

Chapter One:

The Problematic History of Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century American Theatre

Introduction

There are a number of signs coded within the appearance of human beings that convey particular meanings to us. For example, imagine a voluptuous, blonde woman walking down the street in a tight red dress and black high heels carrying groceries. She is communicating a number of signals which adhere to society's standards of beauty through her red dress, high heels, and blonde hair. Her voluptuous figure represents the ideal feminine image of a woman's body as sensual and desirable. In addition, her groceries also signify that she is fulfilling the role of her female gender construction: domestic servitude. In contrast to the female image is the male gender construction which embodies more masculine qualities. The male identity can be described as a tall, handsome, and well dressed man in a top hat, grey business suit, and well pressed tie. He holds a door open for the woman, allowing her to enter the building first. The man's apparel signifies that he is dominant and independent. He holds the door for the woman because he has been culturally conditioned to provide assistance to a lady in public. Automatically, we also assume that these gender binaries are heterosexual because they are cultural constructions in a patriarchal environment.

While these depictions are gross demonstrations of common identities, the actions, clothes, and objects of these gender binaries all communicate a meaning that is

controlled and influenced by a social ideology. As these strict depictions of two main identities continue to be portrayed in everyday life, there are also signs and signals that are found in theatrical performance, which continue to reinforce a culture's construction of gender and sexuality. With an explanation of how signs, or semiotics, are applied in theatre, it will be possible to examine how the codes of gender and sexuality are depicted on stage. As previously mentioned, semiotics, according to Elam, is the study of how meaning is produced in society through signifiers (Elam 1). He notes that semiotics is a process of communication and signification within the signs of an object to allow for meanings to be generated and exchanged (Elam 1). Since semiotics has the ability to dictate and reinforce meanings associated with an image, there will be an analysis of how identities based on gender and sexuality are defined by different codes and signals in the theatre. An understanding of semiotics can reveal and provide an analysis of the problematic nature of gender and sexuality and how it affects those representations.

Semiotics: How Meaning is Conveyed through Signs and Signals

In order to comprehend how depictions of gender and sexuality are coded by semiotics, there are some basic elements of this process that need to be defined. According to Elam, a sign is an entity that links a signifier or material vehicle with a mental concept or signified object (Elam 5-6). Essentially, a sign is an object which represents a larger idea or concept to convey a meaning. The semiotic unit of a sign is

an ensemble of elements that is signified as an aesthetic object that resides in the collective conscious of the public (Elam 5-6). The application of a semiotic unit to an object means that the item or image being signified is composed of one or more elements that influence an already culturally accepted and acknowledged meaning and representation. If semiotics is then influenced by patriarchal ideology, these signifiers help form and represent the constructions of a gender and sexual identity. Therefore, there are common signs and codes that identify a construction of a heterosexual male and female.

For example, the previous description of the male character in a business suit could represent the ideal image of a straight man as dictated by patriarchal ideology. His gray business suit and top hat could signify the dominance and power of masculinity that is granted and perpetuated by a patriarchal society. Conversely, the sexy female type as previously profiled can be symbolized as a sexual and desirable object because of her voluptuous figure, red dress, high heels and blonde hair. When audiences view these representations on stage, these portrayals become socially accepted because the performance is most likely portraying the cultural idea or identity associated with those characters. Is it plausible then to use semiotics to challenge those socially accepted and restricted symbols? There might be a potential to utilize semiotics to question these cultural constructions, but, at this moment, it is important to comprehend how an object becomes signified and communicates meaning.

The communication process from a signifier, as described by Elam, is generally a signal that is transmitted to a destination from a source (31). He further details how the signifier's communication process works by outlining the details of this transmission and defining certain terms related to the process. First, the source of the information can be an idea or impulse from the mind of a speaker, an event, or state of affairs (conditions of a surrounding area). To send the information from this source out to a destination, a transmitter, such as speaker's voice, a lamp, computer, or any object that is capable of sending out a signal, is utilized. The transmitter sends the signal through a channel towards the destination. Assuming the signal has traveled undisturbed, this signal is then selected by a receiver, which is then adapted into an understandable message for the destination (31). The destination can be considered the eyes, ears, or touch, a point for one of the senses to receive the broadcasted message from the sign.

