



AMERICAN DRAMATISTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Opening Doors

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

AMERICAN DRAMATISTS IN
THE 21ST CENTURY

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LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023

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Cover design: Ben Anslow

Cover image: (L-R) Nikki Crawford, Samuel Ray Gates, Shannon Dorsey, and
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bigsby, C. W. E., author.

Title: American dramatists in the 21st century : opening doors / Christopher Bigsby.

Description: London ; New York : Methuen Drama, 2023. | Includes index. |

Summary: "Analyzing the work of 7 American playwrights whose careers began in the present century, each chapter of this book focuses on a different playwright: David Adjmi, Julia Cho, Jackie Sibbles Drury, Will Eno, Martyna Majok, Dominique Morisseau and Anna Ziegler. In addition to covering all their works, and providing a sense of their critical reception, Bigsby also includes brand new interviews with the playwrights themselves, and exclusive discussions of unpublished works, the texts having been supplied by the authors. Bigsby argues that the diverse range of racial, religious, gendered, and, in several instances, immigrant backgrounds from which these playwrights come means that they all see America from a different perspective. These playwrights differ in their styles but share an interest in identity, as well as a desire to break the fourth wall, often seeing the audience as intimately involved with the work on stage. Their careers have all advanced through development, staged readings, and small venues to major stages, and they have picked up many awards along the way (including Pulitzers, Obies and in one case a McArthur 'Genius Grant'). The book, therefore, is in part an account of how North American theatre works from the point of view of those who commit to the challenging task of making their living by writing for it. At a time when, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, theatre has been under greater pressure than ever, it is a reminder of what a present tense art has to offer, as it holds a mirror up to a society ever concerned with its own sense of itself in a changing world"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022029777 | ISBN 9781350340480 (hardback) | ISBN 9781350340527 (paperback) | ISBN 9781350340497 (epub) | ISBN 9781350340503 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350340510

Subjects: LCSH: American drama—21st century—History and criticism. | Dramatists,
American—21st century—Interviews. | LCGFT: Literary criticism. | Interviews.

Classification: LCC PS353 .B53 2023 | DDC 812/.609—dc23/eng/20221004

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022029777>

ISBN:	HB:	978-1-3503-4048-0
	ePDF:	978-1-3503-4050-3
	eBook:	978-1-3503-4049-7

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the kindness of Julia Cho, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Martyna Majok and Anna Ziegler who provided me with copies of their work

INTRODUCTION

The American theatre has changed in recent years. Doors have opened that were if not closed then only ajar, even as a national debate about identity has become more central than ever. First- and second-generation immigrants have used the stage to explore the nature of their relationship to a country whose motto, until replaced by In God We Trust, was E Pluribus Unum. The writers considered here include a Syrian-Jewish American, Korean American, Jamaican American, Polish American and Haitian American. Women have increasingly claimed centre stage. In the 2019–20 season, eight out of the ten (in fact fourteen because of ties) of the most produced plays in America were by women, while twelve out of twenty (in fact twenty-two because of ties) of the most produced playwrights were also women. In 2022, Lynn Nottage had three plays on Broadway. There is a reason that women predominate in this study.

An increasing number of theatres have sought to give space to new writers whose path to success has often involved staged readings, development and productions in small, sometimes unnervingly small, spaces though reviewers, for whom such would once have fallen below the radar, are now inclined to keep a watchful eye. This includes *The New York Times*. Along the way, as the size of audiences grew, the writers considered here have all picked up awards from the kind of grants and fellowships which enabled them to put food on the table and maintain confidence in themselves, to national and international recognition, including Pulitzer Prizes. Dominique Morisseau won the McArthur so-called genius grant worth \$625,000. In the years since 1981, playwrights have been honoured just sixteen times by the McArthur Foundation. Of these, fourteen are either women or members of a minority group, again an emphasis reflected in *Contemporary American Dramatists*. Though this is a book about playwrights, it also reflects the changing nature of the society they address.

If doors have opened, in 2020–1 they closed as the Covid pandemic took hold. Many lost their lives, economies suffered and restrictions were imposed. The theatre was not immune. A few companies responded by taking productions online, but most entered a period of enforced hibernation. A few closed down completely, never to re-open. Online versions were clearly a boon, but they were also a reminder that an essential element of theatre is presence. A present-tense art, it takes place in the presence of audiences who breathe the same air (hence the restrictions), occupy the same moment, respond to those on stage as those on stage respond to them. Though individuals bring their own experiences, convictions, feelings to bear, they are also responding to those around them. Theatre is social, whether in a small space where exposure is unavoidable, or Broadway's sometimes cavernous auditoria. An online play is impervious to audiences. Time is not shared nor, usually, is the experience. In a sense audiences become voyeurs, observers rather than full participants.

Audiences in the theatre, of course, are not one thing. They have different reasons for attending, looking for different things, consenting to enter the lives of others to a differing

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extent, leaning back in their seats to be entertained, or leaning forward, captured by something more than the moment. They are, however, present, having signed up to an implied contract which finds them seated alongside strangers and exposed to a story whose unfamiliarity becomes familiar. As the director and theatre theoretician Herb Blau remarked, theatre is a ratification of the social. He quotes Virginia Woolf's remark, 'No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death,' as he does John Ashberry's 'For we never knew, never knew what joined us together.' He quotes, too, from Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*: 'There was nothing for the audience to do ... They were silent ... Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough.'¹ At the end of the play (a pageant) mirrors are turned on them by the performers.

Mirrors are turned on the audiences by all the playwrights considered here who write plays in which characters engage directly with audiences, the fourth wall proving fully permeable. In a Will Eno play a character counts the number in the audience. Dominique Morisseau even posts what she calls Rules of Engagement, in theatres or programmes, in which she exhorts those attending to be a full part of the drama, declaring, 'Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say "amen" should you need to. This is community.' Community, indeed, celebrated and threatened, is another link, the question being what constitutes it in a country which simultaneously celebrates and distrusts difference. In Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* the audience is invited on stage, or at least some of them are, as racial divisions are confronted, thereby becoming its subject.

