

**Lara Stevens**

Networks of Resistance:

Connecting Stage, Street and Social Media in Tony Kushner's  
*Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (2004: 1)

On 15 and 16 February 2003, an estimated 10 million people in over 800 cities worldwide marched to protest against the second Iraq War (Hil 2008: 29). This collective of bodies made up the largest global anti-war protest in history, clearly demonstrating the lack of popular support for the war and a return to 1960s modes of political resistance. Yet, unlike the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Western governments ignored the performing bodies of the 2003 anti-war demonstrators. The protests had little or no effect in stalling or preventing the American-led 'Coalition of the Willing' from embarking on the war and the anti-war resistance movements were described as impotent and atrophied (Chomsky 2004; Roy 2004; Butler 2006).

The relationship between theatre, performance, politics and activism continues to trouble scholars who problematise the connection between performance and political efficacy (Bishop 2012; Spencer 2012; Shepard 2010; Butler and Athanasiou 2013). In particular, Claire Bishop has criticised participatory art for its claim to offer agency and empowerment to spectators by ending the 'passive' spectator paradigm, making spectators 'productive' and conflating ideas of democracy in art and in society that she argues should be maintained in tension with one another (2012: 36-41). The idea of judging an artwork based on its 'productive' merit or its ability to galvanise action is also problematic in the way that it instrumentalises art and measures it according to late capitalist standards of value. Yet, the question of how to characterise the relationship between theatre, political consciousness-raising and left-wing activism becomes even more urgent given Western governments' refusal to take seriously the organised resistance to the Iraq War. Artistic critiques of politically and ethically dubious actions, such as the invasion of Iraq, might thus be viewed as either more urgently needing to provoke spectator responses or risk being seen as frivolous and ineffectual cultural products that distract from the more 'serious' collective actions of civic protest or occupation.

More recently, Marxist political theorist Jodi Dean's analysis of the Occupy Movement notes the shift in contemporary forms of resistance away from vertical chains of command to collective

organisation along non-hierarchical, decentralised or 'horizontal' lines (2012: 210). Yet, Dean continues to privilege traditional street protest over horizontal forms of organisation when she writes: 'even as Occupy uses communicative capitalism's networks and screens, its energy comes from a vanguard of disciplined, committed activists undertaking and supporting actions in the streets' (2012: 216). Moreover, Dean clearly distinguishes these more conventional forms of protest from artistic products that promise political resistance and community building but offer little more than 'commodified experiences [...] displacing political struggles from the streets to the galleries' (2012: 13), feel-good radicalism without real risk or commitment.

More recent global or mass-mobilising protest actions, such as the global Occupy Movement or the Arab Spring, suggest that in light of Western governments' lack of responsiveness to traditional forms of protest (exemplified in the anti-Iraq War rallies) and increased accessibility to new modes of communication, civic action has diversified. This article focuses on the anti-war protests of 2003 and 2004 as the framing of Kushner's *Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* but it also argues that Kushner's play pre-empts the rise of digitally networked protest formations and their incorporation into politically engaged artistic practice.

Writing on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, French philosopher Jacques Rancière objects to the assumption that critical or 'political' art should compel its viewers to mobilise against a system of domination. He claims that such an assumption implies 'a specific form of relationship between cause and effect, intention and consequence' (2010: 135), which is to assume that art necessarily impels spectators to react in harmony with authorial intent. Rancière points out that since modern artistic movements such as Dadaism, Futurism, Expressionism, Symbolism and even Realism, subject matter and form have been deliberately mismatched leaving 'no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue' (2004: 61). Today, art rarely provokes direct and measurable social action.

Yet, despite the breakdown of a correlative relationship between politics and aesthetics, Rancière believes that the artwork takes on a momentum of its own when it is put before a spectator public. Rancière describes the product that artistic exchange might produce as a 'third thing' that exists between artist intent and passive spectator reception of the work. He writes: 'the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect' (2009: 15). This 'third thing' accommodates a plurality of responses from spectators that have the potential to manifest later in unexpected and unmeasurable attitudes and actions in real world civic engagement outside the theatre.

