

Studying the Relationship between Artistic Intent and Observable Impact

Dani Snyder-Young

Performance disappears, leaving memories and archives in its wake. Freshwater (2009) critiques researchers' overreliance on the voices of critics and our own subjective experiences as audience members. I concur with her critique; my usual methods for studying spectatorship are rooted in qualitative inquiry. I watch the audience watch the play, conduct informal interviews, and analyze discourse in transcripts of post-performance discussions. Frequently, I train a diverse team of research assistants to join me in these endeavours, triangulating what I see and hear with the things that people I trust see and hear. But there are limits to this method. It requires my physical presence at multiple performances, and I can only be in one place at a time. To work with a team, I must secure funding and hire, train, and schedule assistants in advance of a run. Sometimes, a production emerges as a significant point of cultural conflict too late to set up a full study, in a location I cannot attend. This essay is about studying the relationship between artistic intent and observable impact under conditions that do not allow my embodied presence at the theatrical event under study.

The world premiere of Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* was produced at Steppenwolf June 1–July 9, 2017, under the direction of Danya Taymor. *Pass Over* is about two young black men, Moses (Jon Michael Hill) and Kitch (Julian Parker), trapped on a purgatorial street corner, plotting and yearning for escape to the promised land. They are visited by a lost and entitled white man, Mister, and an antagonistic white cop, Ossifer (both played by Ryan Hallahan). The play riffs on *Waiting for Godot* while gesturing to Exodus, painting an absurdist landscape in which black men are overtly trapped by multiple manifestations of white supremacy.

The production became a significant point of cultural conflict resonating with my current project, which examines theatrical interventions in white supremacy and the ways white audience members consume the stories of racialized others. Hedy Weiss's (2017) review of the play in the *Chicago Sun Times* called the premise of the play "inspired" and praised it as "brilliantly acted." However, she argued that "this play distorts the full story" of "senseless, endemic violence in Chicago," which she understands as mostly "perpetuated within the community itself," and takes issue with the allegorical play's archetypal characterization of a racist white cop as "clearly meant to indict *all* white cops." This led to a firestorm of protest, including a petition for the Chicago theatre community to cease offering Weiss complimentary tickets to review their plays, signed by nearly four thousand people.

Ilyssa Kosova, my research assistant, saw the production in previews and drew it to my attention prior to Weiss's controversial review. I was in the midst of a cross-country move and could not attend a performance, and I conscripted Kosova to attend a few performances and take field notes in my stead.¹ I triangulate what Kosova, who is a white woman in her twenties, reported back of her first person experience as a participant observer with published reviews. All of the reviews I cite in this essay were written by white critics, reflecting the problematic racial dynamic that white reviewers dominate Chicago's critical landscape. Spike Lee filmed a performance of the production, creating a

Dani Snyder-Young is an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre at Northeastern University and the author of *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* (Palgrave, 2013).

cinematic archive of the production's artistic choices.² I mine the details of this archive and Kosova's reports for evidence of the production's impact on its audiences, with a particular eye to the closing moments of the play.

Nwandu's stated artistic goal for the production is "to be a witness to what I see happening in the world today. People are going to take away what they bring in, and I don't know what that is. That said, I hope people don't think the only message this play offers is about young black men. I hope people leave this play thinking about themselves" (Armour 2019). Nwandu's allegorical play pulls no punches, and she recognizes that audiences at Steppenwolf—a large institutional theatre located in an affluent neighbourhood on the North side of Chicago—are predominantly white. She echoes Ranci re's recognition that a spectator "links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places" (2009, 13). Artists cannot control the larger cultural forces informing audience members' pre-existing sense of how the world does and should work. A play might offer a moment promising new understanding or insight—but an audience member who arrives unprepared to meet the offer might reject it.

In the play's tragic ending, Moses has just defeated Ossifer and, free of police violence, is about to lead Kitch off of the concrete street corner into the desert to leave for the promised land. Just as Moses takes his first step off the corner, Mister calls out from the back of the audience, "Ahem." His footsteps echo loudly in the silent theatre as he walks toward the stage, "You going somewhere?" "Who are you?"

Moses responds, "I'm Moses, dis my my brother Kitch, and we gittin up off—"
Bang bang.

Mister shoots Moses. Blood streams down Moses's white shirt as he looks at the hole in his chest, perplexed and horrified. He falls to the ground in the sand, one arm reaching over the edge of the set to touch the black floor at the front of the theatre. Mister has shot him before he can escape his purgatorial prison.