This is not an echo of 1960s and 1970s works in which audiences were embraced, berated, coerced, liberated, radical groups even taking to the streets in a demonstration of their relevance and commitment. What is at stake in the work of those I discuss is the nature of community in a culture in which experiences may differ radically, an attempt to bridge that gulf, a bid for intimacy originally, perhaps, facilitated by the nature of the venues in which they worked. There is acknowledgement of the nature of theatre, its processes and artifice, even as its virtues are made manifest. Direct address to the audience, like the Shakespearian soliloquy, like the first-person narrative of the novel, allows the playwright to enter the mind and sensibility of a character under pressure.

This has been, and continues to be, an exciting period in the American theatre. *Contemporary American Dramatists* offers an account of some of today's most compelling playwrights. The American theatre is not Broadway, with its forty-one theatres seating five hundred or more, the evidence for that to be found in the careers of these writers, even as it remains a place seen, by some, as an ultimate validation. Sixty-five per cent of those attending Broadway productions are tourists, while some 80 per cent of those productions are musicals. It does have its loyal devotees, 28 per cent of all tickets being bought by those who attend fifteen or more productions,² while 68 per cent of audiences are women. The average ticket price in 2022 was \$113. By contrast, tickets at Chicago's Goodman Theatre can be bought for between \$15 and \$40, while students can pick up tickets for \$10. People's Light, where Dominique Morisseau's *Mud Row* was staged, charged \$40–45.

The American theatre thrives in small theatres, in communities, though not without a struggle. It seeks new audiences, listens out for new voices, stages a debate with the society beyond its doors, challenging, celebrating, exploring, failing, succeeding. Sometimes the

playwrights move to Off Broadway and Broadway. More significantly, their plays are presented across the country. Broadway shows still travel. In 2019, you could see *Hamilton* in twenty-three cities. But so, too, do the plays considered here. The Theatre Communications Group lists seven-hundred-member theatres, in forty-seven states. There are just short of 1,900 community theatres in America. In 2019, over 7 million attended not-for-profit theatres. Now recovering from the pandemic, theatre is live, and alive.

CHAPTER 1

DAVID ADJMI: THE OUTSIDER

I think the theater has a moral obligation to start telling these other kinds of stories.¹

David Adjmi

Whatever the subject of his plays, they are, David Adjmi has confessed, rooted in aspects of himself and his experiences. 'I write plays,' he has said,

Because I have to exorcise certain things. It's like I'm trying to reach for one thing, but I'm also trying to expel something else inside of myself. There are things in my unconscious that need to come out. Some sort of demon or dark side of myself. I thought I was going to write a comedy after *The Evildoers* because that was a very dark play. I thought I would write something kooky and fun, and then *Stunning* took this hairpin turn. I have this fantasy of being Noel Coward and I really want to do frothy light things. And yet I'm always undone because I always encounter the hard wall of reality.

Even *Marie Antoinette*, which features the last Queen of France before the Revolution, combined 'drawing room elements' with 'German tragic elements' and is 'really a play about America and ... people in my life.'² No matter how far he travels, he always seems to come back to himself generating drama from his own contradictions and finding in them echoes of a society apparently so assured but equally capable of contradiction and a level of self-destruction.

His insecurities are plain from his interviews, his sense not only of staring into society from the outside but also of looking at his own life with the same sense of unease. He has said that 'I've been in dark places ... because I've pushed myself to look at things that can't easily be repaired or healed.'³ In a way he writes himself into existence, assuming the guise of characters whose grasp of events is not as secure as it seems, sensing that something is not quite in place, their identities under threat. They are seldom quite what they appear, a fluid style reflecting psychological and social flux. He moves from the carefully constructed and artfully deceptive assurance of the woman in *Elective Affinities*, blind to, or consciously suppressing, the entropy which threatens both herself and her society, to a queen who clothes herself in imperial certainties only to find her world subverted, dissolving in the face of external threats and internal disturbances. When he turns to farce, as in *3C*, he revels in the permeability of boundaries, the arbitrary nature of distinctions, simultaneously mocking those who presume themselves to carry authority while sensing that farce may, indeed, characterize an existence in which nothing is really secure. His name, Adjmi, he has explained, derives from the Arabic name for outsider or exile, and there is a sense in which that applies to his own sense of outsidership, his time in therapy an attempt to locate himself.

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A surprising number of American playwrights owe something to the British theatre, either beginning their careers in the UK or receiving a boost there. Ayad Akhtar has said that 'I would say that in the UK there is a social commitment to the theatre. The audiences are well versed in the form ... The Brits have a national writer [Shakespeare] – we don't even have a national writer – and their national writer is a playwright!' They 'have an exposure to a rich performative language. In the U.S. nobody goes to plays, unless they live in New York. There isn't a national obsession or a national interest in the theatre, so it just creates a different kind of petri dish. The petri dish of British theatre is overflowing with rich abundance that just can't be rivalled.²⁴ Clearly, this is more than a little over the top. The British, in truth, are not obsessed with the theatre while there is a world beyond New York, more especially when it comes to the fostering of new work. Even so, not only did the Edinburgh Festival prove receptive to American plays, but small theatres and major companies alike welcomed them. While still a graduate student, and before attending the Juilliard in New York, Adjmi received a commission from the Royal Court Theatre which led to the production of *Elective Affinities* in 2005, nine years before its American premiere at New York's Soho Rep.