The ability of art to remain autonomous from the culture industry places an unreasonable burden on art and its relationship to the civic and political sphere. Rancière notes that theatre is hypocritical in its promise to reveal 'truth' and 'reality' whilst relying on falsity and the suspension of belief, putting it in a contradictorily privileged and disadvantaged position for exposing the hypocrisies of ideology (2009: 61). He suggests that we need to change our expectations of 'committed art' when he writes:

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. (2004: 19)

Rancière notes that while an artwork, framed within an artistic space, can identifiably address a political issue, it can never control how that politics is read, what it inspires or how it 'works' upon any spectator in their civic choices and behaviour outside of the artistic setting. What is significant for Rancière, however, is the potential for art to shift the coordinates of the visible and the invisible in the public sphere, coordinates that are largely controlled and influenced by the mainstream media. Rancière's emphasis on upsetting the 'parcelling out of the visible and the invisible' suggests that for art to impact on the political world outside the theatre it needs to challenge habitual ways of seeing society and expose what ideology polices as visible and sayable as well as that which it tries to keep invisible and silent.

In the playlet *Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy (Only We)* (2003) Kushner presents a fictionalised encounter between Laura Welch Bush, the First Lady to the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush, and the dead Iraqi children of the then immanent 2003 Iraq War. The purgatorial setting of Kushner's play and its representation of ghostly and angelic figures historicises the Iraq War through an anachronistic reflection on an imminent future war. Its fantastical setting is positioned against the brutal reality of the 'War on Terror' as it is extended beyond Afghanistan and into Iraq. The second scene in the play was written in anticipation of the 2004 US Presidential elections for a fund raising benefit for the influential online left-wing advocacy group MoveOn.org in New York.

I argue that *Only We* invites reflection on the role of politics in art and the role of art in left-wing political activism by reconnecting theatre to grass-roots resistance. This article will demonstrate how the combination of the play's incorporeal characters, its online dissemination and its performance within the context of anti-war and anti-Republican protests prior to the 2004 elections provoked spectator responses that suggest 'a third thing' that was not presupposed by the aesthetics of the play, nor the playwright himself. Importantly, it shows how the play provides a forum for political debate rather than consensus, what Rancière calls 'dissensus', the rejection of consensual politics and the acknowledgement of differences within a pluralistic democracy (2010: 42). I will show that spectator responses to *Only We* did not elicit a single ideological position but, on the contrary, provided a physical and intellectual space for debate and disagreement. As such, it argues that *Only We* is an example of theatre that rouses spectators out of the habit of passively consuming artistic products or 'commodified experiences' (Dean 2012: 13) without assuming a cause-effect relationship between art and political efficacy. *Only We* shows how twenty-first century anti-war theatre and political struggle is a complex intersection of resistance on the streets, in the theatres and through online social communications that feed into networks of civic disobedience that reject mainstream political party politics.

### ***Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy***

*Only We* was first published as a 'work in progress' consisting of just one short scene, to which another scene was subsequently added in August 2004. The first scene of *Only We* dramatises Kushner's imagining of Laura Bush's reaction to the American-led invasion of Iraq. Scene One of *Only We* appeared in the March 24, 2003 edition of the New York based weekly online and print magazine *The Nation* as well as *The Guardian* in London. The timing of the work's publication occurred shortly after the invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003 but before the insurgency in Iraq began in May 2003. It opens with the directions:

This scene is the first of a new play titled *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. No performance or reading of this work may be given without express permission of the author, which will be happily granted to anyone wanting to use it at

antiwar events. For permission please contact him at: MysteryGuardians@aol.com. (Kushner 2003: n.p.)

Although Kushner offered the work free of charge, he specified that its performances be framed within the context of 'antiwar events'. This offer was taken up by numerous theatre groups around America, from trade union groups (Kushner 2004: n.p.) to Hollywood celebrities including *Sex in the City* actress Cynthia Nixon and Holly Hunter (York 2004: n.p.). Kushner's decision to make the work free and publically available positions the play as a contribution to political activism—an unusual choice for a high profile playwright in the broader climate of postmodern scepticism towards agit-prop art (Ranci re 2010: 136; Auslander 1987: 23), public protest for purposes more wide-reaching than identity politics. The range of social groups that decided to perform the play demonstrates its extensive appeal and its ability to unite classes in a greater struggle against the Iraq War.

