

*Kopit's Metatheatrical Experience*  
*From, Oh Dad, Poor Dad through*  
*The Hero to Indians*

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When Arthur Kopit (1937) turned to drama in the late 1950s, the American theatre was already undergoing a crisis which "seemed deeper and more irremediable than usual" (Bigsby 249). Tennessee Williams, overwhelmed by personal problems, was steadily declining in power as a playwright; he did not produce works of much importance in the 1960s and the 1970s. Arthur Miller seemed to have lost interest in the theatre, being under the threat of the political persecutions and public conservatism of the decade. America desperately needed a playwright who, according to Bigsby, "would have been invented if he had not existed" (249). However, American playwrights of quality "do exist. The problem is that they are not really welcome on Broadway" (Lewis 167). Though this statement is applicable to Broadway at any time, it was particularly valid during the 1950s and early 1960s when "the economics of Broadway were such that the financial risks were too great to take a chance on an untried talent" (Bigsby 249).

It is noteworthy that American drama at the time was advanced by the new theatrical generation with priorities at odds with those of the establishment. It is

true O'Neill, Williams and Miller had firmly established a distinctive dramatic tradition-- "a blend of realistic-expressionistic drama with a sharp focus on psychological and social conflicts" (Engler 280). The young dramatists, however, did not regard this type of drama as a model to follow. Socially committed and aesthetically radical, they rebelled against the traditional well-made plays and turned to the European avant-garde, especially for form and technique. They looked forward to Brecht's Epic Theatre, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Pirandello's Metatheatre.

The long list of dramatists who started producing their plays off-Broadway in the 1960s included a group of one-piece playwrights whose talent sparked in a single burst and was gone; others continued to shoot off repeatedly, and a few kept burning with steady light. Arthur Kopit was one of those who managed to stand out prominently, especially in portraying the paradoxical contradictions of America coupled with presenting the 'Apocalyptic' temper onstage; he gives a Brechtian message in a Pirandellian form, thus integrating the ironic detachment of Brecht and the existential anguish generated by Pirandello.

**This study is an attempt to shed light on Arthur Kopit as one of those new-generation playwrights who manifests conspicuous influences of "meta-theatrical" techniques. This does not mean in any way that Kopit has not come, directly or indirectly, under the influence of other dramatic or theatrical trends in vogue, like the Theatre of the Absurd, to mention only one example, despite his declaration: "I'm not conscious of the influence of other playwrights at all, except indirectly, I suppose" (qtd. in Weaver 233), which contradicts a previous frank comment on his own "inability to break completely away from the conventions his predecessors had so firmly established" (Engler 281); Kopit admits that:**

**One can never wholly dissociate a work of art from its creative environment any more than one can separate its style from the traditions around it. ...Tradition has always been the basis of all innovation, and always will be? ("The Vital Matter of Environment,"13)**

**This paper also intends to highlight, as much as possible, the metatheatrical techniques and devices that are used in Kopit's theatre, besides the reason why he**

resorts to them. It is necessary for this research to begin with a brief introduction to "metatheatre"—its definition and techniques, in addition to past and contemporary examples.

The term "meta-theatre" comes from the Greek prefix 'meta', which implies 'a level beyond' the subject that it qualifies. 'Metatheatre' can be simply defined as the self-conscious reference within theatre to theatre itself. Meta-theatricality is generally referred to as a means for a play to comment on itself, drawing attention to the literal circumstances of its own production, such as the presence of the audience, or the fact that the actors are actors, and/or making the literary pretence behind the production overt. However, there is much uncertainty over the proper definition of this type of theatre, and the dramatic techniques it may use. The term was invented by Lionel Abel, and has ever since entered into common critical usage. Abel coined this term to define a form of drama characterized by its self-conscious nature. In contrast to the catharsis-oriented Greek tragedy, he argues, the hero in Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Calderón remains "conscious of the part he himself plays in constructing

the drama that unfolds around him” (167). The device of the play-within-a-play is present in works such as *Hamlet* or *Life is a Dream*, yet Abel indicates that the concept of 'meta-theatre' goes beyond the use of this specific device: "the plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (Abel 134).

Abel's idea of meta-theatre can be traced back to the early 1960s, when the prefix “meta” enjoyed extraordinary prominence among art critics. As Puchner observes, it is in the late fifties and early sixties:

When the [sic] literature, painting, music, and theatre produced in the first half of the twentieth century are canonized, when prominent scholars engage the often hermetic, puzzling, and complex works of high modernism, introducing and explaining them to the academy and to the a wider public. The formulation they commonly use is that these difficult works do not seek to represent the world, but are rather 'about' art itself.... There existed no art form in the twentieth century that did not acquire, sooner or later, the prefix *Meta*”. (Puchner. "Introduction," in Abel 2-3)

Abel describes metatheatre as reflecting comedy and tragedy at the same time, where the audience can laugh at the protagonist while feeling empathetic simultaneously. The concept reflects the world as an extension of human conscience, rejecting given societal norms while allowing for more imaginative variation and possible social change. Abel also considers the character of Don Quixote to be the meta-theatrical, self-referring character prototype, as he looks for situations he wants to be a part of, not waiting for life, but replacing reality with imagination when the world is lacking in his desires (139). The character is aware of his/her own theatricality. According to Ebersole, the technique is an examination of characters within the broader scheme of life, in which they create their own desires and actions within society. He adds that role-playing derives from the character not accepting his societal role and creating his own role to change his destiny (8, 35).

Stuart Davis suggests that 'meta-theatricality' should be defined according to its fundamental effect of destabilizing any sense of realism; he says:

**'Metatheatre' is a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic — to be nothing but a mirror in which we view the actions and sufferings of characters like ourselves, suspending our disbelief in their reality. Metatheatre begins by sharpening awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness — in short, the theatricality-- of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide. (Davis)**

**From this perspective, modernist theatre considers the existence of theatrical audiences as an essential component of the theatrical event, not just a factor to be corrected or neutralized. "The appeal to the audience," remarks Pérez-Simón, "is usually made through the laying bare of the artistic devices" which breaks the illusion of reality and demands a critical involvement on the part of "spectators who are not treated as simple voyeurs" (Pérez-Simón 2).**

The ideal of total desertion of the barrier between stage and audience was gradually replaced with a critical approach to the fourth wall, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, as dramatists and directors reflected on the ideological implications of this physical separation. In this respect, the theory and practice of Brecht's theatre represents the most consistent attempt to re-evaluate the distance separating stage from audience.