Elective Affinities, a monologue delivered by a wealthy WASP woman 'of the Brooke Astor, Gloria Vanderbilt ilk,'²⁵ called Alice, on the face of it seems an unlikely first play from Adjmi given his background, a gay Sephardic Jew whose family had originally come from Syria, though that would become more relevant with his later play, *Stunning*. His parents had lived in Nashville and were 'southern Jews, very assimilated'. They had subsequently moved to Midwood in Brooklyn. Though they were not particularly religious, they sent him to the yeshiva, a Jewish institution which focusses on the study of religious texts, though he has confessed that he had never opened a Bible or attended a synagogue, nor could he speak Hebrew. His fellow pupils were Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Mediterranean area), children of rabbis and for the most part well off. His father's business, in the Bronx, having not done well, his store having been robbed seventeen times in its first year, leading to him becoming bankrupt, he was on financial aid and aware, as were his fellow pupils, that his clothes did not match theirs. His consciousness of the value placed on wealth and material goods would later be satirized in *Stunning* in which he would return to this world in a comedy which edges towards the tragic. He did not fit in, even being suspended for eating non-kosher food, though he committed other offences.

He later recalled that 'there was an enormous amount of racism in my immediate family, and at school. There was one girl who was African American in the yeshiva ... she didn't last very long. If you were Sephardic, you thought you were better, you had nicer clothes.' His fellow pupils were essentially trying to dream the American dream even as they kept a distance from a country which offered to accommodate them at the price of assimilation. The school, though, was also 'incredibly homophobic. It's really hard when there are no models for it. The only gay Sephardic Jew was I guess Isaac Mizrahi [a fashion designer] ... a Syrian Jew who also went to yeshiva of Flatbush. And he dropped out.'

Having started out in Honours classes, 'by the time I left I was in the dumb class. It was ... horrible. And eventually I just left. I dropped out of school my junior year.' He was an outsider even among outsiders. As he explained, when he was in high school,

I thought, I can just fix it; I was seeing a therapist who was like, 'You can fix yourself.'
So, I [thought] okay, I'll just do it, I'll move to Ocean Parkway, I'll work in an electronic

shop, I'll have kids and somehow just make it work. Until it was like, it's not going to happen ... I always felt so invisible and just not part of the discourse.⁶

His family were not happy with the fact that he was gay, were, indeed, not happy with one another, his father leaving home only later, equally mysteriously, to return, at least for a while, still with a fondness for vodka, subsequently re-discovering a religion he had never really discovered in the first place, encouraging his son to follow suit, whose bar mitzvah had originally seemed no more than a kind of ritual theatre. His religious period was short as was his attempt at relationships with girls, beginning to feel, if not yet acknowledge, that he was more attracted to boys. Later, his therapist 'tried to do a conversion on me to make me into a bisexual and get married off. That didn't work, but I tried, I tried.' It was 'like some gigantic sedimentary rock I carry, like some of the trauma of that.'⁷ As a measure of that trauma, he would later consult a psychic healer at \$150 for twenty minutes. It was as though he were suffering from a disease and seeking a cure, though from what exactly? Peace of mind has seldom come cheap in America, though in his case it seemed beneficial.

As he has explained, 'I felt Other within the Other ... I felt my sense of alterity very excruciatingly. I am a gay, eccentric, arty person. In the world in general, I feel weird. But in this community – which has a very specific set of codes, values, and structure – I felt suffocated.'⁸ An edict by rabbis in the Syrian-Jewish community, he told Felicia R. Lee in *The New York Times*, banned intermarriage with non-Jews even if the non-Jews converted, a process which they regarded as 'fictitious and valueless.'⁹

Threatened with expulsion, he pre-empted those who had sought to prescribe his behaviour, clothes, convictions, feeling that 'They'd devised a reality for me to step into, but I could just as easily step out of it. I could build a new reality. I could make it anything I wanted.' His feelings of exile were 'transmuted into freedom.'¹⁰ It is tempting to feel that that is what he would subsequently do, not least in creating fictions, plays, which would indeed constitute a new reality.

For all his Jewish background, *Stunning* aside, he explained that 'I mainly write about WASPS' though, 'ultimately, I write about people who are outsiders and then impersonate insiders' as he himself had done at yeshiva. For him, playwrights were outsiders almost by definition. In his case, though, there were other reasons for his sense if not of alienation then of marginalization, and whatever the subject of his plays might be he never strays far from his own experiences. As he has said, while other writers choose to invent, 'I'm working through things in my plays, and I can't really write things unless I have a very, very deep, molecular connection to the material.'¹¹ He grew up largely surrounded by women – his mother, sisters, and cousins – and that is reflected in his plays. It was his mother who introduced him to theatre and art, he later recalling a production of *Sweeney Todd* which left him shaken but suddenly aware of what drama could do.

From the yeshiva he moved uptown and upmarket, going to the private York Prep then on East 85th Street, with its British headmaster who had founded it. Adjmi prepared by teaching himself more acceptable pronunciations than had passed in Brooklyn. He was now able to take courses not available at Jewish schools, including on drama, taught by an actress, the first text he studied being *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche appealing to him because she was 'like me, sensitive and poetic and desperate to re-create herself ... she was like me, an outsider, a sensitive person crushed by reality.'¹² His recreation even took the form of adopting a French

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accent when, for a while, he worked at an expensive clothing store, as he did a Southern one when challenged for smoking on the subway while wearing an expensive cowboy hat. As he explained, 'I became a different person ... The self was an endless burden, like a giant piece of luggage you were forced to haul around. But what if there was a way to remove the burden? What if you could just erase the self you had, as though it were a drawing in pencil, and start over?' (175)

After school, he enrolled at the University of Southern California to study film where his reinvention seemed to be in the direction of being as masculine as the fraternity boy-men he encountered, along with those who surfed on drink, drugs, and pornography: 'I ceded my wants and desires for everyone around me so I could be part of life' (190) though it was here he had his first homosexual encounter.