The dissemination of the play through a high profile online news publication enabled rapid distribution to a wide public of artists and spectators. It allowed Kushner to contribute a creative critique of the Iraq War to a global audience whilst the invasion was still prominent in news media coverage and public debate. In some ways, Kushner's harnessing of digital technologies and online communities situated the playtext outside the elitist bourgeois institutions of Broadway and off-Broadway theatres by opening up its public accessibility. On the other hand, however, the reading demographic of left-wing news media publications such as *The Nation* and *The Guardian* gave the play exposure to an audience already inclined to be sympathetic to the political sentiments expressed in the work. Nonetheless, this mode of dissemination does signify a change in the potential of playwriting to speak to contemporary issues at a speed and spatial distance unprecedented in the history of theatre.<sup>1</sup> It also reveals media outlets sharing their already existing communities and networks and allowing other forms of political critique to participate in the debates around ethical issues of war.

The online pages of *The Nation* and *The Guardian* where the play appeared also included the option to 'share' the play through email or the social media networks of Facebook and Google+ as well as the option to directly connect to Twitter, encouraging readers to tweet a comment about the play or the issues it raised. This kind of sharing of platforms for public debate might be increasingly necessary in an age when peaceful public protests have lost their potency and currency among the political elite and the mainstream media wields significant power in shaping the Western public's perceptions of remote conflicts and the popularity and credibility of politicians.

### **The Incorporeal**

Scene One of *Only We* consists of a dialogue between a character based on the political figure of Laura Welch Bush and an angel who guards the souls of dead Iraqi children in the afterlife. The character 'Laura', true to her namesake's work on wide access literacy programs for disadvantaged and minority groups (Caroli 2010: 318), has come to an undefined purgatorial space to read to the dead children of the 2003 Iraq War from the classic Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. As Laura reads, she interrupts herself to ask questions about the children and the causes of their deaths in ways that explore her complex relationship to and complicity in the violence of the war.

Although Kushner's fictional caricature cannot speak for the real life Laura Bush, his evocation of a political figure in office at the time of writing the play demonstrates an attempt to have theatre

speak to contemporary politics. Audiences viewing the work necessarily view the character as having a pre-existing history and public personae, making *Only We* a work of political satire. In the play's preface Kushner links the characters to the real life incumbent President George W. Bush and his wife and their portrayal in the mainstream media.<sup>2</sup> The real political figures and the brutality of the invasions occurring outside the theatre, in the 'War on Terror', are contrasted with the spectacular, ethereal characters of the angel and the dead Iraqi children. For spectators, any aesthetic pleasure aroused from watching such otherworldly characters is undermined by the metatheatrical function they serve as they estrange and abstract the 'War on Terror' and remind spectators of its violent effects on innocent lives.

The play begins with three Iraqi children in pyjamas and bathrobes sitting in a row. Behind them stands an angel who, the opening stage directions specify, '*remains throughout the play, unfailingly kind and polite*' (Kushner 2003: n.p.). The angel figure, which appears frequently in Kushner's plays, most notably in *Angels in America*, is a self-conscious metatheatrical strategy. The angel as spectacular, otherworldly and camp or queer figure connects the personal to the political by evoking Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' and the personal protections ostensibly provided by guardian angels in popular mythologies (Kruger 1997: 151). The angel asks the children to rise and welcome their distinguished guest. As the children attempt to cheer and wave to welcome Laura it becomes apparent that their words have been replaced with the music from Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-1983). This postmodern piece uses woodwind and stringed instruments to create the realistic effect of a flock of birds tweeting. The bird noises are frantic, ethereal and haunting. The birdsong hinders the children's ability to communicate clearly and effectively with Laura, theatricalising their inferiority by symbolically associating them with animals. In the eyes of the West, the 'natural' state of Iraqi existence as voiceless subjects is de-naturalised through the beautiful and evocative birdsong. The children's expressive musical outpouring heightens the brutal depictions of their deaths described by the angel in the play, as well as the descriptions of civilian deaths in the journalistic reporting on the 'War on Terror' in the same editions of *The Nation* and *The Guardian*.

