.

Having Our Say, more than any other of Mann's documentaries, is a heartwarming and upbeat story. The audience is guided through the memories of two strong-willed and intelligent African-American women who, despite racism and bigotry, achieved their professional goals, maintained personal integrity, and led happy and distinguished lives. A truly inspirational story, the play does a strong job of presenting the memories of Sadie and Bessie Delany, important representatives of America's potential. But in order to retain its balance as a happy story, the play can only subtly refer to the destructive pain and injustice of the race hatred that still remains in American society, the triumph over which makes the lives of these women so absolutely heroic.

Greensboro, considered almost a companion piece to *Having Our Say* by Mann because of its focus on the dark side of American racism, presents the story of the massacre through the lens of an investigator attempting to report "the truth" based on research gathered over ten years after the event was over. This device is an imaginative

approach, designed to allow Mann to expand the audience's historical perspective on the repercussions of the tragedy in Greensboro, North Carolina. In the process, however, it seems that the play developed a confusion of presentation techniques that ultimately overshadowed the content itself.

In his seminal book *The Empty Space* Peter Brook poses and answers the question, "What is theatre for?" by suggesting that the justification for theatre (and for all the arts) is that it allows us to recognize and analyze the patterns that make up our history and, in essence, ourselves:

We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes. We observe that the behavior of people, of crowds, of history, obeys such recurrent patterns.⁷

Brook cites Brecht's theory of audience alienation (to distance his audience emotionally from the events of the drama so that they can evaluate the nature of the society at work beneath the story) as a model of how to best hold a mirror up to nature on the contemporary stage.

One of Mann's central goals as a dramatist has been to affect her audience on an emotional as well as intellectual level. In fact, Mann claims that she likes about Brecht's plays exactly what he didn't seem to like, and that was their ability to reach audiences on both these levels. What I have found is that Mann's plays affect the audience much more on the emotional rather than the intellectual level. It is because audiences like the woman Annulla that they overlook her limited perspective on the Holocaust. It is because audiences feel sympathy for Mark and his psychic wounds that it is possible for them to forgive him despite the fact that he killed innocent families in Vietnam, and is unfaithful

⁷ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 38.

to his wife whom he may also still be abusing. Audiences also felt sympathy for Dan White, the murderer on whom Mann centered the action of *Execution of Justice*. Audiences certainly felt a deep and resonant affection for Sadie and Bessie Delany, whose spunky, prickly reminiscences were bittersweet. The affection inspired in audiences by these two characters provided Mann with her biggest commercial and critical success.

Among Mann's plays, *Greensboro* is a bit of an anomaly. In this, the last of her documentaries to date, Mann altered her dramatic formula and did not offer the audience a central character with whom to empathize. This alteration in style was made by Mann in an effort to focus her audience's attention on the larger issues and long evolving history of American racism. While the play seemed to gain strength when produced in the small simple arena at the University of North Carolina, *Greensboro* suffered from a lack of dramatic focus, due, perhaps to a discomfort felt by Mann with this different style of dramatic presentation. In her earlier plays the central theme and focus were provided by the emotional story of the central character(s). Without that central character the central organizing idea or goal of the play was lost. And without a clear focus *Greensboro* was not able to achieve the emotional strength of Mann's earlier plays nor was it able to offer greater intellectual clarity on the subject for the audience. It is also true that *Greensboro*, a serious and dedicated effort, failed for the very reasons Mann's earlier plays had succeeded. Audiences trained by television want human interest and emotionally compelling stories, more than they are able to decipher and appreciate a more intellectual approach.

Mann's earlier plays offer a great deal of emotional inspiration for audiences, providing an opportunity to feel empathy for characters who have suffered pain at specific times in the collective history of our society. Mann had intended to appeal equally to both intellect and emotion through the documentary form and she achieved a good measure of her goal. Her plays have consistently inspired heated debate on social issues in great need of further examination by the public at large. She has devoted her career to providing important information rendered in a moving and artistic context, allowing numbers of people to contemplate the nature of their place in and responsibility to the social fabric in which they live.

While Mann contends that her most recent play, *Meshugah*, is an extension of her documentary work, since it is based on a novel by I.B. Singer, it does mark a break from her canon of documentary plays. While employing descriptions of true but unrelated events concerning separate groups of people, the material was consolidated by Singer into one story involving a small complex of composite individuals that molds real events into fiction. Mann has commented that *Meshugah* marks the closing of a circle for herself as a playwright. Her first play, *Annulla*, was about a woman whose life was shaped by being a refugee from the Holocaust; in *Meshugah*, Mann grapples again, through the fictionalized characters given to her by Singer, with the devastation of the Holocaust as experienced by a refugee. While *Annulla* dwells on the role of the interviewer and the quixotic memories of the title character, *Meshugah* focuses the audience on a number of highly charged quandaries: Can one judge the actions of those who did what was necessary to survive? Is it possible to forgive those who survived by compromising the lives of others? How should one deal with the guilt of survival?

Meshugah engages the audience's imagination, emotionally and intellectually, and illuminates some of the darker territories of surviving the Holocaust. Important to note is that Mann accomplishes this by focusing the play on the lives and histories of a few individuals, in this way quite similar to her documentary work. But in *Meshugah* the characters are placed in a context larger than their own lives, thus allowing the audience to place the actions and decisions played out onstage in a perspective relative to the surrounding historical events. While this play depends solely on the actors to perform the story without the aid of video or scenic montage, Mann does employ the device of a narrator to explain certain subtexts to the audience. Identified as a technique common to epic documentary theatre, the narrator, in *Meshugah*, embodies the voice of the author and the central character as he appeared in the novel.

In answering the comment posed by interviewer Amanda Somers, "I assume you would almost always be starting your plays out here [at the McCarter] before New York," Mann replied,

I guess. But I don't know. I think so. I think it depends on whether this is the right stage. I think the new piece [*Meshugah*] can work here. I think I want to make sure that it will get picked up before I produce it though. I don't want to work this hard for three weeks. We didn't do that with *Greensboro* and I think that was a big mistake.⁸

Meshugah was produced on the McCarter's mainstage, but was not picked up for a commercial run. And as mentioned earlier, it did have a subsequent production at Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, in its 1999-2000 season. I spoke with Mann just before the Trinity production and one year after the production at the

⁸ Emily Mann, interview by Amanda Somers, "Major Themes in Emily Mann's Work as a Playwright and Director" (B.A. thesis, Rutgers University, 1997), 42.

McCarter. As of that date her questions about the direction her work as a playwright might take were still open.

Nevertheless, the plays of Emily Mann stand out as the finest examples of the form of documentary drama produced in this country to date. The effect television has had on the writing and appreciation of documentary theatre actually extends to all forms of theatre. I chose to discuss the documentary play because I feel that the evidence is most marked in this dramatic form and because television is one of the flagships in our society for the advent of the age of information, twenty-four hours of news every day without cease, resulting in a news machine that is voracious in its need to have material to report. To fill that void the news machine spins, creates, re-packages, and manufactures information, making the media the most effective documentary playwright of all.

Comparative study of how to measure the balance between an audience's intellectual and emotional response to a play, whether and why one type of experience (intellectual or emotional) is more pleasurable than the other, how certain plays achieve either effect or both, and how a drama (based on fiction or reality) can criticize the means of communication of our culture, while employing those means to achieve the same ends, are rich areas for further scholarly work.

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