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# Representations of the Family in Modern American Drama: Media Implications for the Theatre, Film and Television

John G. Blair

One of the implications of the present discourse is how foolish it turns out to be if we try to subdivide literary studies into “theory” versus “history” or “teaching” versus “research” or any comparable binary dichotomy. Whether I begin with a discussion of the ontology of texts or with the situation shared by all SAUTE members, that is, teaching in a Swiss university a foreign language and literature, the upshot will be the same. My particular concern involves American drama, but the basic issues are not national but literary and pedagogical.

For expository convenience I start by linking pedagogy with ontology, in particular the teacherly need to take into account for students at a Swiss university the peculiar nature of plays as printed texts. Quite obviously plays are not written to be read by readers but by production companies: directors, actors, lighting specialists, costumers.<sup>1</sup> In English-speaking parts of the world students can attend professional theatrical productions but only rarely do travelling English-language companies visit Geneva and then more often for Shakespeare than for American drama. Performances of American plays in translation are worse than no help because they tend to introduce their own confusions. Example: Arthur Miller’s *Death of Salesman* has been performed in French in Geneva, but its cultural valences are misleading if directly transposed into that cultural setting. Miller’s set calls for the Loman house,

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<sup>1</sup> Balz Engler is right to remind me that George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O’Neill are major exceptions to this generalization since they include long prose passages in their stage directions. These proto-fictional elements, however, do serve production companies as well as readers.

just now becoming free of its mortgage payments, to be so dwarfed by modern high-rise apartment buildings that Willie's carrots do not get enough light to grow. That house is comprehensible in the USA where individual dwellings dominate and, in recent years at least, about two-thirds of the population owns its own housing. But think of that setting from the point of view of students in this country. In Switzerland as a whole the comparable figure for home ownership is 30% and in the Canton of Geneva only 9% own the place where they live. The result in performance is that any allocation of a private dwelling to a lower-middle class "Loman" family speaking French sends misleading messages.

In order to study drama with any seriousness, I reaffirm, it is necessary to see it (in English) and not just read it. Drama texts, then, imply an ontology which differs palpably from those of poems or novels. They need to be read imaginatively, as if being staged, perhaps "constructively." Once we have taken these factors into account, then it will become possible to focus intelligently on thematic and cultural concerns such as the way(s) families are depicted in modern American drama.

Since the primary pedagogical need is to expose students to plays in production, I began a few years ago introducing into Geneva classrooms VHS video tapes as a source of professional-quality productions of plays. At once, however, such reproductions manifested their own complications: many of the video tapes on the market follow only the NTSC American-Japanese television standards. Multistandard equipment can overcome this drawback. A more telling complexity resides in the fact that many of the versions available were made in Hollywood as films, where changes, sometimes major, were introduced into the play texts either for media reasons or in view of the target audience or because the film maker interpreted the play text in an unprecedented and sometimes untheatrical way. Still other productions available on video reproduce stagings made for television, a medium with its own exigencies and interpretive possibilities. Hence it has become necessary for me to isolate a number of major factors that affect the way plays are treated in these extra-theatrical audio-visual media.

There are a surprising number of plays available for study. By now I have compiled a list of some 190-odd play titles that fit the following criteria: that they are marketed under the same title as a play written originally for the stage in English by an American playwright (no adaptations from fiction or of plays from other theatrical traditions and no musicals).<sup>2</sup> Access to VHS

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<sup>2</sup> I have made an exception for Chicano author Luis Valdes' *Zoot Suit*, which integrates Latino music inextricably into a representation of Mexican American subculture in relation to the so-called Pachuco murders in 1940s California.

tapes is sometimes a problem: few libraries in Europe include such collections and European scholars may find it hard to arrange viewing time in the USA. Many of the tapes listed in current catalogs are not actually available anywhere that I can find. The cumulative result is that I have not yet viewed even half of the titles on my list.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless I either own or have viewed virtually all versions of the major plays I am going to discuss here (see appendix for list of all plays with at least two productions available on video).