However, only particular plays let the audience know at once that the events and characters in them are of the playwright's invention and that "insofar as they were discovered . . . they were created by the playwright's imagination rather than by his observation of the world" (Abel 133). Such plays have truth in them, not because they convince us of real occurrences or existing persons, but because they show the reality of the dramatic imagination, instanced by the playwright. Abel remarks that the characters appearing on the stage in these plays are there "not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them". From the same modern perspective, interesting events will have the quality of

having been thought, rather than of having simply happened. Then the playwright has the responsibility to acknowledge in the structure of his play that it was his imagination, which controlled the event from beginning to end. Plays of this type, according to Abel, belong to a special genre and deserve a distinctive name; he calls them "metaplays" or works of "metatheatre" (134-35).

Some critics use the term to refer to plays which involve explicit 'performative' aspects, such as singing, dancing, or role-playing by onstage characters, though these may not come specifically from meta-dramatic awareness. Others condemn the free use of the term except in definite circumstances for fear that it should be used to describe phenomena which are simply 'theatrical' rather than 'meta' in any sense, which proves to be true as Patrice Pavis clarifies in the most recent edition of his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre* (1996), "metatheatricity is a fundamental characteristic of any theatrical communication" (qtd. in Callens 211). In support of Pavis' definition, Callens elaborates:

Insofar as theatre always is a metacommunication —the communication to a public of a communication between performers . . . — it may indeed at any time

shift that public's attention from the signified to the theatrical signification process and its means (performers, set, text. . . the creators' attitudes and perspective or approach, their preparation,...). The metatheatrical moment, then, is constituted by combining the representation with a simultaneous auto- or self-reflexion [sic] on that representation, a running commentary organically fusing staging with self-staging. (211)

However, five distinct techniques may be found in metatheatre, as Hornby indicates (1986). These include ceremony within a play, role-playing within a role, reference to reality, self-reference of the drama, and play-within-a-play. In 'metatheatre', the play-within-a-play provides an onstage microcosm of the theatrical situation, and such techniques as the use of parody and burlesque to draw attention to literary or theatrical conventions, and the use of the 'theatrum mundi' trope.

Notwithstanding the techniques used, the audience's theatrical proficiency, and the degree of disruption felt, meta-theatre should be considered as a "specific heightening of the theatre's inherent doubleness, as fiction and reality, showing and telling,

as a mind-broadening confrontation of the self with its Other," (Callens 219). Here, Cohn's "theatereality," a term she coined in her book *Just Play* (1980), proves to be useful in designating a distinctive form of metadrama, emerging in those moments when the enacted stage reality—whether visual image or verbal narration—synchronizes with the fiction (99). Cohn, nevertheless, realizes that 'theatereality', like the aim of Pirandello's dramatic experiments, or the more social objective of integrating theatre and everyday life pursued by the American "alternative theatre of the sixties, remains a *virtual* realm: always in theatereality [sic] the actual and the fictional only nearly converge" (103).

There is a considerable body of modernist dramatic works, exemplified by those of Genet, Brecht, Pirandello and Beckett, that responds to what one can expect from meta-theatre's self-reflectivity, critical relationship to previous models and complexity. Yet, the notion of meta-theatre is not exclusive to one artistic period. It can be traced back to Aristophanes (448—380 B.C), as the chorus plays a prominent part in his drama, especially the early plays: *The Acharnians*, *The*

*knights, The clouds, The Wasps, Peace, The Birds, Lysistrata and Thesmophriazusae.* The chorus was "regulated by a number of formal conventions, notably the parabasis, an address to the audience, [especially of comedy], which permitted the dramatist to put over directly his own views of the subject at issue," according to Taylor's *Dictionary of The Theatre* (18) This address was also "independent of the action of the play: usually following the *agon* [a formalized debate or argumentation, especially in comedy] and, in the earliest forms of comedy, serving often to end the play (<http://dictionary.reference.com/>).

Seneca, the Roman dramatist (4 B.C.—A.D. 65), also has meta-dramatic aspects in a way or another. Erasmo, in his book: *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality* (2004), for instance, considers allusions to personalities or events outside of the theatre or to the dramatic action of the play to be meta-theatrical and necessary to understanding the play. He particularly argues that knowledge of Roman law and custom is vital for understanding Senecan tragedy. In his "The Wrath of Seneca's Medea," Guastella has shown that *Medea* is steeped in Roman divorce law. Indeed, the

play's consciousness of the fact that art imitates life, drawing a dividing line between the fictional reality and actual reality, and of the fact that it (the play) is only fiction, amounts to meta-theatre. This consciousness is verified through Seneca's choice of legal vocabulary. Moreover, Atreus and Medea may be considered as Seneca's mouthpieces. However, these characters control the narrative and do appear to exercise a self-reflexive judgment.

Shakespeare also employed "meta-theatrical" devices in many of his plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* are examples. In each of these plays, there is a play-within-a-play or a masque presented as part of the larger plot.

Kopit, who is the focus of this study, has a unique perspective on life which adds up to the central point in the bulk of his works. In a 1979 interview, and in a clear indication of his dramatic technique, Kopit said, "I want to discover new ways of seeing things. I want to show events, as it wasn't [sic]. I want to distort because through distortion you arrive at clarity" (Auerbach 70). The dramatist has written over 30 plays, among which

*Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1960), *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis* (1965), *Indians* (1969), *Wings* (1978), *Nine* (1983), *End Of The World With Symposium To Follow* (1984), *Ghosts*-- an adaptation of Ibsen's play (1984), *Road to Nirvana* (1991), and *BecauseHeCan* [sic] (2000) stand out.

