The Truth which "Passeth Show": The Staging of Presence in *Venus* and *M. Butterfly*

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"There is an element of danger to your presence"

Hwang, *M. Butterfly*

Résumé: *Mon but dans cette étude est d'examiner les formes du spectacle grotesque montrées par deux pièces contemporaines,* Venus *(1996) de Susan Lori-Parks et* M. Butterfly *(1996) de Henry D. Hwang, dans lesquelles les catégories d'absence et de présence surfacent comme des éléments constitutifs communs à travers „la mise en scène" de „l'Autrui" racial et sexuel. Mon argument montre non seulement que* Venus *et* M. Butterfly *s'encadrent dans la conceptualisation du grotesque faite par Joyce Carol Oates, mais elles accomplissent aussi la fonction de grotesque, c'est-à-dire de „commentaire historique" sur la présence déconcertante de l'Autrui à l'intérieur de soi-même.*

Keywords: *grotesque, other, presence, representation, self*

An arguably rhetorical question frames my argument in this paper: where else could the idea of presence be examined and tested but on a stage which *presents* us simultaneously with illusion and reality, the visual and the verbal, text and performance, self and other? Until recently, theater has been seen as "an essential repository of presence": as Roger Copeland reminds us, most answers to the question of what makes the theater unique have had something to do with the fact that "it's live and unmediated, that it can put us in the *presence* of other living, breathing human beings" (39, 31). But Derrida's assault on metaphysical presence – in particular, his reflections on Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" – has rendered such answers problematic. With a nod to Derrida, David Savran maintains that theater is "always about the impossibility of representing what was never fully there in the first place" (587). According to Copeland, theatrical presence has been variously defined as "stage presence", an actor's charisma that commands our attention, her ability to either project a fictional character or to step outside of that role and reveal her "authentic" self (Chaikin); a sense of "reciprocity" between actors and spectators (Copeland); a heightened sense of "presentness", of the here and now (Jones); an illusion of reality (Stanislavski's "as if"); a state of pure, unmediated perception, both visual and auditory (Artaud); and finally, as an *absence* of representation (Derrida and Baudrillard) (31). Copeland rightly concludes that presence in theatre cannot be reduced to liveliness: "The ongoing critique of presence is valuable insofar as it reminds us that no experience (no matter how 'live') is entirely unmediated" (42)[1].

A highly structured, humanly embodied, and ideologically charged form of art, theater draws its "substance" – a concept I will return to shortly – from its power to transcend the written word by making it flesh and turning it into action, which means that theater is by its nature sensuous. True, words can be detached from experience, they are "not the thing itself", but they do point, however ambiguously or distortedly, to a referent beyond the confines of the stage. As Christopher Bigsby states, it is by "pitching word against dramatized experience" (11) that the theater comes alive for us. That experience always feels "real" to those "touched" or "moved" by it – whether it is love, oppression, injustice, revolt, etc. Along similar lines, Zander Brietzke has observed that "Everything on the stage has the capacity to stand for something else and to resonate with private and collective experiences" (28). Brietzke invokes Artaud's "metaphysical theater of sounds and gestures" and Brecht's "political theater of clarity and insight" as precursors of what he calls "spectacular theater", which he defines as that theater "filled with movement and the whole-bodied presence of human figures" (xii, 12)[2]. Unlike any other artistic form, the theatrical experience allows us "to see everything simultaneously in relation to all parts", which "creates a full and understandable visual text apart from and supplemental to the written text" (16). Thus, he goes on to add, good theater "always sparks the sense that there is more to see than can be perceived entirely at one time" (24).

My aim in this paper is to examine the forms of grotesque spectacle offered by two contemporary plays, Susan Lori-Parks's *Venus* (1996) and Henry D. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1986), in which the categories of absence and presence emerge as mutually constitutive through the "staging" of racial and gendered "otherness". According to Joyce Carol Oates, "the grotesque always involves a blunt physicality that no amount of epistemological exegesis can exorcise". She points out that, "in the presence of the grotesque", we "immediately sense" that "it is both 'real' and 'unreal' simultaneously, as states of mind are real enough – emotions, moods, shifting obsessions, beliefs – though immeasurable". Not only do *Venus* and *M. Butterfly* fit Oates's conceptualization of the grotesque, but they also fulfill what she considers to be the grotesque's function, namely, that of a "historical commentary" on the disconcerting presence of the other within the self. Their subversive potential lies in the border crossings they effect, sexual and political, and re-present in the "grotesque body" as a site where patriarchal and imperialist fears and desires converge. As John Jervis states, "The grotesque body transgresses its own limits, is excessive in its very nature", and so is the spectacle it generates, which "dramatizes the excess of representation" (19, 221). The representation in question is, of course, colonialism "in which the other acquires a voice not its own, and images imposed on it, images that it has to recognize itself in" (73). Both *Venus* and *M. Butterfly* are based on true stories which they recreate through non-linear, episodic plots and striking visual images related to objectification and oppression. In so doing, they touch a cultural nerve, sensitizing us to Western cultural myths and stereotypes about African-American women and Asians, respectively.