He then transferred to Sarah Lawrence, in Westchester County, New York, deciding that he wanted to be 'a serious person', having found it difficult to see himself in the regular glare of the California sun. It was at Sarah Lawrence that he finally came out as gay. He majored in philosophy, learning that, for Nietzsche, the self was 'an audacious forgery'. On a visit to New York, he saw John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* recognizing something of himself in the protagonist, a man masquerading as who he was not, so upset that, in tears, he stayed in the theatre when others had left, suddenly aware of the power of theatre to talk directly to him. It was crucial in his decision to be a playwright, just as it was a new psychoanalyst who rejected the notion that he could be 'cured' of homosexuality by becoming bisexual. Because of this he felt 'able to heal'. (258)

It was, though, a philosophy teacher who told him that if he had ambitions to be a playwright then he should begin immediately. He graduated in 1996, in 2002 beginning three years studying for an MFA in the Playwrights Workshop at the University of Iowa, while there writing two comedies, *Doppelgangbang* and *Woody Allen's Fall Project*. At the same time, his account of other budding playwrights had a certain irony about it, one writing a play (clearly based on Adjmi) about a gay Jew eaten by a mountain lion, while another 'wrote Afro-womanist collages patterned on the work of Ntozake Shange, and always cast Kendra (the only black woman on the program) as "Witchgrass" or "Calendula" or something you could get at an apothecary.' It seemed to him that all of them were 'psychodevelopmentally falling apart', having suffered a variety of traumas (296). He himself consulted the most recent in a long line of analysts. Whether because of that or not, after failing to write anything, he felt suddenly inspired submitting the resulting play minutes before the deadline, to his surprise finding it selected for a full production. To his equal surprise, it was well received.

At Iowa, beyond the full-time faculty, he was exposed to visiting writers, including Athol Fugard, but it was the workshop format that he found particularly valuable. While there, he wrote *Strange Attractors*, in its form, he explained, based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* though contemporary in its concern with sexual transgressions, his turn to Ibsen a desperate throw of the dice when he found himself stuck. At its centre is the figure of Betsy, scarcely an intellectual, with a fondness for shopping, married to an MTV executive, and with a liking for sado-masochistic sex. 'I'm not a provocateur,' Adjmi insisted, 'but I do need to clear space for the possibility of pissing people off. Once I know I can piss people off with impunity, I know I'll be able to say what I have to say.'¹³

Following a series of readings and workshops, it opened at the Empty Space Theatre in Seattle in 2002. It was this that would lead the Royal Court Theatre to offer him an international

playwright residency. There he was asked to write a short play for their human rights festival which they called 'Letters from America', not something he felt ready to undertake. In a state of panic, until then having had a torrid time at the Julliard as part of the Julliard Playwrights Programme (which had produced David Auburn and David Lindsay-Abaire whom he had known at Sarah Lawrence), where what was to have been his first class coincided with the attack on the Twin Towers, he came up with some 350 pages, which hardly qualified for the word 'short'. Buried within it, though, was a woman who would become Alice and the makings of what would become a monologue, *Elective Affinities*, which received a staged reading at the Royal Court in 2002 and a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2005, the latter part of a double bill (with Brett Neveu's *Eric LaRue*) under the title *Postcards from America*. He was dismissed from the Julliard because, a letter explained, he had been unresponsive to their teaching style. It stalled him for two years.

He had, however, won a prize and used the money to live in Berlin, where he not only watched plays at the Volksbühne but studied German plays, explaining that 'I love the German Romantics because they have an innate understanding of the fracturedness of human feeling and intellect. The tones are constantly shifting – like Rubato [speeding up and slowing down rhythm at will] in music. The plays are tempestuous and precarious and unstable, you don't know where they're going from moment to moment.'¹⁴ It was an education that would explain elements of his work. On his return, he founded a theatre company called the Vinegar Tom Players, commissioning a group of playwrights to come up with a play inspired by a German *Sturm und Drang* text feeling that what was missing from the American theatre was a sense of primal energies. By way of payment, he told Heidi Schreck, he offered them a pie of their choice.¹⁵

In 1809, Goethe published a novel called *Elective Affinities*. It proposed the impact on an aristocratic couple's marriage of being exposed to the presence of others, drawing a parallel to chemical reactions (in *Arcadia*, Tom Stoppard updated it, relating relationships to the second law of thermodynamics). Perhaps there is a nod to Goethe in Adjmi's play in so far as Alice's husband is German, his and her name being Hauptmann. It is closer in spirit, though, to Robert Browning's monologues, particularly 'My Late Duchess' in which the speaker slowly and unconsciously reveals aspects of his character. The printed text of *Elective Affinities* is barely eleven pages long, but then 'My Late Duchess' runs to only forty-six lines. Both, though, manage, by indirection, to create a portrait in which the narrator is oblivious to what he or she has revealed.

Alice lives in an opulent home and greets an implied visitor required to do nothing but listen. She exudes an air of entitlement. When it was finally staged in New York in 2011, it was presented not in a theatre but initially on the second floor of an elegant Fifth Avenue town house on the Upper East Side, in a room dominated by a large black sculpture, before the audience was summoned to an upper floor. They had all received special invitations saying, 'Mrs Alice Hauptmann would like to extend her cordial invitation to an informal gathering hosted at her home. Fine teas will be brewed, and sandwiches and lady fingers enjoyed.'

As the audience, restricted to thirty in its New York premiere, waited for their hostess to arrive, they were treated to a pianist playing Chopin before ultimately being greeted, with a calculated hauteur, by a woman coldly assured, any sense of familiarity to be quickly dispelled. She was, after all, there to speak to those permitted, on sufferance, to glimpse a world surely distant from their own, and not to engage with them. Propinquity only served to underline a

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social distance to be preserved, along with the presumption of a social code to be respected even as cracks in her assurance slowly become apparent, her room a kind of prison even as she asserts that it is the focus of culture and a social hierarchy. Her love of art, it transpires, is a love of what it represents, not least the wealth which enables her to purchase it and the taste which it embodies. The world is as she asserts it to be, morality itself at her behest. Hers is an imperial self in a country which itself has an imperial conviction that its values have primacy. There were only twelve performances, Zoe Caldwell, who doubted she could remember the lines, reading from the script.