Kopit was first regarded as a theatrical innovator for his parodies, especially *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feelin' So Sad* (henceforth *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*. The text of the play is quoted from John Gassner, ed. *Best American Plays, Fifth Series 1957-1963*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1963. Further references to this edition appear in the text). It is a wild burlesque of murder mysteries. The play is a fantasy about an impossibly possessive mother and her downtrodden son's ineffectual attempts at rebellion. The mother-son relationship, as Szilassy remarks, "very much resembles the one in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly, Last Summer*" (27). The play is linked to the Theatre of the Absurd with regard to its title as well as its content. Engler remarks that:

*Oh Dad* is both a metadrama and an antidrama *par excellence*. It celebrates the spirit of rebellion and seems to take extraordinary pleasure in subverting the entire repertoire of the American drama in the 1940s and 50s. With its subtitle: *A Pseudo-classical Tragi-farce in a Bastard French Tradition*, the play primarily satirizes the dramatic tradition. Although Arthur Kopit seems to follow...Miller and Williams in his choice of subject (a men-hating mother dominating her emotionally crippled son), his dramatic technique is completely different. (282)

The play portrays, in a parody-like manner, a trip of Madame Rospettle— an insatiable mother who tours the world's extravagant hotels with her retarded son— Jonathan, and a strange bunch of luggage including the corpse of her dead husband stuffed in a coffin, a cat-eating piranha fish and two flesh-eating Venus flytraps. The play ends with Jonathan rebelling against his mother's dominance, hacking the piranha and smothering his seductive babysitter Rosalie to death.

Kopit's use of parody is clear from the beginning of the play as some of the props are carried onto the stage just as the curtain rises. While the atmosphere of

the first scene recalls Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*, the names of the characters refer the audience to *The Rose Tattoo*. Yet, there are also obvious similarities as regards the dramatic action. However, in contrast to Williams' realistic portrayals, Kopit does not explore the psychological problems of his dramatis personae; he presents characters, which are as flat as caricatures can be. He is satisfied with delineating his characters as if they were mere quotations from pre-existing texts, thus mocking the objectives of traditional drama. In the opening scene, Madame Rosepettle who is delineated to represent "the myth of the all powerful mother who emasculates not only her sons but all the men around her" (Auerbach 75) is seen giving strict orders to the bellboys, insulting them every now and then, blackmailing them with her meager tips. She asserts herself as a man-eating ogre whom no one can stop. Her poor dead husband is described as, ". . . my favorite trophy. I take him with me wherever I go" (Sc. III 499). Then she gives orders to "put it [the coffin where her husband is stuffed] in the bedroom. ... Next to the bed, of Course" (Sc. I 486). Here, kopit mocks the Freudian interpretations where "the bedroom literally was the center of all", thus blaming society which blindly

believes in such platitudes about husband-wife relationship. Likewise, in the final scene, Kopit makes fun of modern dramatists and directors, when Rosalie tries to seduce Jonathan in his mother's bedroom, especially when they "over-psychologize" in their application of Freudian psychoanalysis to the characters onstage. When Rosalie and Jonathan are about to make love, "*(The closet door swings open . . . and the CORPSE [of his father] falls out, [from the closet--where it is stored right onto the bed], this time his arms falling about Rosalie's neck. Jonathan almost swoons)*" (Sc. II 507). If absurdist dramatists rebelled against preoccupation with psychology, Kopit, as Auerbach puts it, "rebelled against the theatre in which all action was conceived to be psychologically plausible" (74).

Kopit can also be said to parody Adamov in disparaging the mother figure who attempts to keep her son permanently in her grip, thus preventing him from establishing a normal adult relationship with a woman, as Auerbach phrases it. (76-77) Madame Rosepettle, instead of Jonathan himself, asks Rosalie to come to him. Therefore Rosalie snap at him: "Then why didn't

you ask me yourself? Something's wrong around here, Jonathan. I don't understand why you didn't ask me yourself" (Sc. II 493). Rosepettle represents the over protective mother model. She would prevent her son from indulging in the world outside in any way, including telling lies about it and allowing her son to see its ugly side only—represented by Rosalie. "My son is as white as fresh snow and you are tainted with sin," says Madame Rosepettle. Jonathan, who is torn between family lies and family ties, tries to justify his mother's actions:

No! You don't understand. It's not what you think. She doesn't lock the door to ka-ka keep me in, which would be malicious. She—locks the door so I can't get out, which is for my own good and therefore—benevolent.

.....

I mean, I've—I've gggggot [sic] so many things to do. I-just couldn't possibly get anything done if I ever—went—outside. (Sc. II 493)

Conventional American family life is thus parodied in a way that would by analogy denigrate the customs of conventional American theatre. Kopit

manages to theatricalize the set of ineffectual beliefs about the meaning of life against which the play is set. Consequently, the conventions of avant-garde drama -- Theatre of the Absurd in particular, are lampooned. However, despite the "exotic exterior," remark Brocket and Findlay, "the figures are the familiar ones of earlier dramas; the adolescent escaping an oppressing parent. Only the manner seems new and that is more parodistic than truly original" (709). It is nonetheless obvious that *Oh Dad* provides a peculiar parody of Oedipus complex which has been an American preoccupation. The play also seems to mimic Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*, in introducing a vindictive millionaire and a travelling coffin.

*Oh Dad* is also meant to be a repudiation of the "French" influence on the American theatre of the 1950s, i.e. the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd. Kopit's characters are trapped in situations similar to those depicted by Absurdists as typical of the human condition. Characters live in a world where meaningful action is impossible and communication leads nowhere. The plot of *Oh Dad* is circular, and, at the end as if speaking for the distressed spectator, Mrs. Rosepettle

announces the total breakdown of meaning when she describes the place, or rather the world, as a madhouse: "That's what it is. A madhouse". The same notion is further stressed when she addresses Jonathan with the question: "What is the meaning of this?" (Sc. III 508).