There is one theoretical issue that needs clarification before I turn to relevant aspects of the history of these media and some exemplary indications of how comparative media analysis works. The issue concerned is that of where the finalities reside in drama: in the "original play" or in the narrative or story line which can be transposed into any number of media. The essentializing of the "original play" is the position occupied by Egil Tornqvist, author of the only book I know on our subject, entitled *Transposing Drama: Studies in Representation* (1991). This view I find uncomfortably narrow since it implies a kind of sanctity of the original inspiration that fits more comfortably with romantic notions than with our own media-oriented time. I do admit, however, that I excluded from my list plays which were retitled in film or television versions; the use of the same title does manifest a desire to profit from whatever publicity or notoriety may have been associated with the prior theatrical production. My own view focuses more attention on a story line that may reappear in diverse settings and inflections.

As a quick example of the complexities sometimes involved in multiple adaptations and transpositions, I take one title from my master list: the 1989 play by Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang, whose *M. Butterfly* appeared as a film in 1993. These two settings of a celebrated French case of espionage and mistaken sexual identity would hardly be comprehensible without reference back to *Madame Butterfly* at the turn of this century, but that title readily evokes several different versions in different media: Puccini's opera was inspired by David Belasco's Broadway play, which adapted John Luther Long's novel, which, somewhat more distantly, drew inspiration from Pierre Loti's *Madame Crysanthème* recounting his visit to Japan in the late 19th century. Such transmutations are so multiple as to defeat any attempt to differentiate the "original" from the "adaptations."

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<sup>3</sup> For the full list see the spring 1996 issue of *American Studies International*.

Once past the essentialist notion of an "original text," we can take more seriously historical factors in the production and reception of the three primary media of staged entertainment that are involved here: the stage, film, and television. A thumbnail history of American drama in this century offers crucial background to understanding at what price such drama has gained an acceptance into reigning 20th-century conceptions of "literature" by largely cutting it off from "entertainment" and hence the most powerful media of our century, film and television (Internet is next).

Literary historians of the USA uniformly assert that American drama "comes of age" as of Eugene O'Neill's emergence around the time of World War One. From then on it deserves attention in a (Western) world scale of theatrical merit and significance. Prior to that time it was hardly worthy of notice because New York, like Paris and London, produced only sappy melodramas unworthy of serious attention. In short, only when American plays became complex and "modern," simultaneously losing any claim to a broad or popular audience, did they acquire "artistic merit." Entertainment, of course, persisted and indeed grew but its appeal was concentrated in staged musicals or films and then, after mid-century, television. Indeed American drama, as of the 1920s, aims at upper-middle class audiences ready to pay a stiff tariff in return for "serious" and "legitimate" drama. The result is that anyone who wants to pursue the evolution of melodrama as a mode starts in 19th-century theatre and then shifts in this century to film and then to television materials.

Complex differences show up in comparing Hollywood film versions of such plays as Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1932 and 1988) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962 and 1987), Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958 and 1984) or *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951 and 1983). The differences between media involve not simply techniques and their development over time but also differences in spectatorship: educational television reaches a relatively educated and upper-middle-class public with considerable socio-economic overlap with theatre audiences of recent time. Films, by comparison, have typically striven for the largest possible "mass" audience, which has often entailed the imposition of a happy ending. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, for example, appeared first as a 1940 film with William Holden in which the young bride who dies soon after childbirth is brought back to life after having made her visit to the town cemetery and its residents. The 1977 version, made for educational television, ends as Wilder wrote it, with a reconciliation of the recently dead with those who preceded her.

In the comparisons between versions that my study encourages, there are multiple vocabularies available for analysis. *Our Town* 1940 and *Our Town*



1977 can be read in terms of differences between Hollywood films and public television but also differences in credence between a time when World War II did not yet involve Americans directly and a time four decades later when Korea and even Vietnam seemed already to be history.

Even when happy endings are not imposed, Hollywood cultivates the appearance of "authenticity." Episodes or passages which can only be spoken of indirectly on stage are typically acted out on film with the result that spectators exercise their imaginations a good deal less, though it is often not easy to affirm with certainty whether the piece as a whole gains or loses by the remodelling process. One side benefit of the growing credibility of film studies is that differences between the media need not be freighted with reflex judgments in favour of one or the other.