It should be clear by now that "theatrical grotesque" owes something to Artaud's "theater of cruelty", which "lives only by materialization" (108), with body, thought, theater, and text all but indistinguishable. Artaud was highly skeptical of "lucid" or "analytical" language as a representational medium, preferring instead "an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what

it would reveal", or "translates" the "poetry of thought" (71). In pursuit of a "natural" language that could simultaneously conceal and reveal powerful feelings, Artaud's theater aspired toward what Derrida called a "closure of representation" ("The Theatre" 10). A representation cannot be fully "present" precisely because it signifies or alludes to something that isn't fully there. For both Artaud and Derrida, presence is shot through with traces of absence (Copeland 35-6).

Artaud's mistrust of "lucid language" brings to mind Nietzsche, who interrogated the Cartesian notion that thinking/consciousness is a guarantee of presence, or, in his terms, "substance". Nietzsche proposed that "our belief in the concept of substance – that when there is thought there has to be something that 'thinks' – is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed" (Section 484). More often than not, he implied, "the doer" is difficult to pin down, his/her thoughts reflecting deeply held cultural beliefs[3]. As Hwang insists in his "Afterword" to *M. Butterfly*, gender and racial clichés "have so saturated our consciousness" that those who refuse to confront the truth "will remain in a world of surfaces, misconceptions running rampart" (100). For the playwrights I am concerned with here, as for Derrida, the subject remains "absolutely indispensable". "I don't destroy the subject; I situate it", Derrida insists (qtd. in Hutcheon 159). To situate, Linda Hutcheon explains, is also to de-center, that is, "to recognize differences – of race, gender, class, sexual orientation" (159). It is precisely by situating or contextualizing the subject within the framework of both history and ideology that Parks and Hwang bring to the fore – on stage – "the omnipresence of culture" (Jameson 14) while also suggesting that subjectivity remains "inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others" (Oates).

Theater, for Parks, is the perfect place to resurrect the dead, excavate the past, and "make", i.e. recreate, history. As she sees it, her task as a playwright is "to locate the ancestral burial ground – dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down". For Parks, as for Artaud and Beckett, language is a "physical act […] which involves the whole body"(qtd. in Bigsby 308). Much of the tension of *Venus* comes from constructing the body as a "freak", a figure on the boundary between the erotic and the exotic. The title character is based on a historical figure, Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman whose body was displayed publicly in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century. Dubbed the Hottentot Venus, Baartman became a popular spectacle for white audiences who were fascinated and at the same time horrified by her outsized posterior, or "great heathen buttocks", described by a 19th-century historian (quoted in the play) as "distorted beyond all European notions of beauty" (9)[4]. Rather than just an uncomprehending victim who desires to be treated with love and respect, Venus comes across as complicit in her humiliation – too easily persuaded, Parks implies, to go to London to "make a mint" in Mother Showman's traveling show of Nine Human Wonders (62). In her contextualized reading of the play, Jean Young takes issue with Parks's fictional representation of Baartman as "having control and options concerning her captivity, and enjoying her sexual exploitation". Thus, when two South Africans, The Brother and The Man suggest that she "Come to England. Dance a little", as folks will "watch" and "clap", The Girl (as The Venus is first introduced) asks: "Do I have a choice? I'd like to think on it" (14-15). Later, when the Baron Docteur tells her that she cannot stay in London forever and suggests that she go to her homeland and family, The Venus replies: "I don't wanna go back inny more.

I like yr company too much. Besides, it was a shitty life" (Parks 83). To invest Baartman with this kind of agency – where there was actually none – is to render her a participant in rather than a victim of sexual exploitation, to "read" her naivety in patriarchal and imperialist terms as "compliance" (Young).

Against her will, The Venus becomes an oddity, as she finds herself exhibited nude in a cage, constantly subjected to ridicule, forced to "perform" her cultural otherness, and even tried in a court for indecency. At the end of the first act, the court "rules not to rule" (64) and congratulates itself that "in our great country even a female Hottentot can find a court to review her status". In this court scene, as Rosemary Wiss perceptively notes, The Venus is "ambiguously situated – judged by the criterion of the knowing rational self, but without the authority of determining her own position" (19). She is then taken to Paris by the Baron Docteur, who claims to be in love with her, while also displaying her to his colleagues as an object of scientific study. At the time, the pseudoscientific theories underlying such studies served only to reinforce prejudices against physical and cultural difference. According to Sander L. Gilman, by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of Black females (and males) came to be associated with deviant sexuality, and nineteenth-century physicians and sociologists linked the iconography of the two "seemingly unrelated female images – the icon of the Hottentot female and the icon of the prostitute" (225). A twisted debate ensues as Mother Showman and Baron Docteur fight over who has the right to exhibit Venus.