The contrast between the highly articulate Laura and the voiceless Iraqi children is further heightened in the play by the suggestion that the children are ghostly. When Laura asks the angel if she can hug the children to comfort them, the angel replies in the negative saying that the children are: 'incorporeal, they're like ... shadows, or mirages, or dreams, it's hard to explain' (Kushner 2003: n.p.). In this explanation, the angel describes more than the children's metaphysical state in the afterlife by drawing attention to the way in which Iraqis (particularly the victims of 'collateral damage') are portrayed in the media and perceived in the West as indeterminate. Writing on how discourses of war justify violence, Judith Butler explains:

The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral [...] on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. (2006: 33-34)

The discourses that led to the Iraq invasion attempted to dehumanise Saddam Hussein and other Iraqis in a way that made it impossible to mourn the loss of their lives. As Butler explains, these Iraqis had no 'life' in the first place in the eyes of the Western ruling elite. The dead Iraqi children in *Only We* show the unequal social relations between the living embodied Laura and spectral Iraqi children who are peremptorily considered 'neither alive nor dead' in the Western cultural

imaginary. *Only We* draws on theatre's fantastical possibilities and the expectation of spectators' suspension of disbelief to stage what cannot be staged in the mainstream media—the incorporeal bodies that lack a voice, the innocent victims of the Iraq War who are both alive and figuratively already dead.

The paradox of representing incorporeal figures creates a sense of what Jean Baudrillard, referring to the first Gulf War, calls a 'war that did not take place' (1995). Yet, where Baudrillard uses this phrase to describe the way in which the first Gulf War was portrayed in the mainstream media as a 'clean war' with few casualties, hiding its violence under euphemisms, *Only We's* purgatorial setting confronts spectators with the war's innocent casualties and the brutality of their deaths. At one point the angel describes the death of one Iraqi child to Laura Bush:

ANGEL: In 1999, an American plane dropped a bomb filled with several tons of concrete on the power station near his village. He was already malnourished; he had been malnourished since birth, because of the sanctions. The power station that was crushed by the bomb was believed to be supplying power to a plant suspected of producing certain agents necessary for the development of biotoxins [...] He already had gastroenteritis and nearly chronic diarrhea, for which medicines were unavailable. Then the water purification system failed and he drank a glass of water his mother gave him infested by a large intestinal parasite. He died of dehydration, shitting water, then blood, then water again, so much! (Kushner 2003: n.p.)

In describing the violent death of an Iraqi child, *Only We* fills gaps in public discourses and debates in the mainstream media around the suffering of war. The metatheatrical and hypertheatrical representations of the incorporeal beings such as angels and dead children's ghosts, invite reflection on what is omitted in the media about the 'War on Terror' and its sinister effects. This is emphasised most effectively by the spectacular and beautiful imagery of an embodied angel juxtaposed against the angel's descriptions of malnourishment, dehydration, intestinal parasites and the internal bleeding of an innocent child.

### Historicising the Future

The temporal displacement of the dead Iraqi children in *Only We* is significant to imagining the possibility of a future that averts war. *Only We* was published before the fighting in Iraq began and the work pre-empts the inevitable effects of the conflict. Kushner does not make any claims to prescience but, rather, he points to a tendency common to all modern warfare: collateral damage. 'Collateral damage' is a term coined in the last two decades to describe military actions and is frequently used by journalists reporting on military operations, particularly those of the 1990 Gulf War (Bauman 2011: 4). By writing the first scene of *Only We* prior to the commencement of the insurgency in Iraq, Kushner remakes the Brechtian technique of historicisation. The purgatorial space in which *Only We* is set does not encourage spectators to look back and reflect upon past events but, rather, to look *forward* to the future consequences of actions and decisions being made in the present.

The liminal or in-between purgatorial space and Kushner's representation of the *potential* casualties of the Iraq War historicises all warfare through a paradoxical retrospective on an imminent future war. Its temporal positioning looks 'back' at the effects of the war as a means to look forwards. At one point in the play, Laura feels compelled to try to explain to the children the reasons for their deaths: 'So, so it was um, *necessary* for you to die, *sweetie*, oh how *awful* to say that, but it was, *precious*' (Kushner 2003: n.p.). The historicisation of these deaths estranges

Laura's claim that the destruction of the Iraqi children's lives are a 'necessary' evil of war, by showing that these violent outcomes are not only calculated and contingent, but also *preventable*. While the rhetoric of the Bush administration leading up to the invasion asked the public to accept that there would be innocent lives sacrificed in the name of 'justice' and in order to 'defend freedom' (Bush 2001: n.p.),<sup>3</sup> *Only We* confronts spectators with the victims in advance. It highlights the callousness of such a presumption by humanising the otherwise distant and anonymous 'enemy', albeit represented as voiceless, incorporeal children.