One difference relevant to many of these plays-as-films involves the shift from black-and-white to colour, which became dominant as of the 1960s. While I know no definitive theorization of this factor, Rudolph Arnheim has a suggestive approach. Black and white constituted a convention of representation that film viewers were for years obliged to live with, basically until the economics of colour became favourable enough to justify most films appearing in that medium. The move to colour, then, amounted to a removal of the convention since objects could appear "as they really do."<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of authenticity which differs between the stage and both of the purely visual media is the freedom with which both film and television can appear to move on location at will. Particularly the hallmark of cinema, sequences on location bring both strengths and weaknesses with them. Credibility and authenticity may well be enhanced for some viewers when places and events are not just talked about but re-enacted for the cameras. On the other hand, viewers may become dependent on being shown everything as if "literally," a trap theatregoers are unlikely to fall into. Made-for-television plays tend, perhaps for reasons of production costs, not to stray far from a stage set which is basically similar to what the actors would find in a theatre, though the production process may often depart radically from that of a play on stage. For example a television production may be glued together from shots taken out of sequence: a wall removed in order to record all the dialogue requiring a certain camera angle, followed by the shifting of walls and a complementary series of fragmentary interactions. Television actors, like those on film, rarely have a chance to participate in building a scene in interaction with other characters.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Film as Art*, 1958, as cited by Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6. I am grateful to Balz Engler for calling my attention to this useful book.

The greatest difference, obviously, is the camera which directs viewer attention in ways which are quite impossible in the theatre. On stage, actors and director have to work hard to focus attention when and where they want it whereas film and television productions have it easy. The camera controls not only angle of vision but also closeness and hence intensity. Anthony Davies, concerned above all with filming Shakespeare's plays, defines the difference as falling between "theatrical space" and "cinematic space:"

The architectural similarity of the cinema with the theatre concealed the profound changes in the psychology of audience response. While the spatial divisions remain, the psychological effect of the modern camera's spatial versatility is to break down the constant of distance between the viewer and the detail in the framed image. Not only is the image itself in sustained movement, but so also is the view-point, for the camera's function is one of exploration rather than presentation; one of making the spectator conscious of the dynamics of space in breadth as well as depth. (Davies 7-8)

As a result filmic action is necessarily discontinuous rather than cumulative, and what Davies calls "theatrical frontality" (5) focuses a spectator's experience in the theatre on the "presenters (not just the performers) of a dramatic work" (6). In cinema, by contrast, as André Bazin puts it, "the screen is not a frame like that of a picture, but a mask which allows only part of the action to be seen."<sup>5</sup>

Thus far the differentiation has been drawn primarily between the stage and films but television complicates the issues because it shares many cinematic camera-based features but not all. To test differences between these two audiovisual media, I turn to Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, so far the only play by an African American to be available in two versions. The earlier, a black-and-white film with Sidney Poitier dates from 1961, whereas the 25th-anniversary colour version of 1989 starring Danny Glover was made for television.

One of the prop motifs in this play is a certain plant which the mother has been barely able to keep alive in the dark ghetto environment. She will return to the apartment at the very end to reclaim this emblem of continuity in family life. The film version treats this plant matter-of-factly, showing it as part of the furnishings of the apartment, seen always from a camera position somewhere within the apartment. In the television remake, however, the plant's importance has been established early on by situating the camera outside the kitchen window (as if several stories up) using the window to frame the grandmother's soliloquy to the plant. The film may look more

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<sup>5</sup> From *What Is Cinema*, I, (English translation 1967) as cited by Davies, 6.

"authentic," but the television version is more dramatic. This difference may not only reflect differences in the media but also the quarter-century that separates them in time, a period in which all camera work in the relevant media became notably more active and inventive.

A side issue of particular interest is the way that media discourse can be, in the hands of a talented film maker, put to the service of extending the implications of a playtext into the functioning of the medium itself. I know of only one example so far, but it is so effective that I want to call explicit attention to it. It comes from Robert Altman's 1986 film of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*. On stage the playwright uses shifting and contradictory conventions to unsettle the audience's confidence in what is going on, and in particular what is said in exposition about prior events. For example, the father, who has been confined for most of the play to a reserved space on one side of the stage, suddenly crosses out of his preserve to join a controversy among his two children as they recall past events incompatibly. Altman finds another way to suggest un-reliability to his film audience: by introducing contradictions between what a character says and what we see by way of illustration.

The young woman describes a day when she and her mother were walking in a strange town trying to locate the missing father. Her words evoke a quiet walking together hand in hand, but what we see is an angry mother dragging her daughter along faster than she can keep up. Result: we know we cannot take this memory at face value. The same trick is applied on the male side as the son recalls when he as a boy left home with his father one night. He says they walked long distances silently, but we see the father talking and gesturing energetically to his son. Once again Altman has found a brilliant device which extends the experience elicited by the play but in a uniquely filmic fashion.