While *Oh Dad* reflects the failure of realistic and absurdist drama, and explicitly disqualifies those specific texts that used to serve as "pre-texts," it displays many elements of 'meta-drama'. One might even feel justified in interpreting the events on stage as a dramatization of the situation in which the new playwrights found themselves at the start of their career. Jonathan, whose paralyzing dependence on his mother has made him unable to find his own language, may represent the young dramatist who tries to overcome the oppressive heritage of his predecessors and is still in search of his own voice. *Oh Dad* gives a rather dull view of the future of American drama as it ends with Jonathan submitting all over again to his mother's overwhelming influence and his regression to a stage of 'speechlessness'. Engler rightly remarks:

With the 'pre-texts' still looming so large, the contemporary dramatist is condemned to endlessly re-present the tradition, either by slavishly imitating it or by rebelling against it. (283)

Apart from the jovial parody and rhetorical uproar that are very clear throughout the play and give it an adolescent quality, many critics hailed it as genuine and brilliant. For example, Weales remarks: "It is more serious than its pastiche of parody," ("Drama" 415). Esslin too affirms that "there is enough evidence of his [Kopit's] genuine concern with the problem of the play to prevent it from being a mere parodistic joke" (316).

Kopit's mime playlet, *The Hero* (1964) is a farther step in his theatrical experience. It may be considered as 'meta-drama' to a greater extent than *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, according to Engler as it "completely dispenses with one of the foremost means of dramatic presentation, the medium of language". Moreover, it "negates the conventions of traditional drama in the most radical way" (284). Kopit also wrote this play against a background of pre-existing texts; the hero of Kopit's playlet, very much like the two protagonists in

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, is a shabby tramp who seems to have lost direction in the world. The scenario suggested by the stage decor puts the audience face to face with the motif of man's absurd predicament as the hero finds himself lost in an endless desert.

The action of the play starts with a man who collapses from fatigue just after entering the stage; he gets up again, and carefully dusts off his rags and attaché case. Then he begins to search the ground, looks back to where he came from, searches again, and finally leaves the stage as if intent on fetching something he lost on his way. He returns carrying a huge scroll of paper. He takes a sandwich from his pocket, but he cannot eat it, as it is rotten and too hard. Provoked by this experience, he pulls out a large, badly torn "MAP OF THE WORLD." Although he knows that a map on this scale will not give him any sense of his exact location, he checks it, and pretends to have found the section depicting the desert. When he seems to spot something in the distance, he gets out a pair of opera glasses and begins to unroll the scroll of paper, arranging it like a billboard. He takes out a paint box from the attaché case, and while scanning the distance with his glasses,

draws a sketch of an oasis with all the goodies necessary for a luxurious picnic. After finishing his painting, he carefully hides the paint box behind the scroll, straightens up his appearance and rests, in a rather cheerful and contented mood, in the shade of a palm tree he has just painted.

This bizarre and seemingly nonsensical action reaches its climax when a tattered woman appears on the stage. She is somewhat irritated when she sees the painting of the oasis and a real man resting under a fake palm tree, but pretends not to notice. After a while, she searches the billboard and checks the distance, but "she sees, of course, nothing." The man offers her his opera glasses; yet again, she sees nothing. Finally, she gives up her suspicions and sits down under the palm tree; she even shares the rotten sandwich with the man! The woman seems to be satisfied with her situation, and the play ends with the following stage direction:

*Suddenly she touches his shoulder and he turns. He looks at her. She motions to the surrounding oasis and sighs, with pleasure. She laughs warmly. He laughs modestly. They snuggle up to each other. They stare off into the distance, smiles on their faces. Long pause. The*

*orange disk of the sun sets slowly against the cyclorama. The lights fade as it does. They snuggle more, as the cold of night approaches. The vague smiles on their faces never leave. Indeed, they almost seem frozen there. Darkness. (84)*

The dramatic action of *The Hero* is apparently enigmatic if not absurd; however, few critics have bothered to analyze the play in some detail. Wolter, for example, deals with the play as an account of the common ideology of heroism. He asserts:

After a severe test of his heroism by reality, the hero ... uses a billboard to advertize the false dream of his heroism. When a woman comes along, he succeeds in making her believe in his vision.... For the audience, the dream of heroism, which the woman indulges in ... turns into nightmare, because we realize that ... life can only be endured with the help of illusion. (63)

Taking into consideration Kopit's earlier *Oh Dad*, with its poignant satire of the "Bastard French Tradition", *The Hero* can be regarded as 'metadrama'. As such, it can be interpreted as a "subversive attack on the preconceptions and ideologies on which most plays written in the vein of the Theatre of the Absurd are

based" (Engler 285). Adler agrees with the notion that *The Hero* is an example of meta-drama, although he finds Engler's specific definition of that concept too narrow. Instead, he would consider Kopit's mime as meta-drama "because it celebrates the notion of theatre itself as well as the act of going to the theatre" (322). Indeed, *The Hero* begins and ends with a sunrise and a sunset that deliberately announce themselves as artificial because the audience witnesses the stage machinery involved:

*"The sun is a bright, orange disk which is hoisted by a wire, up the cyclorama" / "The orange disk of the sun sets slowly against the cyclorama. (84, 88)*

When The Woman enters, she is at first startled by the illusion of reality (the palm tree, the water, the mountain, the lunch spread out on a blanket) created by the hero/artist out of "*nothing*" (82-83). But soon she willingly enters into the play, becoming a full participant in the creative process. Her act of "*smiling*" and offering him half the sandwich, which he stares at "*amazed,*" proves the decisive moment, for afterwards she "*touches . . . and sighs, with pleasure . . . [and] laughs warmly . . . [and then] They snuggle up to each*

*other*" (84). It is an image of mutuality, of communion, in the face of the void or nothingness beyond the illusion on the painted backdrop. And in that sense, perhaps it is not unlike what Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) suggest. In fact, their very nicknames, Didi and Gogo--- containing as they do nearly all the letters needed to spell "Godot" -could be interpreted as suggesting that Godot will not come or need not come, because he is already here.