Kushner's historicisation of the outcomes of war and his hasty publishing of the play for a global online audience before the war had begun provoked spectators to see that it was not too late to take action to prevent the American invasion of Iraq. The timing of the performances of *Only We* coincided with the moment when the American public was in a position to decide whether or not the invasion would proceed by voting for or against a second term of the Bush presidency. In the next section I will show how the play was directly connected to the Presidential elections and party campaigns as well as the collective civic actions on the streets and in public debates and discourses in online social media.

### **Performing *Only We* Post-Invasion**

Scene Two of *Only We* was added in August 2004, whilst the fighting between Western coalition forces and Iraqis was well underway. The timing of the performances of *Only We* with the additional scene meant that the play took on a very different focus. The additional scene directly addressed the role of theatre as an intervention into politics and was also more critically aimed at the Bush administration and the need to vote out the Republican Party at the next elections. In the media, Scene One *Only We* was met with some vitriolic criticism, including an article in *The Boston Globe* by columnist Alex Beam who called the play a 'wonderful work of hate' (2004: 5). A significant number of journalists and readers of *The Nation* were critical of what they saw as Kushner's personal attack on Laura Bush. These criticisms distracted many people's attention away from debating the key issues of the play and helped them to avoid its provocation to confront their complicity in the Iraq War.

Kushner took the public criticism of Scene One seriously. Consequently, Scene Two was written as a 'reply' to the public and media criticism, a self-conscious reflection on the right and the role of theatre, literature and art to intervene in politics. In an interview with *Salon* Kushner justified his personal attack on Laura Bush by commenting that while he realised that writing about a living person made him more vulnerable to criticism, Laura's official status in the Bush administration made her a public figure accountable to some of the decisions and actions of the government. Kushner said: 'I think she [Laura Bush] is an official of the Bush administration. She works in an office that I pay for, she has a staff that I pay for, she acts as a spokesperson' (in Traister 2004: n.p.).

Kushner wrote the second scene for a fundraising benefit for MoveOn.org. In this scene he inserted himself as author-character into the dialogue, imagining Laura's reaction to the work and her riposte to Kushner's depiction of her in Scene One. MoveOn.org is an influential online American political advocacy group that aims to give average civilians a voice in a political process that the organisation claims is currently controlled by lobbyists with financial power. Kushner's participation in this event links the grass-roots activism of MoveOn.org and their highly visible and globally renowned political campaigns and lobbying to theatre that aims to politicise its audiences. The following analysis shows how theatre and online advocacy can enhance one another's effectiveness by bringing together new networks of civil disobedience.

Scene Two self-reflexively raises questions about the potential of art to intervene in and influence contemporary political issues. In this scene the imagined characters of Kushner and Laura debate the political efficacy of mimetic and non-mimetic art. Laura expresses a preference for mimetic over didactic art and her desire for art to elicit the Aristotelian elements of empathy and catharsis from its spectators (Kushner 2004: n.p.). In her criticism of *Only We*, Laura states that she prefers 'great literature' such as Shakespeare and quotes from *Much Ado About Nothing*. In a comment that comes out of an interview with Laura Bush in the *New York Times*,<sup>4</sup> the character of Laura tells the character Kushner her opinion on the role of art and politics:

LAURA: First off, art has nothing to do with politics and if you had any real understanding, or, or anything to offer other than shallowness and silliness and bathroom humour, you would set your sights on plumbing the mysteries of, of human nature and the human condition, like Dostoevsky did or Chekov or ... (Kushner 2004: n.p.)

Laura wants to make an earnest bourgeois liberal humanist reading of art that is the opposite of the self-reflexive, satirical and postmodern tone of *Only We*. Yet, despite Laura's limited interpretation of what constitutes 'good literature', her belief that literature can transcend politics is revealed as a conservative manoeuvre that denies the role of art to effect change or to intervene in the *status quo*. Laura's complaint also sits in deliberate ironic contradistinction to the performance of *Only We* that does not address the mysteries of human nature in the abstract philosophical and ambiguous mode of Dostoyevsky but, instead, invites audiences to discuss the ethics of human relations, Western culpability and possibilities of resisting a concrete and current act of war.