One final remark on the relationship between printed texts and the changes that may or may not be introduced in different adaptations: film makers have often engaged the original playwrights, either as filmscript writers or as consultants, partly to offset possible complaints on their part concerning changes. Some playwrights themselves may generate multiple versions of the "original" play for diverse reasons. The most revealing case known to me is Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In addition to the normal "authorized" text, Williams also rewrote the last act for the original Broadway production at the behest of its director, Elia Kazan, a version which is printed as an appendix in the Signet edition of the play. The film of 1958 with Burl Ives and Elizabeth Taylor partly followed this so-called Broadway version of Act Three, but Williams himself was credited as a writer, thereby "authorizing" an unprecedented elaboration of the father-



son relationship of Big Daddy and Brick. For this play the most sensitive issue was the lurking implications of homosexuality involving Brick and his now-dead friend Skipper. The pressures on the script reflected not only the film maker's uneasiness about public response to such issues but also the Motion Picture Production Code, which from 1934 through 1965 threatened to ban any references to "impure love, the love which society has always regarded as wrong and which has been banned by divine law" (291).<sup>6</sup> This film, in order to offer some motivation for Brick's alcoholism, shows father and son railing obscurely about meaninglessness, an inadequate response to the suppression of the core motivation. The 1984 version with Jessica Lange playing Maggie the Cat is closest to Williams' printed text: not only had the Code disappeared into a voluntary ratings system,<sup>7</sup> but public acknowledgement of the existence of homosexuality had evolved considerably, as, for example, in the 1973 vote of the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the list of mental diseases.

These few pages have been devoted to sketching the kinds of issues, theoretical and historical, which become inescapable for any serious study of these American plays and their adaptations in audiovisual media. Having acknowledged the range and importance of such concerns, I can now devote my remaining space to the original topic: depictions of the family in modern American drama.

The short way of putting it is that the American family is depicted, with few exceptions, as a disaster. Throughout the 20th century public figures have reiterated that the family is the bedrock of American cultural value (Newt Gingrich is only the most recent orator on behalf of this venerable shibboleth). But the playwrights depict families that are destructive prisons, as in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, or desperately hypocritical self-promotions, as in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or *All My Sons*. For half a century and more these playwrights have been suggesting that there was no imaginable hope left in the family as an American institution, whether gauged from the point of view of individual searches for fulfillment or a larger concern for a social collectivity. Think of Tennessee Williams' decayed Southern gentry as in *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *A Glass Menagerie*. For nearly all the characters the past so dominates the present as to frustrate any possibilities of fulfillment. Similarly desperate portraits persist in more recent time with Edward Albee (*Who's*

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<sup>6</sup> The Code is printed as an appendix to Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, 286-92.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically the film which ended the hegemony of the Code was also based on an American play: Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) where the issues concerned less sexuality than blasphemous language. See Leff and Simmons, Chapter 11.

*Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is his only play available on video) and then Sam Shepard, represented on video by Robert Altman's brilliant *Fool for Love* and *True West*.

To be sure, Neil Simon offers a string of sophisticated comedies, of which a dozen exist on video, recuperating a residuum of hope through laughter for the lives of couples (including the 1968 odd couple), but by and large the exceptions are so few as to demand special attention. Among the plays which have at least two productions on video, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1953) are the two which must be accounted for.

*Our Town* has the special distinction of being the only American play with three versions on video and the differences among them point up the different periods and audiences for which this "heart-warming story" has been filmed or taped. The original black-and-white film of 1940, featuring William Holden and Martha Scott, was voted one of the ten best films of the year by the National Board of Review. Its primary emphasis was on nostalgia for the small-town life of the turn of the century, as was clear from its reversal of the ending so that the young farm mother who died in childbirth could simply visit the town dead in the cemetery and then return to life. Thornton Wilder's play text not only offered nostalgia but also a requiem for a way of life that even in the late 1930s seemed long gone. But Hollywood in 1940, with a European war already well launched and American involvement uncertain, was more engaged in reaffirming those down-home images that Americans would have to think of themselves as fighting for if it came to that.