Different from what Engler claims, the smiles on the Man's and Woman's faces do not become "vaguer and vaguer" (288) as the sun sets. It is true, "*The vague smiles on their faces never leave. Indeed, they almost seem frozen there*" as "*Darkness*" descends (84). "But isn't that because they now exist in the world of art, which is eternally fixed?," exclaims Adler, and concludes that the great analogue in dramatic literature for the experience of going to the theatre in order to find regeneration for daily life--which seems to summarize what Kopit's *The Hero* is all about--will always be the journey that the characters in Shakespeare's romantic comedies take into "the green

world," which, too, provides a space for revitalization in the midst of a world torn by conflict (323).

Both Engler's and Adler's interpretations can be considered as valid in their support of the idea that *The Hero* is 'metadrama'. From the beginning of the play, the homeless couple find themselves in a hostile, life-negating desert, which recalls the standpoint of many Absurdist playwrights. The orientation, which the fragmented "MAP OF THE WORLD" seems to promise is far from helpful and, as the image of the discarded segments of the map suggests, the past, i.e. the road already travelled, is incapable of defining one's present situation.

Yet unlike Beckett, Kopit does not "conceive his dramatis personae as being petrified when facing the meaninglessness of their actions" (Engler 286). The structure of *The Hero* is not circular, nor do Kopit's characters remain trapped in schematized patterns of speech and "non-action like Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Kopit's protagonist is a "hero" as far as he takes action and creates an alternative to reality that seems to be without any promise. "His act of evoking the illusion of a counter-world is itself intended to be

treated as an illusion," remarks Engler, who adds, "The means of producing it are always kept within easy reach" (286).

When the woman finally discards her skepticism and willingly submits to the illusion, she enacts what has been aptly described, in the theory of art, as the readers' or audiences' "willing suspension of disbelief," which refers to an act of the intentional disregard of one's better knowledge, that is to say the knowledge that all pictures of reality presented by art are more or less well made artifacts. The phrase of the "willing suspension of disbelief," which was first invented by Coleridge, sums up the artist's effort to create an imaginary reality with a "semblance of truth". Coleridge asserts:

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of

disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.  
(5-6)

Coleridge maintains that the artist has to make his picture of reality in a way that enables the recipient to perceive the picture as if it were reality itself. Because the suspension of disbelief depends on the verisimilitude of the work of art, Coleridge wants the artist to make the reproduction of reality as authentic as possible. Engler remarks that:

Kopit's version of the concept seems to imply that the prerequisite of artistic production is not objective but subjective reality, in other words, a specific psychological disposition. In the case of *The Hero*, the oasis the artist seems to copy by looking at some distant reality with his opera glasses is nothing but a mere hallucination. The artist does not represent reality, but the likeness of his own wishful thinking. . . . His work of art, then, is merely the mirror of his emotions. (287)

Thus, Kopit poses an essential question of the potential achievement of art in modern society. As *The Hero* reveals at the end, the illusion produced by art seems to make it possible for man to rise above the hostile situation of existing in a hostile and squalid

world. When darkness draws closer, reality can no longer be covered up.

Designed as a meta-drama, *The Hero* dramatizes Kopit's call for an anti-illusionist artistic attitude, a call for a theatre which confronts the audience with the reality it would rather not see. The play could indeed never become a harbinger of illusion aesthetics. On the contrary, its main force is aimed at disparaging the results of an art which traps its audience in a fake world of wish-fulfillment.

*Indians* (1968) is truly a landmark in Kopit's metatheatrical experience. The idea of the play occurred to Kopit in March, 1966, and received momentum from Vietnam War. Kopit read a newspaper article quoting General Westmorland—commander in chief of the American forces in Vietnam, lamenting an irrational slaughter of civilians. Kopit recalls:

I thought, 'No, your hearts don't go out to the innocent victims of this, because there is something wrong.' And then suddenly I thought of the Indians and the White Man. It was part of a struggle that we had been fighting throughout our history with people we

conceived of as being spiritually, morally, economically, socially, and intellectually our inferiors. ("Interview with John Lahr,")

He wanted to write a play on the subject but did not know how to do it. Finally, he decided to write a play that would explore what happens when a certain power imposes itself on a weaker one falsely justifying the whole matter in terms of general and moral good.

The title of the play superficially suggests its subject to be the genocide of Indians by white Americans, which is not true; Kopit uses poetic license with history to establish an equation between American past and present as the political theatre of the play "places the Vietnam war in the context of American history" (Weaver 226). However, *Indians* is not a documentary play, but an attempt to reproduce historical events. In the light of American behavior throughout history, according to Kopit, Vietnam war was an inevitable episode which dislocated America's values, undermined its myth, and disturbed its moral equilibrium.

*Indians* represents the dilemma of American Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through William Cody

**(Buffalo Bill) who, though acknowledging the humanity of Indians, is misled into being a national hero through perpetuating legends which justify genocide. In thirteen scenes, Kopit describes the destruction of Indian tribes and the loss of Cody's integrity and authenticity through a series of flashbacks and alternating between portraying real-world events and others of the mythical world of the Wild West Show. The playwright gives a chronology of Cody's life under the title, "Chronology for a Dreamer", immediately before the text of the play begins.**

**It is clear from the beginning that Kopit adopts Brechtian theatricalism, instead of fourth-wall tradition, so as to break the illusion of reality and detach the audience from the action of the play with view to forcing them to concentrate on the ideas behind it, and preventing identification with the characters. The stage has no curtain and when the spectators enter the theatre they are faced with three large glass show cases holding a larger than-life-size effigy of Buffalo Bill in embroidered buckskin, effigy of Sitting Bull in simple cloth beside some artifacts—a buffalo skin, a blood-stained Indian shirt and an old rifle. Strange music**

coming from all about enhances the dislocation of the audience. The Wild West Show and the play-within-the-play are introduced to the audience by another group of theatrical and artificial tools. Buffalo Bill enters the stage wearing the same clothes as his effigy in the case riding an artificial stallion. Then, an open-framed open fence rises to enclose them all. A voice reverberates from all about the theatre urging Buffalo Bill to start the show, "I'm sorry; it's time to start" (4). According to Auerbach, this intentional unreality of the setting "underlines the distortion of the White man's view of both himself and of the Indians" (92). The audience, in its turn, plays the role of jurors whose vision of American history is going to be changed by what they are about to see.

