

Gesture and Movement in the Plays of Megan Terry: A Study of *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*

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Abstract: Gesture and body movement play an important role in drama. These gestures as well as “silences” and “pauses” are absent in the dramatic text and come into play only when the text is performed. Body language is an important aspect of performance. An actor’s body language plays a crucial part in telling the audience about the character they are playing. Megan Terry the famous playwright, screenwriter and theatre artist of America has produced numerous dramas, some of which were performed at New York City's Open Theatre. The mimes, gestures, and body movements in Open Theatre are used to inject a sense of realism, actuality, and immediacy into the dramatic scenes of the play. The experimental environment at the Open Theatre helped Terry conceive her plays as a series of action blocs rather than sequential scenes. She also began using her scripts as starting points for dialogue and action and allowed the participants to perform their parts.

Key Words: Action, Gesture, Transformation, Stage Image, Body Movements.

INTRODUCTION:

Megan Terry received favorable notices for her one act play *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*. Most of the critics applauded Terry’s use of such innovative theatrical techniques as nonlinear time, body movements, gestures and refusal to maintain the play's action within the confines of the stage. Terry’s transformational drama is a theatre of discovery and the transformation technique is not always the same. In *Comings and Goings*, randomly selected actors substitute other actors, often in mid-sentence, and are themselves swapped, continually challenging the identification of actor and character or of audience and character. In *Calm Down Mother*, three actresses exchange their roles, becoming first one character and then another. As Richard Schechner describes in *Viet Rock*, this technique is skillfully employed: “In the opening scene the actors become, in rapid sequence, a human, primordial flower, mothers and infants, army doctors and inductees, inductees and mothers. In the Senate Hearing scene actors replace other actors within the framework of a single scene” (16). In *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, not only do the three prisoners change into other characters as the play progresses, but the situation being dramatized transforms as well.

Gesture & Movement in the Play of Terry:

Megan Terry's *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, staged by The Open Theatre in March 1965 keeps up its allegiance to the transformational technique with the use of body movements as is the case with most of her plays. With three male characters the play traces the exciting possibilities of interaction between them through spiraling divergence of diverse roles. Scenes from “movies” and “costume epics” were freely incorporated while developing the material for the play (Feldman, 204). Familiar models are unleashed with apparent arbitrariness into the shifting contexts of action as the performers take on and discard them in course of the play. The play is replete with gestures and body movements along with impressive dialogues.

The title of the play bearing remarkable similarity to the labels of medicine containers refers to the prison cell of three men, Jaspers, Michaels and Gregory. The cell with “Two bunks and one single bed” (177) is the unchanging setting for the entire play. Hence gestures, dialogues and body movements of the performers play an important role in delivering the actual message to the audience. The three inmates are made out to be guilty of the murder of Jaspers’s wife. Jaspers is said to have got his wife killed by Gregory, hired through Michaels for

insurance money. But Gregory's subsequent confession at the court is supposed to have upset Jaspers's apple-cart as a result of which all the three find themselves in the jail.

Jaspers, an "intelligent, and arrogant lawyer" (177), thinks of ways in which he could make either Gregory or Michaels take the blame entirely and let him be released. This story line is purely perfunctory in the sense that it is continually disrupted by the myriad overlapping of contradictory scenes and the playful atmosphere that suffuses the play.

The play advances with a credible background of the three characters which is not sustained throughout the play. The background itself seems to be a playful creation as it keeps melting away and reappears to present different facets of their life, that assume the nature of complete indulgence. The three performers, for instance, after enacting "a machine" sleep in the bunks. Jaspers wakes up and talks to Michaels who starts parroting the words "I'm in jail" repeatedly, while answering questions about his health. Jaspers, too, resorts to that pattern in asking the latter to "Get up" (177-79). Meanwhile, the plan to get out of the prison is discovered; it has to be through Gregory's withdrawal of his confession that their escape is possible. But this developing motive is caused to be perky by the shifting gestures ranging from machine formations, "ultra tense" bodies, "military" movements, and postures of sleep to mechanical repetition of words (177-78).