In 1977 the second version of *Our Town* was made for television. Hal Holbrook embodies the narrator who strolls out among the townsfolk on the school gymnasium floor where folksy actors walk through sketchy props to speak their lines. The town carries rather more echoes of a 1950s suburb than a 1900 farm village but the point remains largely the same: Americans from the 1970s audience for "educational" television (PBS, Public Broadcasting System) were susceptible to feelings of nostalgia for the earlier and simpler time they too in their generation remembered (or thought they remembered). Here, however, Wilder's sobering ending is maintained. The brightest girl in her high school class, having married her dumb-farmer beau, dies in giving birth to her second child and goes off to remake acquaintance with the town characters who inhabit the cemetery. After Vietnam death is acknowledged in a more candid way, even if it is treated as something "normal" more than awesome.

The third version of Wilder's play represents the rarest kind of video offering, a stage production filmed for distribution on video, this one a 1989

Lincoln Center production from New York with Spalding Gray playing the narrator with a delicious New England accent. The camera shows us the whole stage initially but since almost no props are physically present, it does not linger on this outer frame. Instead the camera concentrates our attention on each cluster of characters as they interact. The primary innovation of this production is the aggressive edge given to the narrator who often cuts off the speeches of the townsfolk as if he (and by implication we) were impatient with their sentimental maundering. In relation to the theatrical and PBS publics of recent American time the play still expects the audience to respond to down-home types, but with the impatience reserved for old folks who recount their stories once or twice too often.

The succession of these three versions shows how differently the same basic theatrical material can be shaped for audiences with different primary concerns and orientations. The collection of families that go to make up a town still has its claim on American attention but their way of life gets less and less respect as time goes on.

Among the American plays which have received two video productions, the only one which reaffirms family values in any serious way is African American: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1953). After the play's successful run in New York, Lorraine Hansberry herself was hired to write a screenplay, now belatedly published, in which she made the play over into a document of life in the black ghetto aimed at the mass audience of whites who could be counted on to know little about that segment of life in America. Her script was never filmed, despite the use of her name in the credits, however, perhaps because the upbeat message about "good blacks" would have been lost. The 1961 film, starring Sidney Poitier, concentrated on the same message as the play but now reoriented to a mass audience. The implication was that despite all the human pressures to which black families were subjected in the job market and in their cramped ghetto quarters, they were ultimately loyal to admirable family values appropriate to white suburban life. The film was also judged one of the ten best films of 1961 by the National Review Board and as such it did contribute a positive vision of the implications of the Supreme Court decision of 1954, *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in the public schools and launched the long process of implementing racial integration. Comparable Broadway plays of the 1950s concentrating on whites, say Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), offered little hope for the survival of marriages because of repression and hyper-self-consciousness. On the other hand, this 1961 black-and-white version of *Raisin* achieved its popularity only by whitening out the serious social implications of the black family's desire to move into a suburban house. The film suppresses several scenes from the play

indispensable to understanding the social climate. Film-goers did not see a black neighbour bring over a newspaper report of violence greeting the first black family to move into a white neighbourhood (ostensibly modelled on Cicero, Illinois, a Chicago suburb). Instead the camera takes us on a tour of the ideal dream house with no white persons visible, as if the house could be abstracted from its social surroundings.

The twenty-fifth anniversary version of *Raisin*, made for television in 1989, starring Ruby Dee and Danny Glover, restored the original script and suppressed the camera's visit to the suburb. This approach is much more effective, leaving the audience with the family's dream of acquisition still mortgaged with uncertainties about how they will be greeted by the white neighbours. One remarkable detail about these two versions is that the same actor plays the part of the delegate of the white neighbourhood association who proposes to buy out the family rather than have them move in. This unexpected physical continuity graphically reminds students of American Studies just how little dated the issues of this 1953 play still seem in the late 1980s, despite all the changes concerning the colour line that have taken place in American life.

In relation to the family as depicted in modern American drama, then, I find that the two exceptions to negative portraiture offer special circumstances. For *Our Town* it is the enduring appeal of nostalgic looks back to earlier and simpler times which seems to work with American viewers as much late in the century as fifty years before, but in all cases those traditional families are written out of the present and its concerns. *Raisin in the Sun* marginalizes the positive reaffirmation of family life by imagining it as involving only blacks.

The use of video tapes here has been to broaden the investigation to audiences of different times and different compositions than those for which the plays were originally performed. What is remarkable is that through so many different playwrights and media and productions the underlying negativity should remain so strong, despite the two partial exceptions I have studied in some detail. According to modern American drama, the family has not much of a future.

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