Scene Two ends with a long monologue by the character Kushner in which he describes to Laura a dream he had the night after the war began. He explains that the dream came after watching her husband address the General Assembly of the United Nations. In Kushner's dream, President Bush pleads with the United Nations to help him rebuild Iraq. The long poetic monologue follows the logic of a dream that meanders and jumps from Bush's justifications for war in Iraq to the legacies of imperialism: poverty and unstable political, economic and social systems, to terrorism and the international trafficking of young girls. After a long description of Bush's UN appeal the character of Kushner describes the General Assembly becoming restless and rising up and seizing Bush in a flurry of ferment to which he concludes:

And then I woke up.

And then I went online to MoveOn.org and johnkerry.com and democrats.org and I signed up for poll watching and leafletting and I donated to the Kerry campaign and the DNC the hundreds of thousands of dollars I am making doing Shakespeare in the Park, or at least as much as is my legal limit. (Kushner 2004: n.p.)

Kushner contrasts his grand poetic visions with the highly pragmatic actions of joining online advocacy and support groups for the Democrats, their convention and their nominated Presidential candidate. Kushner concedes that while making powerful art might stir emotions and raise important questions for confronting real world political problems, the practical extension of this fervour is less romantic: helping raise money for the political party that most closely aligns with one's political convictions.



## The Performances

The fund-raising benefit for MoveOn.org that performed *Only We* took place at the American Airlines Theater in Times Square, New York (Traister 2004: n.p.). The performance was staged as an unrehearsed reading suggesting that it was organised urgently before the election. In the audience were celebrity actors Edie Falco, Philip Seymour Hoffman, comedian Reno and the electronica musician Moby (Traister 2004: n.p.) and it was extensively reviewed in the media. *New York Times* reviewer Randy Kennedy described the performance as ‘the backdrop for a kind of joyous cultural pep rally for those who want to see Mr. Bush turned out of office’ (2004: n.p.) and *Salon.com* reviewer Rebecca Traister emphasised the anti-bourgeois nature of the performance:

This was not a high-minded theater production or a highfalutin charity do. Instead it was the latest fusion of art and grass-roots politics that has been reinvented in the wake of the Iraq war and in anticipation of the November presidential elections. (2004: n.p.)

Traister’s description of the event as a reinvented ‘grass-roots politics’ suggests a link between the arts, politics and street activism. Furthermore, the atmosphere of the theatre as different to a ‘high-minded theatre production’ suggests that the audience was not seeking an easy night of theatrical entertainment, but, rather, recognised the event as a space for public gathering and political debate.

While reviews of performances are not always reliable sources for scholarly analysis, the range of detailed descriptions of the event bring to light some of the kinds of audience responses *Only We* engendered. Traister reported the atmosphere at the event as follows: ‘the fervor created by Kushner’s scene threatened to spiral slightly out of control’ (2004: n.p.), suggesting the ambience of a rowdy crowd at a march or rally. After the performance of both scenes of the play, Traister explains that: ‘The cast reclined on the set for what seemed likely to be an adoring — if not sycophantic — question session’ (2004: n.p.). Kennedy’s description of the performance also suggested a degree of consensus amongst the audience: ‘It might not have swayed many swing voters ... mostly the night had the feel of preaching to the converted, or even of preaching to the preachers’ (2004: n.p.). The accusation that the play merely reinforced already held beliefs amongst like-minded people once again raises the problem of how art can provoke Rancière’s ‘third thing’ or a politics of ‘dissensus’.

Yet, Traister’s detailed description of the post-performance discussion, quoted at length below, demonstrates that the responses to the work were anything but homogenous, consensual or unanimous:

when someone asked what MoveOn had planned for the Republican National Convention, things got very tense very quickly.

Dawn [Laura Dawn, the leader of MoveOn] explained that the grass-roots political organization — which had hit a 2.5 million membership just that day — was not planning demonstrations during the five-day Republican gathering in New York at the end of the month. ‘They’d [the Republicans] love nothing more than to get a picture of one kid throwing a trash can through a Gap window,’ she was saying when a voice from the audience began to forcefully object.