To continue with the point, similar tendency can be noticed in another part of the play where Jaspers contrives to trick Gregory into a trap only to lose the track of his intentions. Michaels is to "make" Gregory "feel small" so that Jaspers could succeed in achieving his aim of being friendly with Gregory (182). Before Michaels is ready for his part, Gregory is found "smiling" in his sleep while possibly witnessing a dream (183). The latter proceeds to give a graphic description of his romantic experience with a girl in his dream. Jaspers and Michaels relish Gregory's narration of the lusty experience, the former urging him (Gregory) to "take off her slip," and the latter inquiring whether the dream girl is grabbed or bitten. As Gregory fails to consummate his desire to seduce the dream girl, Jaspers and Michaels get disappointed and, in frustration, go back to their bunks. Shortly after, the three group once again to "become a machine" (184). Thus, in this portion of the play, too, Jaspers and Michaels miserably fail in their attempt to trap Gregory and make him confess guilty of murder. The play, rather moves ahead into the realm of dream as a result of which the truth remains unresolved.

All the three characters change their identities in the play in order to meet the demands of a new situation. Jaspers had the curiosity to know "what did it feel like" to his wife to get herself killed (193). Promptly, all the three characters instantly transform themselves to enact the scene of the murder. Jaspers turns into "his dead wife," Michaels into his son, "a small boy" and Gregory into the killer (193). The killer and the victim of the killer (the 'wife') "circle in a tense dance," and the former in order to throttle "her", "pulls the cord" tight around her neck (195).

It is not that the essential playfulness of the performers is all clouded in complete confusion. The application of a definite method is self-evident in the manner they jump from one reality to another with mutual understanding and synchronisation of individual actions through their body movements. The games theory that trains the actors to work as a team in which each one would "direct all his action to his fellow players" (Spolin 42), is put into effect here in the play. Stage images are created through the collective pursuit of the performers with their body movements and gestures. The little plays within the play that go forth to portray a variety of images existing at a tangent to each other, are meant to break the developing psychology of characters and the flow of the narrative. The performers take up new roles with mutual consent to manipulate their action in tune with the sudden changes in context. To pick up an instance from the text, Jaspers conspires with Michaels to obtain a compliance of Gregory to "sign a confession" retracting from the earlier one, through "torture." Gregory is pulled out of his sleep and the three of them promptly enact the "General Custer" scene that abruptly brings out a new context separate from the preceding one (180). Jaspers as the "General" assumes an entirely different aspect in his bearing by tipping his "hat forward" and climbing "on horse" to gallop "in circle." Michaels turns into the General's assistant, "a blue-coat" and Gregory, falling in line with the contextual shift, becomes the "Indian chief." Then follows the charged exchange of words between the General and his antagonist, the Indian Chief. Soon after the close of the Custer scene, Jaspers gives up his "horse" and reverts back to the theme of murder with "Mike" joining him obligingly in yet another shift of context (180-81). In this way, the play makes room for new situations demanding the performers to embrace new selves at a short notice with the help of their gestures and body movements to suggest the images created on the stage.

Choosing an instance from the text, at one point Jaspers “becomes a fifteen-year-old English lad,” suffering badly in Jamestown, Virginia (186-87). He is looking for “Captain Smith” to rally round him whereas Michaels is all venom about the Captain, calling him a “lying black heart.” Soon Smith appears in the shape of Gregory to come to the rescue of Jaspers (187). A little later the three of them wrap themselves together in a blanket and have a “circular motion” while muttering the words, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” that recall the chantings at the grave of the dead. Then follow the ‘dance’ movements accompanied by a group song referring to “Minnie the Mermaid down at the bottom of the sea” (188). The end of the song quickly signals the start of another stage image built together by the performers converting themselves yet again, into “drag queens” to play a love intrigue (189). All this flow of perpetually changing scenario is posited firmly in the same single space, the prison cell. But the cell itself is made flexible by the performers who transform it as and when they please into places of historical events, burial ground, the sea bed or the romantic world of “drag Queens” through their body movements.

