



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

**Supervisor's Report:**

**Bc. Daria Shakurova, “Events of Sand’: Affirmative Speculations in Contemporary American Drama,” MA thesis**

“Events of Sand’: Affirmative Speculations in Contemporary American Drama,” is an outstanding piece of scholarship that marks a noteworthy achievement for an MA student. Bc. Shakurova positions her project in relation to Tony Kushner’s landmark millennial two-part drama *Angels in America*, noting its inventive political bid for positive change. As explained at the outset, the optimistic promise of liberation so vividly proposed by Kushner’s epic work, is the catalyst for the thesis’s investigation of twenty-first century American theatre. The framing context here is crisis, and specifically the cascading crises of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century.

In her opening chapter Ms Shakurova offers a complex map of the discourses around neoliberalism. With reference to the work of David Harvey, Karl Polanyi, Mark Fisher and, above all, Lauren Berlant, she identifies the key co-ordinates and impasses of the neoliberal project, that despite its mounting costs is repeatedly justified as common sense, or the reality to which there is no alternative. What happens to the possibility of change and what does imagination have to offer in creating a future not already totally circumscribed are the core questions here. Ms Shakurova finds a compelling stimulus in the work of anonymous group “the uncertain commons” and their 2013 manifesto, *Speculate This!* As she states, this text “provides the general framework with its proposal to differentiate between two distinct practices of attending to the future” (p.6): firmative and affirmative. In contrast to the *fait accompli* firmative attitude of the neoliberal, “affirmative speculations”, akin to Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “agonistic pluralism” opens spaces of fluid possibility. Ms Shakurova productively pairs these ideas with reflections from Lauren Berlant’s last book *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), as a suggestive means of rethinking structure. The chapter draws to a close with an astute contrasting of the differing attitudes to the political manifest in British and American contemporary theatre and theatre discourse. Positioning her project in relation to Nelson Pressley’s 2014 book, *American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice: Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, Ms Shakurova argues that, contrary to Pressley’s view, contemporary American theatre is engaging with political



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

challenges of the present, and that “liberating impulses, as in impulses towards open horizons, continue to inhabit the American stage in the new millennium” (p.11).

The thesis is structured in three extended body chapters, each providing a combination of thought-provoking conceptual scaffolding with insightful close reading. Chapter 2 treats the work of Annie Baker and Quiara Alegría Hudes, specifically *The Flick* (2013) and two plays from Hudes’s “Elliot Trilogy”: *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006) and *Water by the Spoonful* (2012). The slow uneventfulness of Baker’s play is framed with a fine explanation of the affects of pervasive precarity – what Berlant earlier labelled “crisis ordinariness” – alongside temporal distortion and plasticity. The ways the cinema in *The Flick* is a strange site of work and escapism permeated by the failures of the characters to live up to the neoliberal idea of the entrepreneurial self are analysed lucidly here. A similarly perceptive exploration of “crisis infrastructures” is evident in the discussion of Hudes’s plays. Characters flounder in their attempts to perform “true selves” yet simultaneously come to embody “heterogenous lifeworlds” (p. 39) that may offer a speculative basis for hope. Chapter 3 considers Young Jean Lee’s 2007 play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and Jackie Sibblies Drury’s 2018 work, *Fairview*. Turning to post-race discourse and neoliberal constructions of the self and racialized bodies, Ms Shakurova’s choice of plays provides dynamic and productive primary material. Berlant’s notion of the “overcloseness” of the world as opposed to alienation from it (p. 44) is strategically paired with Sianne Ngai’s work on animatedness and ugly feelings to produce probing, spatially attentive readings of both these provocative works. The traps laid for audiences by Young Jean Lee and the glitches that invade Sibblies Drury’s play are persuasively explored. Finally, chapter 4 applies “Necrocene”, “necrocapitalism” and Gerry Canavan’s “necrofuturism” (p. 64) to the apocalyptic future portrayed in Wallace Shawn’s 2009 *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*. Shawn’s post-human, nightmarish and grotesque drama is radically disruptive, imaging a world in which erosion of taboos, of the distinction between human and non-human animals, of basic values or even common sense is overwhelming. Ms Shakurova deploys her key terms incisively and manages to draw Dan Rebellato’s essay on an “apocalyptic tone” in contemporary British drama into her discussion to good effect. Her conclusion provides a cogent and poetic synthesis of the research journey, bringing the project to a creative finish.

Overall, as a piece of scholarship, the thesis identifies its key concerns with clarity and takes intellectual risks; it is logically structured and consistently developed in relation to a wide range of very up-to-date resources. Ms Shakurova’s research shows strong initiative and critical



**FACULTY OF ARTS**  
**Charles University**

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

judgement while her use of secondary materials is strategic and informed. A wide range of relevant and complex ideas is investigated and integrated with focused close reading of the selected primary materials. Sources are not only appropriately cited, but actively engaged with throughout. The stylistic register is apt, and the thesis is articulate and linguistically nuanced. I noticed some small typos: misspellings mainly – Cliff Odets, Martin Medekke. But these are rare. Presentation and formatting show a meticulous attention to detail.

The process of composition and revision of the project was extended; in the end Ms Shakurova has succeeded not only in bringing it to completion, but in producing a work of real intellectual value of which she should be proud.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “EXCELLENT” / 1.

21.7.2024

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Clare Wallace".

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD