The Piano Lesson: My Education and Entertainment

At one time in my life, claiming the theater as a source of entertainment was chic and offered acquiescence from groups of which I only wanted to pick fruit. I would attend a play from time to time and often leaving unsure of what I should be feeling. The music would move my body, and the story would jerk me emotionally, but I have found that there is more to theater – revealed by being challenged to understand the theater and its history. I attended “The Piano Lesson” last week better equipped and without the heinous motives of yesteryear (I attended alone). I have learned some of the history of theater and feel a little more connected to it knowing its origin; however, I still attended this play a little skeptical. Serendipitously, I find that theater offers an education and an entertainment – phenomena better known as “culture” encompassing much more than the funk of music, and/or emotion-jerking stories.

The assignment hand that I was dealt this semester played out perfectly in this matter. I planned to attend “Hamlet” – written by the noteworthy William Shakespeare. Arthur Miller best explains my relief in being absolved to Shakespeare and/or his works, when he says, “It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man” (Miller). August Wilson, the playwright of “The Piano Lesson,” is not a big Shakespeare fan either, so I embrace the irony and gratefully accepted the hand as dealt. I’m confident that there is a higher level of connection to drama when one feels the time, and the socioeconomic plight of the characters involved. The education here is plainly finding and accepting one’s passion for a particular work in drama understanding what drives it.

My group was assigned to “Fences,” another Wilson play. I enjoyed that play and acquired an interest in Wilson’s work. “The Piano Lesson” just happened to be showing at the
Theater in the Square of beautiful downtown Marietta. Being a long-time resident of Atlanta (a city less country than Marietta) I thought that my cosmopolitan ubiety would grace this place.

The meal this night was a slice of affordable pizza at a sidewalk table. I attempted to pick out the theatergoers as people strolled by. I only picked African Americans because I thought the play would draw those connected in some way with the playwright, and/or the storyline. There were not many African Americans passing by so I immediately envisioned a half-full theater at curtain call. I finished my pizza and walked the half block distance to the theater and mingled with the crowd that gathered in the small lobby. A not-so-dressed-up lady, lacking formalities that I’ve associated with theater, served snacks, soft drinks and wine from a small counter. My mind raced. I thought, “This place is a dive!” as she pointed toward a door to the outside. I wondered if she understood that I asked for directions to the restroom. Nevertheless, I followed her directions and strolled down a quaintly landscaped alleyway. I started to feel something else – connection to the theater building. It is small – an old building remodeled with an “urban renewal” feel to it.

My exposure to theater and the education of drama expands as I realize its transition from Abydos to bright city lights to small town “renewal.”

I found my seat early to wait for that “spiritual experience” referred to by my professor (“as the lights grow dark….”). Inside the theater, the ceiling is left unfinished but painted black. The lights are hidden throughout the rafters. The theater’s stage was curtainless – initially viewed as another flaw, but it gave me the opportunity to observe the set. I felt coziness in the theater possibly created by the lack of the curtain as we gaze directly into Doaker’s home. This home had familiarity that I anticipated knowing the setting’s time, place and flavor. Some of the set brought back memories of my family’s home (the radiator, the oval pictures of loved ones on the wall and the couch with the “bedspread” cover tucked neatly – garnished with pillows). Blues
music softly played. By the time the theater filled up (yes, filled up!), I felt quite at home. I felt this way for only a short time as I realized that majority of my fellow theatergoers were possibly season ticket holders made obvious by their ability to find their seats unattended and even recognized by the ushers. To my surprise, the place filled up by mostly whites. Not a problem. Everyone was warm and friendly – a small-town characteristic that I do admire. In fact, the man and woman sitting next to me would point out several “who’s who” amongst us, which included the Honorable Mayor of Marietta and his entourage.

The lights dim and the play is on with an explosive start. Boy Willie (one of the protagonists and the **only antagonist**) enters with high energy and maintained that energy until the end! There were times where I just wanted to yell, “shut the hell up Boy Willie!” to end his constant nagging, poking, and instigating. Berniece, Boy Willie’s sister (the other protagonist) wrestles with Boy Willie to preserve a part of their family history, heritage, and legacy (a piano with carvings of their ancestors on it and the cause of their father’s death). In both of the Wilson plays of which I am familiar, I have seen these thematic patterns. Primary conflicts centering on history and the importance of the African American family acknowledging it, embracing it, preserving it and telling the stories along with man’s struggle with death (or more appropriately, man’s acceptance of death). Boy Willie says, “Hell, I ain’t scare of dying. I look around and see people dying every day. You got to die to make room for somebody else.” He eventually goes upstairs to fight the ghost of Sutter (a life or death struggle).

There was power in the scene where all of the men (except Avery, the preacher) were able to identify with each other as they reminisce about prison and sang an old work song. Amazing – to be able to sing and fondly reminisce about such a degradation ceremony. Music moves me, but I was especially moved by the fact that that scene was the only scene where
everyone was on one accord – harmoniously done! Incarceration seems to be quite a common denominator in the African American man’s existence.

I can identify with Boy Willie’s impulsive quest to level himself with the white man, but he creates the conflict by insisting that he sells the family piano to buy the land where his ancestors once worked as slaves. Berniece sees a different value in the piano. In this sense, the play makes a connection with the aforementioned theory stated by Arthur Miller regarding tragedy and the common man (Miller). Barely escaping a tragic end, I considered the play to be melodramatic with tragicomic tone covering a lot of territory emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually.

Wilson won his second Pulitzer with this play. He also won “two thumbs up” from me, as I stayed energized, engaged and totally entertained. If I were to yell out to Boy Willie, he would have heard me. The actors were not so removed (they were close enough to not need amplification themselves), but one of the lessons learned from another assigned play, “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” was the difference between actor and character. I wanted to yell at the character and not the actor. Early this semester, I owned up to being a theatergoer “wannabe.” My education in drama started at that moment and continues as I stroke this keyboard. Quoting August Wilson’s mother, “Something is not always better than nothing,” is great segueing to the fact that all of my theatergoing experiences have been seeds strewn on barren soil (Zoglin). To enjoy theater for its history, its conventions, and yes, the funk of music, and/or emotion-jerking stories proved theophanic beyond comprehension. Okay, I experienced that spiritual moment when the lights dim, but on this occasion, it was at the play’s end.
Works Cited


Zoglin, Richard. “100 Years in One Life.” Time 02 May 2005. 27 April 2005

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