With the formation of new roles for new scenes, the flux of action is kept alive all the time. The possibility to remain engaged gets enhanced and a “dynamic and kinetic existence,” to quote Moholy-Nagy, becomes the distinctive feature of the performers in the play (Kostelanetz 25). It is through their body gestures that the performers continually realize a chain of events, events that each new scene or situation produces, thereby keeping themselves engaged in action of one kind or another.

The play endorses the thoughts of gnosticism that calls for the subjection of the body to intense pressures and also verbal vulgarity in order to possess real freedom from the world and society. The three actors in the play do expose their body’s stress and strain in order to display the physicalizing images on the stage. For instance, all of them enact the family situation of Jaspers; Michaels and Gregory as the two sons, and Jaspers himself as the father. The roles of children demand an exacting pressure on the part of the two actors to modulate their voices accordingly. The two sons “lift” their father, Jaspers, “above their heads” and then lower him to kiss his “knees” and “shoulders” (199). Next, the three of them come together with locked arms to “move like a machine wheel” (200). It becomes clear how meticulously, the actors put their bodies into different uses to form postures.

The play, being fragmented into compartmentalized placing of contrasting scenes in which the actors present actions of varying sort, is arguably a conglomerate of differing symbolic activities. Going back to the text, Gregory narrates a mythical story of a snake that grew up inside a “girl on our street,” and then he starts “Hissing and moving snake-like,” while looking at the audience (184). The narrator himself is transformed into the reptile in assuming the gait and posture alien to his own nature. Thereafter, all the three actors “group to become a machine” and begin advertizing the machine’s “versatility” and the capacity for “Heavy duty” (184-85). This brief and abrupt changeover into completely contradictory planes of experience, ranging from the animate to the inanimate realms of a machine, is intended to serve as a symbolic gesture. There is also a strange orchestration of sound and movement. Gregory gives a verbal outline of a snake’s growth in the girl. Then, he enacts the role of the snake, complete with its hissing sound and motion. Thereafter all the performers form a machine. They speak individually as well as in chorus while highlighting the machine's wonderful qualities. If a solo voice says, “Easy to get at mechanism”, the chorus of voices says “SAFE.”

In the final moments of the play, Michaels and Gregory as the sons, begin chanting “our father, our father” along with Jaspers. The “chanting” continues till all the three of them make a formation of “a machine wheel” in motion. Along with the wheel-like movements they repeat the line “roller and roller and roller” (199-200). “A formalized action” often based on “repetition” is one of the important aspects of ritual (Sainer 42).

The absence of the principles of cause and effect in the construction of the numerous scenes placed together without a coherent continuity and in the actions of characters who keep changing roles dramatically, thus, subverting their sequential growth based on motive, takes the play in the direction of rituals. The very beginning of the play offers such an instance. The three “men” project the mechanical realm of a “machine” that could be “opened for inspection” (177). The rigidity of the machine image is then followed by their “military” movement (178). After a brief “sleep,” Jaspers and Michaels wake up to construct the story of the murder through their speeches referring to “jail” and their wrongful confinement (178). The action developed here changes rapidly from the enactment of “machine” to the realities of the prison the men are placed in. The performers just portray the actions without paying attention to their motive in changing from one posture to another. Therefore, their behavior which is oriented towards doing something or other implies a religious craving to make each and every

action respectable. The religious man “thirsts for being” in order to escape the “chaos” of life (Eliade 64). The central message of the play deals with imprisonment, alienation, and dependency.

CONCLUSION:

In *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, the extensive use of gestures and movements, which largely constitute the action, makes the act more lively and interesting. The facial expressions and gestures help the performers to articulate what they can't converse verbally. It is through the nonverbal communication i.e signs, symbols, gestures, postures and many more which helps the actors to exhibit their inner feelings in front of the audience that's why this form of communication was used widely in the Open Theatre. The play begins and ends with the three men holding hands to act like a machine expresses their need for interdependency to transcend their limitations.

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