Through direct address to the audience, Sitting Bull narrates how his tribe was destroyed by depriving them of the most essential rights of food and clothing and the right to perform their religious rituals:

**SENATOR LONG.** Indians! Please be assured that this committee has not come to punish you or take away any of your land but only to hear your grievances, determine if they are just. And if so, remedy them. For

we, like the Great Father, wish only the best for our Indian children. (7)

Kopit uses the flashback technique in Scene Three as he recalls the incident when killed 100 buffalos – the Indian's only food supply. This step back from the narrative disrupts the rising of passions because the audience becomes conscious of the narrative qua narrative. Before the Wild West Show, Cody was hired by Americans to hunt buffalos so as to provide railroad workers with food. Now, he does this merely to show off his skill at shooting, and "in exhibiting signs of bravery . . ." (13). This is presented on stage by Indians in the form of eye-wounded buffalos that die one after the other.

Theatricality is quite apparent in the direct address of Spotted Tail's corpse to the audience defending himself as a brave Indian, not a Comanche: "My name is spotted Tail. My father was a Sioux; my mother, part Cherokee, part Crow. No matter how you look at it, I'm just not a Comanche" (28-29). Another example of direct address takes place in Scene Five when Geronimo, an imprisoned Indian fighter tells the audience about his bravery with the Whites:

**I AM GERONIMO! WAR CHIEF OF THE  
GREAT CHIORICAHUA APACHES! NO ONE  
LIVES WHO HAS KILLED MORE WHITE MEN  
THAN I! (34)**

**In Scene Seven which is the thematic and structural centre of the play, action shifts to the White House where Ned Buntline introduces his play "Scouts of the Plains"—a play-within-the play—to the President and the First Lady:**

**Ah, forgive me, I'm sorry, Ned Buntline's the name,  
It's me who's brought Bill Cody fame.**

**Wrote twenty seven books with him the hero.**

**Made'm better known than Nero.**

**And though we sold'em cheap, one for a dime,**

**The two of us was rich in no time.**

**As for my soul's redemption, it came thus:**

**I saw the nation profit more than us.**

**For with each one o'my excitin' stories,**

**Cody grew t'represent its glories,**

**Also helped relieve its conscience. . . . (42)**

**The play portrays a bizarre picture in which Cody and his friend Hickok impersonate themselves (which is role-playing in a way or another); they go to save an**

Indian maiden, in a cowboy adventure where many get killed. Indian roles are played by German and Italian actors.

Authenticity versus impersonation is enhanced as a theme by the apparent contrast between Cody's character and that of Hickok. The latter does not go too far with ideas of being a public benefactor; he rejects "the humiliation o'havin' to impersonate [his] own personal self" (54). He elaborates that "man may need money, but no man needs it this bad" (46). Consequently, he decides to behave naturally and keep his self-esteem. Cody, on the other hand, lives the illusion of being a national hero: "I am doin' what my country wants! WHAT MY BELOVED COUNTRY WANTS!" (49). He believes he is doing a lot of good, "Entertaining people! Makin' 'em happy! Showin' 'em the West! Givin' 'em somethin' t' be proud of!" (47-48). By the end of this scene, Cody is in absolute bewilderment as to whether his show corroborates the myth justifying colonization.

The play-within-the-play is appropriately used by Kopit to emphasize the analogy of Buffalo Bill and America itself with regard to rejecting reality. The

dramatist remarks that the "dream of glory was not the nightmare of destruction, of willfulness, of greed, of perjury, of murder which it has become" ("Interview with John Lahr").

Absolute meta-theatricality strikes the audience when Uncas--a dead Indian, not only comes back to life but also indulges in an arbitrary verbal monologue which comments on the real action of the play and the reality of contemporary America itself:

UNCAS. (German accent) I am Uncas, Chief of the Pawnee Indians, recently killed for my lustful ways. . . . I had this vision: the white man is great, the red man nothing. So, if a white man kills a red man, we must forgive him, for God intended man to be as great as possible, and by eliminating the inferior, the great man carries on God's work. Thus, the Indian is in no way wronged by being murdered. Indeed, quite the opposite: being murdered is his purpose in life. . . . And now I die again. (52)

In his interview with Lahr, Kopit asserts that he was not originally concerned with the Indians but with the way in which Americans rationalized their treatment and how it gave rise to the myth of the West;

the elimination nearly of two thirds of the Indian nation is ironically rationalized and pardoned through a false sense of the white man's destiny. The Vietnamese war is nonetheless moralized. It is an ongoing process where Americans consider themselves to be superior and give themselves the right to do whatever they like to nations of inferior status.

Bringing the dead back to life in the play-within-the-play is a famous Brechtian device used by Kopit to force its audience – the president and his wife, to think of the situation of the Indians as depicted in the action of the main play and to make the audience of the main play think of the way America deals with other nations.

Inspired by Pirandello's play-within-the-play, the fictional actors and audience in Kopit's *Indians* parallel the actors and audience of the main play. Thus, the murdered Indians in Buntline's play parallel the lamented Indians in the real world of the main play; consequently, the President's family parallels the audience of the main play. The fictional play itself is full of asides, direct conversations between the actors and the audience, in addition to arbitrary monologues and actions:

**Teskanja Vila. (the Italian actress) . . . I'd like a little privacy.**

**(To the First Family) After all, I've not rehearsed this. (58)**

**The President and his wife are greatly excited and every now and then encourage Cody:"Good show, Cody! Good show!" (58) Moreover, they are extremely fascinated by Buntline's murder and the rape of the Italian actress on stage:**

**First Lady. Ooooh, look what he's doing now!**

.....