'No, no!' shouted a woman, who turned out to be the comedian Reno, from the middle of the orchestra seats. She stood up and looked around, exhorting the crowd to protest anyway. 'We have to be out there! Be out on the streets on Sunday August 29! Get out there!' The actors on stage looked surprised, and a little uncomfortable.

Dawn moved quickly to reassure Reno that she believed in protest, but was merely trying to explain why MoveOn had not planned anything. 'Yeah, that's cool, sure,' said a calmer Reno, sitting down. But a few seats over, someone else piped up. 'I'm from San Francisco,' the man said by way of explanation. 'And we need to do something to counterbalance that convention!'

People began to cheer, and Kushner took over. He said that while he supports the United For Peace And Justice march on Aug. 29, he is keenly aware of how the media will spin things. 'Four more years of this guy is unthinkable,' said Kushner, 'but we need to think about how this is gonna play.' The playwright suggested that Bush advisor Karl Rove chose to hold the RNC in a city 'that has hated George Bush and which George Bush hates' precisely *because* he anticipates heated protest, which the party can convert into an 'Elect John Kerry and madness and anarchy will follow' message.

'There's nothing to throw! We're on the West Side Highway for Christ's sake!' shouted Reno, in reference to the decision to relegate the march to a closed strip of highway.

'Maybe people could get naked,' Clarkson suggested.

Another question from the audience — 'What is the left doing about Ralph Nader?' — prompted both applause and vitriolic hissing from the crowd. 'We don't have the luxury of voting for a third party,' responded Dawn, and someone in the crowd shouted, 'What third party? They wouldn't nominate him!' (2004: n.p.)<sup>5</sup>

Rancière's belief that an artwork takes on a momentum of its own that engenders the possibility of developing into a 'third thing' when it is put before a spectator public is realised in the diverse range of responses to *Only We*. These responses demonstrate how a play can provoke debate amongst its viewers, actors and author and can resist the culture industry's tendency to become 'commodified experiences' that 'buttress capital' (Dean 2012: 13). Surprisingly for Kushner and the actors, the call to action came from the spectators, in particular, Reno's insistence that everyone join the rally to protest the Republican National Convention. The discussions inspired by *Only We* considered not only strategies for replacing the incumbent Republican Party with a Democratic candidate, but also for considering independent candidate options. The range of ideas suggests that the play encouraged self-reflexive thought amongst spectators who were united only in their opposition to the *status quo*. Although such dissensus lacks a clear, unified and immediate outcome of collective activism, what it did facilitate, was a platform for debate and the emergence of Rancière's 'third thing' regarding voting choices and ways to resist and protest the Iraq War.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, the executive director of MoveOn.org, Eli Pariser highlighted the importance of such plays intervening in politics. He noted: 'I think in some ways politics just tries to smooth over complications, and that's what this work [*Only We*] revels in' (in Kennedy 2004: n.p). Pariser also commented on theatre's ability to unite disparate parts of the community to discuss contemporary political issues: 'I think cultural events can have the effect of bringing people together...if not in agreement, at least in conversation' (in Kennedy 2004: n.p). Pariser's emphasis on 'conversation' rather than consensus offers convincing evidence that despite

Kushner's highly polemical stance and unambiguous critique of the Iraq War, as well as his history of socialist activism and protest in the 1970s, *Only We* never tells the audience what to think, but encourages them simply to think critically and sceptically. Whilst Kushner's political position is clearly an anti-war and anti-Republican play, *Only We*'s formal qualities do not invite simplistic answers to but, rather provoke more complex questions around the ethics of war and its civilian victims, in other words, they encourage Rancière's notion of dissensus.

Kushner's playful organisation of time and his depiction of encounters between mystical and historical figures invite audiences to see a relationship between the real and the imaginary, between brutal violence and the possibility of a future that rejects and avoids such violence. The staging of *Only We* in the middle of the Presidential election campaigns and amid the mainstream media's coverage of an escalating 'War on Terror', highlights the unequal power relations of visibility and sayability between the invaders and the invaded. Inviting spectators to 'contemplate the issues' in the wake of 9/11, a time of heightened patriotism, anger and fear, *Only We* became a unique platform for debate and collective grass-roots action.