In an article called "The Art of the Difficult", Tony Kushner sees Parks's play as a farcical tragedy that "shows things you almost never get to see onstage and might wish you weren't seeing". It is through the seamless integration of the verbal and the visual that Parks manages to stage "the unstageable" – the dissection and implicit dehumanization of a body that, literally and metaphorically, overflows its boundaries – as suggested by the minute report of an autopsy performed on Venus by Baron Docteur[5]. Parks too is in the business of "dissecting", of taking apart the story of the Hottentot Venus in order to deconstruct the Lacanian idea of femininity as contained spectacle, which exists only as a representation of masculine desire, as absent in itself, or as incapable of self-representation. If, in Lacanian theory, the woman is always, already "spoken for", in *Venus*, her "voice" emerges into the text as a supplement. In light of Derrida's analysis, the supplement means here both an addition to the normative, legal discourse that objectifies Venus and a substitute, a replacement for what is absent, missing, lacking, namely, the role of desire in the construction of Venus's identity (Derrida 298).

In the play's final scene, The Venus herself turns narrator and articulates a longing for what she has been denied – love and humanity – and that now seems implacably lost:

> When Death met Love Death deathed Love
> and left Love tuh rot
> *au naturel* end for thuh Miss Hottentot.
> Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, thats it
> Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit. (Parks 130)

Both the pathos and absurdity of the circumstances surrounding Venus's tragic life and death converge in these lines, culminating with the vision of "a scene of love" in which Venus asks an imaginary partner to kiss her. We are left to wonder whether this invocation is an erotically-charged performance, fueled by a conventional romantic fantasy, or one tinged with irony, fostering a better understanding of and appreciation for the love that was missed. The invitation, which projects Venus's internal being into a palpable, dramatic *presence*, could also be a plea for empathy, which requires that we reach out to the other and break down the artificial barriers that separate us. In Kushner's words, the play expresses "global empathy, a mourning for all of suffering humanity, and, at the same time, an anger at oppression and oppressors, an indictment of wrongs yet to be righted".

This is precisely the message of Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly*, which the author sees as a "plea to all sides" – men and women, Westerners and Easterners – "to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings" (100). Both *Venus* and *M. Butterfly* can be said to foreground two discursive strategies: what critic Asuman Suner has called "the feminization of the colonized" and "the colonization of the feminine" (50). In Hwang's text, these constitute "intertwined modes of the Orientalist discourse", which constructs both women and the colonized as "Others with regard to the Western, white, male subject" (50). If in *Venus,* Africa is dark and primitive, in *M. Butterfly*, the Orient is "mysterious" and "decadent", and yet in both cases these qualities are characteristically presented as "feminine"[6]. Equally important, in *M. Butterfly*, as in *Venus*, confinement emerges as a complex metaphor for social relations and the individual psyche. "We are all prisoners of our time and place" (47), Rene Gallimard states in *M. Butterfly*, as he pleads with us to see things from his point of view.

Both sources for *M. Butterfly* – the true yet bizarre story of a French diplomat's 20-year-long affair with an opera diva who turned out to be not only a spy but a man as well[7], and the story of the ill-fated romance between Pinkerton and Butterfly/Ciociosan in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* – speak to Hwang's long-standing preoccupation with the question of identity, sexual and racial alike. More specifically, to Hwang, a cultural icon like *Madame Butterfly* captures the sexual and racial attitudes that inform Western relations to Asia. The Frenchman, renamed Rene Gallimard, fantasizes he is Pinkerton, and that his lover – Song Liling – is his Butterfly. Ignorant of the fact that Peking Opera is a transvestite theater, he is convinced that the performer he has "known" and "loved" is a woman – not just any woman, but "the Perfect Woman". In a way, he is right, since the image of the naïve, childish, and submissive woman is his own creation, which, Hwang suggests, is actually a cultural construction that masks Western desires and fears. More pointedly, these racial and gender stereotypes have in turn conditioned political relations between Asia and the West, being invoked to explain, in part, the debacle of the Vietnam War.

Gallimard, whom the first act establishes as "not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful" (10), believes he can become "a real man" only if he can exercise power over a beautiful and submissive woman. As their relationship develops, Gallimard's desire to subdue and dominate Song becomes more aggressive. Stung by humiliation at work, after naively

suggesting that the Chinese will join forces with, or even submit to, whoever has the greatest power, Gallimard makes Song bear the brunt of his humiliation and demands to see her naked, the one thing she has consistently refused him. In the last scene of act II, Gallimard insists, "You have to do what I say! I'm conjuring you up in *my* mind!" (78) No sooner does he make this request than he withdraws it, afraid that what he wants to see is *not* actually there.