It is a monologue not simply in terms of a theatrical convention but because she requires no reply as she reveals her prejudices, free associates, contradicts herself, exposes her insecurities. She plainly needs an audience otherwise seemingly marooned in a place where taste predominates over other values, albeit not a taste shared by her husband who, like the father in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, has fallen in love with long distance. He travels a lot, she says. Their only trip together had been to Disney World, clearly at odds with her cultural presumptions. Otherwise, we learn, he is 'cross' with her, 'furious', and regards her as 'monstrous'. There is, in other words, a reason this is a monologue. Her husband's absence is a presence in the play. Nor, we learn, is he the only one she alienates.

She seems 'almost of another era', her world seemingly hermetic. Certainly, she has not travelled, her knowledge of other cultures deriving from visits to museums where everything is suitably contained, aesthetic rather than social. She has installed a piece of sculpture of a kind that leads her husband to storm out, not least because she wishes it to be '*big* because the *world* is big, and I want to see that bigness in the confines of this *one* room in this *one* house.' (269) The truth would seem to be, though, that for her the room is her world. As she says, 'I prefer to stay where I am and have the world come to me. It's very arrogant I know; I'm *terrible*.' Just how terrible, and in which way, slowly becomes apparent.

She is, a stage direction suggests, 'very charming', though her charm, it emerges, does not extend to her views, her generosity seemingly restricted to the expensive chocolates on view. Her damaged relationship with her husband she puts down to the fact that 'everyone is so cross around me, but people are just peevish these days.' (271) Why they might be cross gradually becomes apparent. Her account of watching nature programmes on television, in which gazelles and other 'animals eat each other alive ... with tendons coming apart, and blood and gore'; (270) suggests something of her own predatory views, favouring the torturing of prisoners while declaring 'who wants to use torture? *No One*, that's who. *Nobody* does, it's *unpleasant* ... I was merely stating that ... the FBI could, should and *would* use it.' (271) One of her defining characteristics is not to be aware of her own contradictions, or not to care.

At the same time, she sees herself as a victim. She and her husband had wanted children but were unable to: 'I surrendered. I accepted my fate ... like one of those gazelles ... when they're captured by some predator ... they just sort of tilt their heads back ... like this ... I was like one of those gazelles.' Even so, she says, popping a chocolate into her mouth, she has had 'a very nice life ... I mean I *feel* happy. I've always considered myself a happy person. I've always *been* happy.' Qualification follows qualification, as for evidence she invokes tea drinking which makes her feel 'edified *spiritually*'. (273) The italicized words, strung together, are telling: *terrible*, *No One*, *Nobody*, *unpleasant*, *would*, *feel*, *been*, *spiritually*. These are the words she emphasizes. 'I've managed to find spiritual fulfilment in material *things*', she declares, seemingly without irony.

The passage about the gazelle, Adjmi has confessed, came directly from something one of his teachers at the Julliard had said, he being anxious to ingratiate himself with someone who until then had been hostile. Beyond that 'Alice was a self-portrait ... in some respect, I was writing a cautionary tale to myself. I was that gazelle, who would sacrifice what was fragile and beautiful in itself because it believed it was doomed and wanted its struggle to be over.'¹⁶

Adopting the voice of her friend, Deirdre, she presents her as asking whether it is right 'to violate certain ideals with the intention of upholding those ideals, I mean do you really think that's OK?' only to reply, in her own voice, 'if you want to live in a civilized society, then I guess it *has* to be OK', (275) explaining that she could never torture Deirdre because she loves her or, rather, 'I prefer you to other people', this being precisely what Goethe explored in *Elective Affinities*. For her, the whole discourse of human rights 'is sort of a joke ... as if *all* human beings have some innate value' while in fact, '... nature is very cruel. Nature confers no rights.' (276)

Something has happened, supposedly a terrorist attack, which has provoked the conversation, but while others are grief stricken, lacking the language with which to express their feelings, she insists that 'I *do* have the language ... Eliminate them ... Kill them, kill every last one' (278) as Conrad's Kurt in *The Heart of Darkness* had called out 'exterminate all the brutes', and, interestingly, when Frances Ford Coppola finished *Apocalypse Now*, based on *The Heart of Darkness*, and with his marriage in a state of collapse, he planned to make a series of four films based on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Alice, by now, '*trancelike, almost evangelical*', continues, 'Kill every living thing, so nothing remains, *nothing*, nothing, kill *everything*, kill *everyone*, then sow the earth with *salt* ... so nothing grows there *ever* again.' (278)

After a short pause, however, she smiles brightly and momentarily returns to the topic of marriage recalling that her mother had told her that intimate relationships benefit from the presence of a third person, territory also explored by Goethe. Somehow the conviction that love is 'double sided' leads her to declare that foreigners, political prisoners and terrorists, 'have value ... not innate value but the value I assign them', this echoing the relationship she has with those she purports to love. Her indifference to others, she suggests, is what makes her partial to those she assumes to be close to her, the elective affinities of the title, except by this time it is clear that for her no one has value beyond that which she is prepared to assign them.