"Ladies and gentlemen, don't be alarmed, it's ok," Mister reassures the audience, "Everything is going to be ok, I promise. Gosh. You could say that we had a bit of turbulence. A few more ups and downs than we would have liked but all that is over now. It's passed. It's passed because we have done what we were meant to do." A lush swell of strings begins to play, evoking the optimistic feeling of a golden age musical. "We stood our ground. We caught the bad guys, we took back what was ours. And now together we will make sure that no one ever ever ever takes back from us again. Will you look at that? The sun has come up. It is morning in America. Go now, enjoy yourselves. Don't worry about the mess. I'll clean that up. All that we once had is ours again. This country is ours again. Isn't it great?"

The play ends as Kitch, still trapped and now alone, mourns Moses's corpse as Mister smiles, relishing the feel of the sun on his face.³

This closing monologue uses the haunting whiteness of the institutional theatre space as a dramaturgical feature, as Mister frames the silent audience as his allies and the beneficiaries of his violent act of white supremacy. It clearly implicates white audience members who witness Mister's murder of Moses and do nothing. White supremacy may wear a charitable or a clueless mask, but in the end, such performances exist to maintain an oppressive status quo. The closing moment of the

play takes an unambiguous position that white privilege is locked in an irreconcilable struggle with black oppression.

I look for evidence of this moment of performance's impact on the spectators who experienced it. What observable performances do they enact in response? Kosova reports, "It is obviously pretty tense in the theatre. I can see a couple next to me squeezing each other's hands. I realize I am fidgeting and moving around in my seat. . . . Everyone quietly and quickly scampered out of the theatre."⁴ At the performance critic Alan Bresloff (2019) attended, "the audience was stunned and it took 10–15 seconds for them to begin applauding this wonderful cast." Conspicuous silences and swift departures might reflect a range of intellectual and emotional responses; Bresloff interprets them to mean the audience members feel "surprise and possibly shock." Kosova, too, thinks the audience is "stunned."

I look for evidence of the meaning audience members make of this moment. *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones (2017) does not explicitly reference the moment in his published review, but he does identify, "white complacency in the creation of the war zone that traps Moses and Kitch." Kosova's interpretation, written prior to the publication of Jones's review, concurs: "The moment seemed to put emphasis on the idea that we are here, we as audience members are sitting passively at this moment and watching this happen, both literally and figuratively; violence and white entitlement are actively happening." Jones and Kosova make this parallel meaning from the embodied experience of sitting in their seats in the theatre, watching Mister's act of violence and hearing him implicate them, as white witnesses, in his action.

I look for evidence of audience members' affective responses to the moment—evidence of how it made them feel. Kosova reflects, "I knew that I needed to hear the message, even if it hurt. That last bit *really* made me think about my privilege, I felt embarrassed to be a white person." Tony Adler (2017), in his review in the *Chicago Reader*, echoes this sentiment, highlighting that in the play, "there are no exceptions made for 'good' whites," exclaiming, "I watched myself squirm" while watching the play. This moment made white audience members uncomfortable and embarrassed, unsettling their racial comfort. For Kosova and Adler, this affective response proved a productive prompt for racial humility and reflection.

Synthesis of the evidence of embodied, interpretive, and affective responses to the moment across the reviews and field notes reveals that the moment unsettled white audience members, making them racially uncomfortable by implicating them in an act of racialized violence. The authors of the written accounts treat this discomfort as a site of reflection, examining their complicity in the structural system oppressing Moses and Kitch and, by extension, all black people. These responses seem to affirm that the production achieves Nwandu's goal to get "people [to] leave this play thinking about themselves" (Armour 2017).

This evidence is significant because the white spectator whose interpretation of this moment drew the most attention, Hedy Weiss, had a very different reaction to the same affective stimuli. Weiss (2017) argued that this moment "could not be more condescending to Steppenwolf's largely white 'liberal' audience," and that it "club[s] its audience over the head in a way that also makes its applause feel self-congratulatory." Weiss pushes back against inclusion in Mister's *we* as he celebrates the murder of an innocent Black man as necessary to restore a proper white supremacist order. She reads the closing moments of *Pass Over* as a balm to white audience members, a reassurance that they are different from—better than—Mister. The same impulse that made Adler "squirm" led Weiss to

distance herself from the abhorrent other. She generalizes her response to include the entirety of Steppenwolf's audience—which, from the other critical responses above, is clearly inappropriate—but it seems unlikely that Weiss is the *only* white spectator to respond to the production's provocation by distancing herself from Mister's overt act of racist violence.