**Really, we must invite this theatre crowd more often. (57)**

**They are much more interested in the absurd melodrama than in the Indians' grievances, which suggests that the American public is more indulged in myths than in facts. Auerbach comments that Kopit implies "an analogy to the . . . time, when millions of Americans were watching scenes of much greater horror, the Vietnam War, on their television screens" (98). Americans are unwilling to bear responsibility for their actions. "The American dream was at odds with the reality. In order to cope with the profound betrayal**

in both cases, the society became numb to death and violence" ("Interview with John Lahr").

The Wild West Show is also the focus of Scene Nine whose spotlight is again the theme of impersonation versus authenticity. Cody takes advantage of straightforward Indians to impersonate themselves in the show. Chief Joseph directly tells the audience how Cody deceived him into his show:

William Cody came to see me . . . . He told me I was courageous and said he admired me. Then he explained all about his Wild West Show. In which the Great Sitting Bull appeared and said if I agreed to join, he would have me released from prison and see that my people received food . . . . So, I agreed for the benefit of my people. (68-69)

Humiliation through impersonation continues in Scene Nine as Indians replay the forbidden Sun Dance in the Wild West Show. When the dance begins, Indians take the pointed ends of long leather sandals that dangle from the top of the "Sun Dance pole and hook them through plainly visible chest harnesses. Then they pull back against the center and dance about it, "failing their arms and moaning as if in great pain" (70-71). The

degradation of replaying the Sun Dance infuriates John Grass so much that he decides to perform it authentically; he actually fixes the barbs into his chest muscles till he dies. Ironically enough, the scene ends with Buffalo Bill cradling John Grass who is heavily bleeding!

*Indians* does not follow a chronological sequence of action. Esslin remarks that, "It presents retrospective action developed by the psychologically sequential pattern of a dream projecting the inner nightmares and conflicts of the author" (403). Scene Ten moves backward to fit in immediately after Buntline's play-within-the play in Scene Seven. Cody is seen urging the President to go to the Indian reservation camp to examine their living conditions. However, the President, who is now dressed like Hickok ridicules Cody's request exclaiming, "What do I do for 'em? Do I give 'em back their land? Do I resurrect the buffalo? Yet, he assigns the investigation committee as an indication of gratitude for the Wild West Show (76), which again accentuates the American public inclination towards myth at the expense of objective truth.

Just as it moves backward, the play also moves forward in Scene Eleven which emphasizes the impossibility of communication between Indians and Americans, and disrupts any rising passions because the audience becomes conscious of the narrative as narrative. "On both sides", reassures Kopit "you not only had misunderstanding, but refusal to dignify the other's life. This is a very strong parallel to Vietnam" (Interview with Lahr). Both sides represent utterly different cultures; they understand concepts such as treaties, land ownership and boundaries from contradictory perspectives, which is obvious from the great Indian chieftain, Sitting Bull's list of demands and how it is arrogantly denied by the committee:

You are on an Indian reservation merely at the sufferance of the Government . . . fed . . . clothed . . . educated by the Government and all you have and are today is because of the Government. You cannot insult the United States of America or its committees; people who have come all this way to help you. (85--86)

*Indians* thus exposes America's real ugly face hiding behind a false masque of humanitarianism; grotesque duplicity is revealed to the audience when

American destructive will is inhumanly imposed on Indians who are looked upon as inferiors. It is nonetheless notorious when Indians are, moreover, demanded to be grateful in return! Finally, Sitting Bull is killed and his tribe annihilated!

Impersonation rises to a climax in Scene Twelve when a group of men enter "*dressed as Buffalo Bill. Their faces are covered by masks of his face; they wear his florid buckskin clothes*" (97). Cody shoots at them. They fall but immediately rise again and surround him. The Wild West Show is finally realized, not only by Buffalo Bill but also by the audience, as a sign and proof of American cruelty and inhumanity towards Indians in addition to American duplicity and hypocrisy throughout history. The show can be viewed as a "forerunner of attempts to package American heritage neatly and reverently"(Billman 255), just as Americans would like to think of it.

In a totally unrealistic or rather surrealistic scene Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Poncho impersonate themselves as villains and Indians. It starts with Jesse singing:

Walkin' down the street in ol' Dodge City,

Wherever I look things look pretty shitty.  
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea, youpy yea,  
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea,  
An' the very worst thing that I can see,  
Is a dead man walkin' straight toward me.  
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea, youpy yea,  
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea,  
This dead man clearly ain't feelin' well,  
If you ask me I think he's just found hell.  
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea, youpy yea,  
Coma ti yi youpy you . . . etc. (88)

It is a "parody of the Western movie barroom scene", remarks Auerbach (100). This prepares us for the corrupting role of media in the last scene of the play.

In Scene Thirteen, a highly theatrical incident takes place, where Kopit portrays a massacre of Indians; Indians cover the centre area of the stage "with a huge white sheet, then lie down in piles" (99). Americans are startlingly indifferent to the number of Indians killed in a devastating defeat: "We wiped them out. . . . We haven't counted", responds the American Colonel to the question "How many Indians were

killed?" He adds in cold blood, "in the long run I believe what happened here at this reservation yesterday will be justified" (100,101).

Projecting the Colonel's response about massacred Indians on Vietnam War leads the audience to a state of disorientation and total confusion under the heavy bombardment of official statements through the media. Americans try to justify horrible violence in Vietnam that would reach genocide, as unavoidable, through historical reference to what happened with Indians. It is an incessant process that would occur anytime and anywhere. Harley remarks that the play "shows the cost of believing that oppressing the weak is unavoidable, though lamentable, consequence in the fight to protect or enlarge national goals" (46).