Behind the bland civility, the teacups and chocolate, the fine art and chatter of museums, is not so much indifference, though, as contempt hence her ready sanctioning of cruelty. The world does, indeed, only seem to render up meaning as refracted through Alice's warped sensibility. She is her own artwork, akin to the menacing sculpture she commissioned which is 'a little terrifying'. (269) She has shaped herself to her own requirements, vaguely registering the hostility she generates, the relationships which in the end mean little to her, other people being no more than satellites circling her undaunted narcissism. The monologue is her natural form since she requires no intervention, no contradiction. With no children, an absent husband and supposed friends who exist only to be parodied or defeated in her mind, she stands in an isolation which is moral no less than physical.

Beyond her, however, surely lie those others prepared to sanction torture, secure in their own certainties, whose awareness of the world beyond is a product not of knowledge but of images. Outside the confines of this elegant house lies a complexity to be rendered simple by a rhetoric which is hermetic and self-justifying. Beyond America is a world to be symbolized by the 'black, hulking ... *mass*' (269) of the statue, designed as a homogeneous representation

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of what cannot be acknowledged in its particularities, George W. Bush's War on Terror being a battle against an abstract noun. The dark humour of *Elective Affinities* is generated by Alice's lack of self-knowledge, her casual contradictions, her misplaced confidence in herself as slowly, layer by layer, her performances are stripped away finally leaving nothing but a lonely woman unwilling to accept the depth of her isolation or the profundity of her failures. She seems the epitome of the American dream, at least in so far as she does indeed find spiritual fulfilment in things, even as her pursuit of happiness has led her to a spiritual cul de sac, happiness, ultimately, being a concept, which evades her.

She is, in fact, not truly 'of another era', except in her belief that manners are a virtue, form trumping substance. Her views are disturbingly congruent with those then being deployed by a president, and those who surrounded him, for whom torture was declared legal and whose view of a threatening world beyond the confines of a nation confident in its supremacy was one of unconsidered violence. Her Darwinian view of the world, in which the strong prevail, and those who have attained status stand justified, is echoed by those determining national policy. The achievement of *Elective Affinities* lies in the fact that what prevails in 'this *one* room in this *one* house' (269) also does so in the society of which it becomes a symbol. Adjmi has said that his plays 'aren't black comedies' even as he explains that

comedy deepens and expands the dark elements, but the two elements – farce and tragedy – are both there and have equal presence ... I think people in general are broken, atomised ... We don't know how to listen to what's actually going on with us, we're not taught how to experience ourselves, that's why we end up inflicting so much harm on people.¹⁷

Alice clearly inflicts pain, does not listen, has no understanding of herself or others.

For Adjmi, *Elective Affinities* is 'about a woman confronting certain choices that she's made, certain relationships that she's had at the end of her life. And, I guess, realising that what she thought was real isn't real and she doesn't always know how to defend it.'¹⁸ Brief though it was, it prompted an enthusiastic review from the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley praising its 'flirtatious artistry'¹⁹ while *Time Out's* David Cote noted its 'eloquent, perverse core of coolly rationalized cruelty'.²⁰ For John Heilpern, in *The New York Observer*, it was a 'brilliant monologue'.²¹ It might be thought that responses were initially to the fact that the monologue was delivered by four-time Tony Award winner Zoe Caldwell, but when the part was played by the equally accomplished Marian Seldes (who was to die three years later of Alzheimer's) responses were equally enthusiastic, Seldes's work with Edward Albee, particularly in *Three Tall Women*, perhaps being useful preparation for Adjmi's play.

New York, of course, was seeing his play out of sequence, six years after its Royal Shakespeare opening. With *The Evildoers* (Yale Rep, 2008) he was back in the world of the privileged, one of two married couples living on the Upper East Side, the other relegated to the country. They drive a Hummer, eat in the best restaurants, buy only the finest food, preferably with a French name, use only the finest luggage, stay at the best hotels, discuss marriage, love and friendship, usually with a glass or two to hand, though with an undertone of anxiety about their lives. They attend classical concerts, are familiar with literature and theories of the self, if not quite sure what might constitute their own selves. They throw ideas around, are articulate even as their articulacy can desert them finding it difficult to hold ideas in their mind for long or using language less to communicate than to avoid the intimacy they claim. Words, as a character

observes, ‘can do violence’.²² So they do. Sometimes they slice with the precision of a scalpel, at others they are blunt weapons, calculated to do damage.

These are characters who appear secure. They are achievers, even if they are unsure what those achievements might amount to. Everything, it seems, is in place, relationships reassuringly assumed, sustained over time, except there is an undercurrent of uncertainty, insecurity. Assurances are challenged, sudden doubts obtrude. They look for faith, aware that something is absent from their lives, conscious of a void which they hesitate to inhabit or even identify. On the surface all seems what it has ever been, though largely because they have not chosen to examine relationships, beliefs, which they assumed rather than interrogated. Now, however, a crisis is precipitated, sudden changes threaten their sense of an equanimity which has anyway been contingent, a product of habit as much as conviction. A rug is pulled from under them. They invade one another’s territory as they had not before. Even their own identities prove insecure, all being of an age when questions are asked if never quite in expectation that they will or could be answered. Betrayal, desertion, false epiphanies interrupt what had anyway been a steady progression down a path to no certain destination.

The printed version begins with more than three pages of introductory material in which Adjmi offers unusually elaborate descriptions of the characters and the style of presentation which, as he says, undergoes ‘rather tortuous shifts’.²³ Jerry Thernstrom, he explains, ‘possesses the old-world affectations and speech of an older WASP-y type, as well as the glow of narcissism and self-containment that is specific to New York psychoanalysis’, a subject on which he had a certain expertise having undergone various therapies as a result of being in what he has called ‘dark places.’ Jerry’s wife, Carol, is a ‘wedding planner who is intensely cynical about marriage. She is quick-witted, fashionable, controlling, meticulous (i.e., *compulsive*), self-conscious, literate, and wears all this kind of breast-plate or armor.’

