



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report

Daria Shakurova, “Events of Sand’: Affirmative Speculations in Contemporary American Drama” (MA Thesis)

The central question examined in Ms Shakurova’s Master’s thesis is whether twenty-first-century US drama, like Tony Kushner’s groundbreaking epic play *Angels in America* did in the 1990s, “calls for conjuring new futures that society could potentially spin into” (2), or in other words, whether it may be regarded as a form of cultural intervention in politics.

The work opens with a comprehensive outline of the current stage of neoliberalism which is not only based on a broad range of authoritative sources but is also characterised by exemplary lucidity and poignancy of writing. Lucidity of the argument and originality of observation are indeed also the chief characteristics of the subsequent detailed discussion of the selected plays; generally, the level of intellectual engagement with the material is on a par with accomplished doctoral theses or published monographs. The plays chosen by the candidate are Annie Baker’s *The Flick* (2013), Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006) and *Water by the Spoonful* (2012), Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2007), Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018) and Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2009) – an excellent selection as regards the considerable formal differences between the plays, as well as from the perspective of the range of topics pertaining to the neoliberal present that these dramas tackle: individualism and accrual of capital, authenticity as an imperative, the psychological impact of precarity on individual relations, systemic racism and racialisation, or apocalyptic visions of the future in a situation of an intersectional crisis, to name but the most prominent few. Ms Shakurova argues that despite the considerable bleakness of much that these plays engage with, their endings may be viewed as open and hopeful and thus as instances of a liberating use of radical imagination. As she points out in constant reference to the uncertain commons’ manifesto *Speculate This!* (2013) and Lauren Berlant’s last book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), these challenging dramas embrace the current state of perpetual crisis in a creative and playful manner and chart possible ways towards a radically reimagined future. Regardless of the significant generic and stylistic differences between the dramas (highlighted also in the candidate’s attention to the use of scenography, lighting and acting), they share a vital structural feature, as Shakurova points out: “a glitch of some kind” (56) that disrupts the impression of normalcy, ordinariness and/or order.

As it will have become apparent, this is a most accomplished MA thesis on a number of accounts; the same holds true of the structuring of the argument and the keenness and honesty of the work’s conclusion. The occasional misspellings or typographical errors are only a very minor blemish.

By way of points for discussion at the thesis defence, I would like to suggest the following:

1) Within the comprehensive critique of neoliberalism by most humanities scholars that the thesis joins and develops, it makes perfect sense to regard appeals to the “obvious”, “rational” and “common sense” as “the most effective tools of contemporary enforcement” of the neoliberal



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present as necessary and ultimately timeless. However, one wonders whether if what seems rational or commonsensical is dismissed in an indiscriminate fashion, the doors are not open to disinformation, populist lies and manipulations, and the collapse of democracy. (A related issue might be the critique of individualism as a foundation stone of neoliberalism that reappears – justifiedly again – in several sections of the thesis: the mantra to “be yourself” is convincingly shown to be inherently tied up with neoliberal agenda; but does that mean that attention should be diverted away from the individual and their position in the world? Should that be so, does this not negate the very possibility of acts of radical imagination?)

2) Thinking of the choice of playwrights covered in the thesis, most are in their thirties to fifties – but as Wallace Shawn is now an octogenarian, a question offers itself: would it make sense to the candidate to consider within the same argument the work of dramatists who came to prominence in the 1990s or even earlier, such as Suzan-Lori Parks, David Mamet, Tony Kushner, Tracy Letts or others?

3) While the plays under discussion engage, in one way or another, with most defining characteristics of the neoliberal present, one seems conspicuously absent, at least to the present reader: the role of information overload on interpersonal relationships. Do any of the plays focus on this as well?

It is without hesitation that I recommend this outstanding thesis for defence and propose to grade it as “excellent” (1).

Prague, 1 August 2024

Prof. Ondřej Pilný, PhD