With this process of how meaning is communicated through semiotics, Elam outlines how theatrical communication is composed of many communicational factors. The source of theatrical communication can be traced to the dramatist (the dramatic or performance text). Next, the director makes decisions and gives instructions based on the text that chooses the transmitters (modes of communication). The transmitters start as the voices and bodies of actors combine with a number of accessories, such as properties and costumes, and further attach to the pieces of set, lights, the sound, and the technology. The bodies, movement, electrical impulses, and sound on the stage are

then arranged and selected syntactically to traverse physical channels of communication through sound wave and light to tactile and olfactory means (Elam 31-32).

According to Elam, the encoding and decoding (formation and understanding) of a message is possible by the code: an ensemble of rules that assigns a certain meaning to a specific signal (Elam 31). Linguistically, the code gives a speaker and an addressee a chance to recognize and form sequences through phonemes (units of sound that differentiate one word from another) and provide semantic material to them (Elam 31). Furthermore, a code can attribute a value to an object such as traffic light colors, which are coded commonly by three different colors to communicate to the traffic what vehicles need to stop and go at a junction. In terms of gender and sexuality, codes help define certain gender constructions. The symbols for men's and women's bathrooms are defined by single images of male and female to indicate which gender can use a particular bathroom. A men's bathroom is designated by a outline of a male figure that looks like he is in a business suit. The women's bathroom symbol is in the form of a female figure that is defined by a dress, which is the only major difference between the two. From this discussion of how semiotics operates, it is possible to observe how the history and gender and sexuality in performance can be viewed through signs and codes.

Savran: Why Theatre is “the queerest art”

In Savran’s chapter “The Queerest Art” from *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, the author argues primarily that theatre “is queer in art because of its particular mode of address and its uncanny ability to arouse a spectator’s mutable and mutating investments” (Savran 60). Savran defines queer as a provocative way of thinking about how theatrical forms/genres and sexual subjects intersect by analyzing American theater (Savran 58). Queer can then be considered a code for an object to communicate a questioning of the relationship between sexuality and theatre. The influence of queer on an object could lead to a deconstruction or questioning of heteronormative or patriarchal ideas placed in theatre. In terms of semiotics, queer can signify an opposition to heteronormative values or patriarchal ideology. For example, to queer the look of a business man, some portions of his outfit could be changed. The tie would be replaced by a bow-tie, silk gloves would be worn, high heels would take the place of the standard business shoes, and the business suit would be a different color such as light pink. Now the image of the straight business man appears queer because his signs have been changed to reflect his separation from a patriarchal construction of a heterosexual male. If we added a skirt to his outfit it would suggest that he is feminine, while the gloves and heels signify that he is gay.

Savran notes that all art, including theatre, has been oppressed by the heterogeneous views of history, which does not allow for, or marginalizes, a number of

cultural productions that do not neatly fit into the model (Savran 61). Therefore, the semiotics of theatre has been heavily influenced by the ideologies of a patriarchal society from the West, which has prevented the opportunity for a range of identities based on sexuality and gender to be equally considered and represented within society. While Savran demonstrates how applying queer to theatre can shake up established conventions of the art form, he points out that theatre, historically, has been notoriously linked to queer pleasures and bodies.

According to Savran, Elizabethan and Kabuki stages were regularly attacked for abetting and aiding in same-sex sexual practices (Savran 59). During Elizabethan Theatre and Kabuki performances, only men played male and female characters in productions. This caused the public to think that the men were having sex with each other because there were no women performing in these plays. At the end of the nineteenth century, the theatre bars in London's West End became widely acknowledged as places for same-sex encounters (Savran 59). The early queer influence on theatre through semiotics communicates that it was a site considered to be sexually deviant because the public was interpreting its signals as something that went against the ideologies of their culture. Here, perception of early queer influence continued to depict theatre as a place for sexual deviance and a site of opposition against patriarchal ideologies. Though not every production during these time periods was using semiotics to communicate a problem with ideologies oppressing sexuality, these movements of