Jerry’s best friend from school, Martin, an anaesthesiologist, while having warmth and an apparent openness, is ‘*Intensely* emotional’ developing ‘a deep, agonizing, insatiable longing’ throughout the course of the play, as well as ‘a profound – and finally *pathological* need to connect to people, to himself, to something authentic and rooted’. His wife, Judy, is ‘fragile, under-confident and somewhat neurotic’, as she ‘works to conceal her obsessiveness and neuroses ... Her respect for decorum is a default.’ (145–6)

It is interesting that he should feel the need to spell out what becomes clear as the play unfolds. The paradox is that he gives depth to those who in many ways lack it, none of them being really rooted, performing roles as if they are, indeed, coterminous with those roles. There is a degree of cynicism in a psychiatrist who says he does no more than hold a mirror to people, while charging a high price as evidence of authenticity, or a marriage planner who does not believe in marriage, her own having fractured in a way not acknowledged. There is an absence at their centre as, it seems, there is in the society of which they are a part and in which they seem paradigms of achievement. As in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* they are walking what’s left of their wits, their very articulacy deployed as a fencing foil, or to facilitate evasion. As Adjmi has said, in ‘*The Evildoers* ... the quest for integrity and self-understanding leads to ... awful isolation and ... even insanity’. The characters are ‘lost inside their roles’, while ‘this sense of falseness is so-deep-veined it cannot be shaken, and the more deeply Jerry and Martin try to discover themselves in their quest for “authenticity,” the more lost they get.’²⁴ Beyond them lies a society about the same business, declaring an integrity easily compromised.

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The play begins in a restaurant where the four are gathered to celebrate Jerry and Carol's anniversary. They are guests of their friends, Martin and Judy, even as friendship proves no more meaningful than marriage. By this stage, they have all had a deal to drink, their conversation rapid-fired if disjointed, non-sequiturs underlining the degree to which they are each following the logic, or illogic, of their own thoughts or discrete emotional states. The alcohol has evidently removed their inhibitions, as in Albee's play, and a certain hostility has invaded dinner table chatter. Not unnaturally, marriage is one topic, but it quickly becomes apparent that this is nothing to celebrate. Carol, who persistently refuses her husband's attempt to fill her glass, offer her food, or kiss her hand, in the face of Martin's assertion that for most people marriage is sacred, insists that 'For "most people" a marriage licence has all the stature of a *parking* ticket ... it means *nothing* ... nobody gives a *shit*.' (157) When he challenges her, she reminds him that he is an anaesthetist, as if that were an equivalent.

Nonetheless, she sees her own class as in some sense a defence against the vulgarity, the middlebrow tastes and moral decay of America even as she rejects what seems to her to be a fashionable apocalyptic vision: 'WE hold it up – "we" being the intelligentsia, the cultured elite, progressive thinkers! ... we're like *barges*: and we're holding up these big pyramids of *garbage*' but 'one day the garbage started to *multiply* ... and now we're all just SINKING. But sinking can go on for a long time, we can go on like this *indefinitely*.' (161) These, then, with their collapsing marriages, broken friendships, coruscating contempt, are the last defence against the incipient anarchy which otherwise they seem to exemplify.

Jerry, equally, diagnoses what he calls the 'WHOLE PROBLEM', namely that 'people don't want to *know* each other' because 'people aren't *authentic* ... they're all circling this – terrible abyss of uh uh pain.' Like Carol, he sees themselves as representing a defence even as their relationships are infected with the same gravitational pull towards the void, his language having a reflexive circularity: 'it's *our* job to get *inside* of that ... because ... if we can't *enter* people's suffering then *we* suffer. Because we're disconnected from their lives: and *their* lives are our lives – but we don't want to see that. And then we *inflict* suffering!' But then, he confesses, 'What can *any* of us do I don't *know* I just keep *conjugating* the problem.' (164) Carol is not wrong in calling this '*bullshit*', even though she is herself fluent in that language.

Judy, like Honey, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is timid, anxious to deflect disturbing truths, easily crushed. In the face of Carol's cynicism, she has no defence beyond an artificial smile. She and Martin have moved to the country for reasons yet unspecified, but it is apparent that this move has not been a success.

This discordant quartet expose an essential loneliness at the heart of each of them. Marriage, friendship, are terms hollowed out by experience as Tom Lehrer, in his ironically titled song 'Bright College Days', spoke of sliding down the razor blade of life, not so irrelevant given that Jerry and Martin will later reminisce about their school days. Theirs is a pain transmuted into aggression. Self-doubt becomes assertion, even as their interventions in the conversation wander aimlessly, half-formed theories, ten cent philosophies, intercut with personal abuse, self-revelation. Their future, it seems, lies behind them.

As the scene edges towards its conclusion Martin turns on Judy, with a sudden outburst of bitterness which leaves her shaking and hysterical: 'you think I'm going to hit you? Maybe I should – because it's what you want ... being that we're all in *love* and we're *married* and we're little strumming *lovebirds*, with honey just *dripping* of our beaks, RIGHT?' (168) As Judy stutters out a response, however, there is a radical stylistic shift as, to the accompaniment

of sudden loud music, the space begins to transform. The title of the play is displayed, and Adjmi indicates that *'the chaos of the argument is parlayed into the transition'*, as Jerry and Carol change into night clothes and Martin is seen pouring a bucket of champagne over his head to simulate the rain from which he will shortly appear as, two weeks later, at three in the morning, he arrives at Jerry and Carol's apartment. The music stops, replaced by the sound of a speeding train. The seams of the play are starting to pull apart, mirroring the lives of those at its centre.

Having left Judy, Martin has discovered that he is gay striking up a relationship with a man on the subway, himself a married man. It leaves him with a feeling of release but also guilt and a sense of pain at abandoning his wife. A drunken Jerry seeks to console him with an increasingly absurd attempt to suggest that suffering is itself a tonic, desperately reaching for metaphors, invoking babushkas and quarks, until his efforts collapse as he himself loses touch with what he is saying even as Martin suddenly kisses him. The first act ends as the sound of a train and whistle recurs until it is *'unbearably loud'*.