In a very long direct address Cody continues not only his apparent delusion of Indians but also self-elusion. He is not different from American politicians and the role they played in Vietnam. After his false justification of the Government's policy of exterminating the buffalo as a necessary step to force Indians to "leave their barbaric ways and enter

civilization", he gives another ridiculous reason why the Government's policy is to have:

its official interpreters translate everything incorrectly when interpreting for Indians, thereby angering the Indians and forcing them to learn English for themselves, which, of course, is the first step in civilizing people. (107—108)

The Man is gradually so overwhelmed by claims of personal glory and allegations of national pride that he declares his disappointment with sentimental humanitarians,

who take no account of the difficulties under which this Government has labored in its efforts to deal fairly with the Indians, nor of the countless lives we have lost and atrocities endured at their savage hands . . . . And all the Indians were the temporary occupants of the land. They had to be vanquished by us! It was in fact, our moral obligation! (108-109)

Cody's direct speech is full of flashback reminiscences composing small plays within the play. He is so much perplexed by his position with both Americans and Indians. He is disoriented in most of the play, trying hard to secure himself a place with both

sides, which amounts to a real predicament representing that of modern man and his basic attitude towards existence or the absurdity of the human condition (See Esslin 401).

In this last scene Kopit introduces a symbolic spectacle where the audience sees Cody selling Indian cheap ornaments in the guise of helping Indians. Ironically enough, these trinkets – a bloodstained Indian shirt, a buffalo skull and an old rifle remind spectators of the destruction of the Indian culture. Throughout Cody's speech, Indians come back to life only to die one by one to recall the complete annihilation of their race, same as in the first scene. At the end Buffalo Bill appears riding his white stallion and waving to the unseen crowd. These all collaborate to effect a circular closing of the play which signifies, once more, the futility of man's endeavor and, at the same time, further highlights the play's themes—the threat to authenticity, the duplicity of the American national character and the persistent process of cosmetizing ugly areas of American history. Kopit asserts that *Indians* dramatizes the fact that Americans "fight wars abroad to prove [their] honor and greatness

as a nation. But the sin and madness are with us in our own land" ("Interview with John Lahr").

Like a Pirandellian play, *Indians* introduces a number of parallels. Buffalo Bill, for example, is the hero of the Wild West Show, yet antihero of the Indians. Thus, he echoes America in the real world with its apparent self-sacrifice and implicit self-service. While Buffalo Bill annihilated the buffalo in the past, he impersonates himself in the Wild West Show as he prepares for the Indian genocide. Likewise, America repeats a fatal historical mistake in its attempt to dominate another nation—Vietnam. It is a non-stop process which can be applicable to other nations that come in contact, in a way or another, with America, not to mention particular cases of conflicting interests.

To conclude, Kopit does not limit himself to a particular approach or style. However, he shows an obvious proclivity to meta-theatre; *in Oh Dad, Poor Dad* he makes use of a wide-range parody of earlier fashions of drama and theatrical traditions, and pre-existing dramatic texts. He lampoons Freudian interpretations of human behavior, and satirizes stock human figures such as the domineering mother figure, and

consequently American family life-style. *Oh Dad* can also be considered as a parody of the situation in which the new playwrights—contemporary to Kopit, found themselves at the start of their career. Like Jonathan, the young dramatist who struggles to prevail over the domineering heritage of his predecessors and is still in search of his own voice, relapses to a stage of 'speechlessness'.

*The Hero* is a more daring experiment of meta-theatre as it entirely disposes of the medium of language. It begins and ends with a sunrise and a sunset that purposely declare themselves as artificial because the audience witnesses the stage machinery involved. This play is also written against a background of pre-existing texts, especially Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It is also meta-theatrically dazzling with its sketch of an oasis, with the hero resting in a contented mood in the shade of the palm tree he has just painted. It is, nonetheless, bizarre when the shabby woman sees this, pretends not to notice, and finally sits down under the palm tree and shares the rotten sandwich with the man! The play can be appropriately interpreted as a revolutionary parodistic attack on the assumptions and

attitudes on which most absurdist plays are based. Designed to be a meta-drama, the play dramatizes Kopit's call for an anti-illusionist artistic attitude; its major vigor is intended to mock art which traps its audience in a phony world of wish-fulfillment.

*Indians*, furthermore, demonstrates a dexterous integration of a number of approaches ranging from show business to history, direct address to impersonation and role-playing, and from parody to dream, thus constructing a cohesive whole that is neither traditionally historical nor representational. From the beginning Kopit breaks the illusion of reality and detaches the audience from the action of the play to force them to concentrate on the ideas behind it and prevent identification with the characters. The Wild West Show and the play-within-the-play are introduced to the audience by another group of theatrical and artificial tools. This intentional unreality of the setting emphasizes the distortion of the White man's view of both himself and of the Indians. "Scouts of the Plains"—a play-within-the play is aptly used by Kopit to emphasize the analogy of Buffalo Bill and America itself with regard to rejecting reality. Utter meta-

theatricality strikes the audience when Uncas--a dead Indian, not only comes back to life but also indulges in an arbitrary verbal monologue which comments on the real action of the play and the reality of contemporary America itself. The playwright also proved himself an innovator by avoiding the linear structure to further break the illusion of reality with view to forcing the audience to become an active component of the performance. The play is packed with flashbacks and forwards, disorder in scenes and memories which all urge the audience to criticize the system that originally brought about the White man's predicament.

This ingenious variety of techniques and approaches, among which 'meta-theatricality' stands out, is used by Kopit not for the sake of experimentation, which might be one possibility, but to express what can be described as the prevailing cultural anxiety of the latter half of the 20th century: the conflict between the human need for order and meaning, and life in a chaotic and fragmented world. His works depict the harrowing impact of this conflict on people both individually and collectively. Kopit's plays also express deep cultural worries of their particular social moment.

**The form reinforces this content; each play brings together and distorts established traditional genres, techniques, styles and outlooks presented in other works in a way that breaks down their aesthetic identities. Moreover, the theatrical effect of each play matches the experiences undergone by the characters, so that the issues and cultural magnitude of their personal crises are felt firsthand by the audience. Kopit's work thus provides a marvelous insight into the intricacies of existence in contemporary times.**

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