Moral philosopher Shannon Sullivan (2014) highlights the ways middle-class white people differentiate between morally good anti-racist white people and morally bad racists by drawing a bright line between them and distancing themselves from any action that might cross the divide. Mister's overt white supremacist violence and framework unquestionably place him in the realm of the morally bad. Furthermore, Mister's invocation of Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" and Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" place him in the camp of US political conservatives. In the minds of many people who would consider themselves in the camp of US political progressives, conservative political camp membership is akin to endorsing overt white supremacy. In a moment of sharp political polarization, a positive invocation of a politically conservative slogan crosses the line dividing good anti-racist white people from morally bad white racists. Weiss is a white audience member, and her bias is problematic; my experience studying white spectators at mainstream theatrical events leads me to expect she is not alone in her response to avoid inclusion in Mister's white supremacist "we."

The distance between Weiss's reading and the readings of Kosova and the other professional spectators I cite above is substantial. Audiences are polyvocal, and spectators experience a range of responses to the same staged moment. The evidence I can access all comes from professional critics and a trained research assistant—these are audience members with extensive experience in watching critically and articulating their interpretations and responses. They write for familiar audiences whose tastes they know, translating their experiences into language to communicate with their newspaper subscribers, regular blog readers, and faculty supervisor. Their writings, like all acts of communication, are performances trying to do something to their audiences. How do we know how the bulk of lay audience members responded?

Artists developing new plays routinely watch audiences through previews, paying close attention to spectators' embodied reactions to moments of performance and responses during post-performance discussions. Some may chat informally with audience members in the lobby or in line to use the restroom. These methods cannot explicate the complex inner workings of every individual audience member's heart and mind, but they can provide evidence of patterns of responses. Artists use these responses to make adjustments to performances through previews; playwrights sometimes use these responses to revise new plays for future productions.

Nwandu's (2018) subsequent revision of the moment described above leads me to believe *she* may have seen a gap between her artistic intent and the moment's impact on the real audience—critics included—through the run of the premiere production. She revised this monologue for the subsequent Lincoln Center production and the play's publication. In the published version of the play, Mister distances himself from the violent act we just watched him commit. He tells the audience he finds it "so darn perplexing" how "something like this keeps . . ." (makes a gesture for "happening") (72), as though the violence he enacts is outside of his control. He structures language within the bounds of how *good white people* talk about race, that "it makes me feel so sad but also helpless to change or intervene or I don't know." Mister admits that "there are those times when I don't wanna know" (72), implicating audience members, who from positions of privilege are able to ignore, avoid, and not think about racism. His ease contrasts with Kitch's sorrow—Kitch does not

have Mister's luxury of deciding he just does not "wanna know." In the final beat, Mister shifts his demeanour, brightening, "Anyway . . ." as he changes the subject to something less unpleasant (72). This revision takes Mister's response to his own violent act out of the language of overt white supremacy and into a realm that makes it harder for white audience members to disavow. It clearly links the conditions trapping Moses and Kitch and "polite" performances through which white people avoid direct discussion of radicalized conflict.

Throughout my larger project, I repeatedly watched white audience members distance themselves from racism. White audience members frequently interpret plays in ways consistent with their own sense of moral goodness, finding ways to preserve a sense of racial comfort. Nwandu's revision offers evidence of an artist evaluating the distance between their intent to implicate and the audience's capacity to disavow. This is significant because all of the published writing on the production, save for Weiss's review, indicates the production operated as a productive provocation for racial humility and reflection. Nwandu's revisions indicate that Weiss's deeply unpopular reading of *Pass Over* may not have been completely uncommon. As a scholar reliant on archival sources to understand a performance that I could not attend, such clues are essential to understand the impact of the performance on lay audience members who did not publish their interpretations.

Notes

1. Ilyssa Kosova's work on this project was funded through an Illinois Wesleyan University Artistic and Scholarly Development grant.
2. This film, produced by Amazon Studios in 2018 and distributed through Amazon's streaming platform, prominently represents the act of bussing black audience members from the South Side of Chicago to the performance, highlighting that the audience for the filmed performance event is not a typical LORT theatre audience.
3. Transcribed by the author from Spike Lee's filmed adaptation of the Steppenwolf production of *Pass Over*, Amazon Studios, 2018.
4. All quotes from Ilyssa Kosova are drawn from entries in her unpublished field log, emailed to the author July 25, 2017.

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