The second act begins in Judy and Martin's home in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania, a small country town. Their belongings are, for the most part, still in boxes. Carol is on hand seemingly to console Judy who has been in hospital and whose reading runs to *Brave New World*, along with accounts of mass killings. The daughter of abusive parents, she has been told by her doctor to pretend that one of them at least had been good. For her part, Carol barely seems to listen, insisting that mothers naturally love their children except those who drown them, as detached from Judy's suffering as she appears to be from her own life, except that there comes a moment, back in her home, when she loses the baby she has been carrying.

Meanwhile, Martin has become ever stranger, his mind a tumble dryer of random ideas as he tries to make sense of the vacancy in his own life which has led him down the path to his present confusions, making further sexual advances to Jerry. They both scream at each other, loud music cutting in *'as the style has tilted somewhat, gets manic, compressed'*. There is, Adjmi indicates, *'complete chaos'*. (223)

For his part, Jerry is left adrift, desperate for a reassurance which he wishes to call love. When, in their bedroom, following his disturbing encounter with Martin, he looks for a gesture of affection from Carol because *'You're my wife'*, she replies, *'you don't have a wife you have a well-filled liquor cabinet. You have a DVD collection. You do not. Have. A wife.'* (225) He declares love and demands it in return, before dropping to his knees and burying his face in her stomach, a gesture described in the stage directions as *'an act of grace'*, though in truth it is hard to see it as such.

Before he leaves, ejected by the couple who had taken him in, Martin declares that he has thrown Carol's ring, the ring which has featured throughout the play as a symbol of love, or love's frailty, into the East River. He is the T.S. Eliot character who enters to disrupt the lives of those he encounters, in his case, though, with villainous intent. Carol, it turns out, has lost her baby because he gave her apricots laced with a chemical which would provoke a miscarriage. This prophet of truth is a murderer who acts as he does because he believes suffering to be the key to understanding.

Carol, for all her disengagement from the life of others, slowly emerges not only as the most intelligent and articulate of the quartet but the one with the tightest grip on reality. When accused by the increasingly crazed Martin of having a faulty world view, she replies, *'What "world view" SANITY is not a fucking WORLD VIEW it's the fucking SUBSTRATE of human existence.'* (235) Learning what he has done, she collapses in tears. For the only time in the play,

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Adjmi indicates, '*possibly for the first time in her adult life – Carol cries, and her crying carries with it currents that eddy backward with the force of her entire history*', (237) a tough call for an actress.

What follows is a gothic touch as, in kissing her, he bites out her tongue, in expiation cutting off his own finger. She runs off, followed by Martin, before Jerry returns, oblivious to what has happened, only to sit and read a magazine whose headline reads: 'Salman Rushdie declares jihad on Harper Collins.' (240) Whatever may be happening in the outside world, however, would seem an extension of what happens in a play in which a suspect faith inspires violence.

The final act, set a few hours later, takes an even stranger turn, metaphors having become literal as things fall apart in what seems a more general apocalypse. Judy's house having burned down, she takes refuge with Jerry, both unaware of what has happened. She is described, perhaps understandably, as looking like Elsa Lanchester in *The Bride of Frankenstein*, who played both Mary Shelley and the Monster's mate, Judy being a mate, though now divorced from a man who has transformed into a monster. Jerry is now detached from reality, even the discovery of an abandoned tongue failing to register as does news of Carol's death, she having meanwhile thrown herself into the river. When Martin fails to rescue her, he returns to the apartment and kills himself with a knife.

Time, Adjmi explains, '*starts to warp, slow down*', and '*the world breaks open*'. A scream '*comes, faraway, hollow, distant*' before getting '*louder, higher*' reduplicating with '*multiple tracks*'. Beyond the window, the rain which has fallen throughout has created a flood as both Martin and Carol come back to life. Adjmi is hardly wrong when he refers to an '*impossible reality*', as Jerry reads from the Bible lines from *Corinthians* referring to the end of the world when the dead will arise, and all will be changed. Indeed, Judy now appears, wearing a wedding dress, '*the Ideal Judy*'. 'This all,' we are told in a stage direction, 'has the tenor of a dream ... The walls start to shake' as Carol returns from her river death having '*developed the tragic, shattered nobility of someone who's been stripped of all vestments of civilization*' even as a '*disconsolate sadness*' is exposed while Jerry utters '*a garbled, fevered prayer*'. (262–4)

What begins with a search for identity and authenticity leads to the collapse of both, the play's structure and style reflecting that. Beneath the civilities, themselves barely sustained, is a whirlpool of banalities presented as philosophical positions. The various shocks delivered at intervals – a sudden conversion to homosexuality, a severed tongue, off-stage and on-stage deaths – seem to be designed as adrenaline injections increasing momentum towards an apocalypse. Even the structure implicit in plot is abandoned. Language disintegrates, Jerry reduced from an articulate person to a stuttering wreck oblivious to the disasters which play out before him, ending with a smile at odds with the collapse of all form.

What had appeared to be one kind of play turns into another. It is a difficult trick to pull off, the elaborate stage directions offering a critical commentary as the play devolves into a kind of synesthesia of effects. There are colour changes, surface brightness dulling, while sound is amplified as character is pressed to extremes. He wrote the play while living in Germany, and it is not hard to feel the influence of *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress), which originally derived from a play of that name by Friedrich Maximilian Klingler set during the American Revolution concerned with emotion and subjectivity as opposed to rationalism, and with ideas of structure subordinated. Here, in *The Evil Doers*, is another American Revolution, the play's title seemingly deriving from George W. Bush's determination, five days after 9/11, to