Still, the play leaves open just what images of Asians are appropriate since the most important Asian figure is a transvestite who admits to practicing deception as often as possible. Song's multiple performances – both on stage, as an actress, and off stage, as a spy – show that gender is not a given, but a construct, fashioned through certain bodily movements, gestures, and acts. The constant shuttling between different positions and roles makes it impossible to tell which performance of Song (male or female) is "true" and which one is "false" even when he removes his disguise and insists on being himself. Both in court and in the final scene between them, Song tries to get Gallimard to admit that he is still attracted to his Butterfly, even though she is a "man"[8]. Gallimard realizes that it is he who has been Butterfly all along, the one duped by love, whereas the spy was actually the Pinkerton who "preyed on his love". The devastating revelation accounts for his desperate wish to rewrite his story, "always searching for a new ending […] where she returns at last in my arms". Gallimard's imprisonment is thus both literal and metaphorical: he is held captive by the government he betrayed as well as by his own illusions about the Oriental woman willing to sacrifice herself for the love of a man, even a worthless one.

In the last scene, as he puts makeup on his face, Gallimard makes manifest – to his prison audience and to us – what his story has hidden all along. It is at this point that Hwang deconstructs the cultural myth underlying Puccini's opera by having the French diplomat turn himself into Butterfly. In so doing, Gallimard fulfils his "vision of the Orient" and reclaims that part of himself he lost upon discovering Song's betrayal. The subversive role reversal highlights Gallimard's choice of illusion/fantasy over reality, just as his self-definition – "My name is Rene Gallimard, also known as Madame Butterfly" – captures the gender ambiguity enacted through his transvestite performance. In his analysis of David Cronenberg's 1993 film adaptation of the play, Suner calls our attention to the contrast between "the smooth and lyrical tone" of Gallimard's voice, which suggests the elegance of Madame Butterfly, and the grotesque spectacle of his body – both male and female, both Western and Oriental (62)[9]. To Suner, this transformation is "monstrous" because it involves the transgression of the conventional boundaries of gender *and* ethnic identity; following Oates, I would call it "grotesque" because the obsession which triggers the switch of identities certainly feels real to Gallimard, but to us his vision remains "immeasurable", if not horrifying.

M. Butterfly is a theatrical tour de force, as it skillfully combines all the elements of theater (Oriental and Western music, dance, ornate costumes, non-linear, episodic plot, multiple casting) while also calling attention to the power of theatrical illusion[10]. These experiments with theatrical convention foster a distance-immersion dialectic that, as I have shown, also operates in *Venus*. In both cases, we find ourselves critical of and at the same time complicit with the spectacle unfolding before our eyes. Thus confronted with *images* of cultural distortion

embodied in the figures of "the Hottentot Venus" and "Madame Butterfly", we are genuinely moved to question the *ideas* shaping our ways of seeing and understanding difference.

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1 Along similar lines, Robert Knopf calls attention to the paradox of realism/life-likeness: "whereas theater is inherently more lifelike because it occurs live and in three dimensions, the presence of three dimensional actors in a theater – a non-real space – may undercut the production's resemblance to life at the same time that the actors increase its 'liveliness'" (13).

2 Contrary to Aristotle, Brietzke considers spectacle as the most important element in today's theater, attuned as this is – or should be – to our visual culture (12).

3 In another note from 1887, Nietzsche writes: "The concept of substance is a consequence of the concept of the subject: not the reverse!" (Sections 484, 485).

4 After her death, Baartman's sexual organs and buttocks were preserved and housed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the late twentieth century (Young).

5 During the intermission, Baron Docteur shares most of this report with the audience, noting, among other things, the long growths that were found descending from Venus's labia.

6 According to Edward Said, Orientalism refers to a cluster of notions that develop around the idea of the Orient, such as its "separateness, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (206). In *M. Butterfly*, the Orient is the scene of escapist sexual fantasy and of imperialist fantasy.

7 As we learn from the Afterword, Hwang was inspired by the newspaper account, "France Jails 2 in Odd Case of Espionage", in the May issue of *New York Times* from 1986 (94).

8 As Hwang points out, "Because they are submissive and obedient, good natives of both sexes necessarily take on 'feminine' characteristics in a colonialist world" (99).

9 Incidentally, Oates singles out Cronenberg as "the most inspired filmmaker of the grotesque of our time".

10 Gallimard and his friend Marc address the audience directly and even interact with them, as when Marc flirts with the women in the audience.

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