### **Theatre and Protest in the Age of the Techno-Imagination**

Historically, social activism is more commonly viewed as sharing performative aspects with performance art movements such as Allan Kaprow's Happenings or the media stunts of Abbie Hoffman, rather than dramatic theatre. Yet, Bishop's critique of contemporary participatory art exposes the problems with this assumed relationship between performance art and social activism. Bishop notes that such art has the appearance of emancipation through its demand for audiences to be 'active' but that it hides spectator subordination to the will of the artist (2012: 39). In light of this crossing over, Bishop argues that 'art and the social should not be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension' (2012: 40-41). *Only We* demonstrates how theatre in the twenty-first century is radicalising and developing its aesthetic form and reach whilst still retaining historical features of 'dramatic' works, such as characters and dialogue. The play also develops the 'continual tension' between the social sphere and its status as artwork by intervening in and commenting on real life, current political events using heightened theatrical devices and self-reflexivity. *Only We* sustains contradiction and tension through its staging of the incorporeal and its historicisation of future events that show audiences the possibility of changing the *status quo* of the present. While *Only We* is quite unique in its formal experimentation and anti-war message, there are some other high profile Western playwrights whose work also attempts to develop the tension between socio-political context and artistic aesthetic in plays such as *Iraq.doc* (2003) by Caryl Churchill, *Bambiland* (2003) by Elfriede Jelinek, *Advice to Iraqi Women* (2003) by Martin Crimp and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008) by Mark Ravenhill.

For Dean, contemporary protest is *least* resistant to the *status quo* when it makes 'individual contributions to, the affective networks of communicative capitalism' (2012: 246). Dean's disavowal of communication networks, visual spectacle and community building through social media suggests a nostalgic and limiting idea of the forms that collective action should take. Furthermore, it ignores the vital and complex role that a liquid or cyber visual culture has played in mobilising resistance groups and disseminating information in recent revolutionary actions such as the Occupy Movement, Zapatistas EZLN Movement, the Arab Spring and the Tunisian Revolution (Costanza-Chock 2012; Thompson 2012: 29-30; Amine 2013: 87; Ziter 2013: 137; Zahrouni 2013: 148). In a new and rapidly shifting era of media ecology, *Only We* exploits the intersecting networks of 'communicative capitalism' for its own purposes—an act of *détournement* that brings together the world of the theatre, the networks of the Internet and performative protests on the streets. In its written form, *Only We* participated in public media debates of left-wing

newspapers and magazines on a global scale while in its performance it was accessible to a more limited audience, much of which was drawn to the work through its connection to and participation in online political advocacy networks.

For Rancière, art should reconfigure consensual worlds of experience by ‘undoing the formatting of reality produced by state-controlled media, by undoing the relations between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable’ (2004: 65). Given Rancière’s hope in the potential of fictional representations to alter the normative logics of doing, thinking and being (2010: 141), the spectator responses to *Only We* showed how theatre can shift the coordinates of the visible and the invisible in the public sphere. Furthermore it revealed how theatre can reorient the dominant perceptual space and disrupt consensual forms of belonging activated most powerfully by the Bush and Blair governments and often upheld by the mainstream media. *Only We*’s depiction of the consequences of invasion of Iraq and Scene Two’s reflection on the hegemony of normative Western modes of visibility and sayability offer new forums for debate that invite rather than foreclose contradiction.

---

### Notes

1. This strategy was also used by British playwright Caryl Churchill in *Seven Jewish Children: a play for Gaza* (2009) and Martin Crimp’s *Advice to Iraqi Women* (2003).
2. George W. Bush never appears in the play as a character but he is mentioned frequently by his wife and thus is an off-stage character.
3. ‘Just war’ theory in the Christian Western tradition dates back to Saint Augustine in the fourth century. Just war theory described the *Jus ad bellum* (right to war) requirements as: just cause, right authority, right intention, and reasonable hope of success (Taslaman and Taslaman 2013-2014: 2). After the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in America in 2001, the Bush administration employed the rhetoric of just war in an attempt to expand the definition to include pre-emptive war as well as justifying the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq on the grounds of humanitarian intervention and the ideological spread of democratic ‘freedoms’.
4. In a *New York Times* interview with Elisabeth Bumiller, the real Laura Bush claimed, ‘There’s nothing political about American literature ... Everyone can like American literature, no matter what your party’ (Bumiller 2002: n.p.).
5. This article first appeared in Salon.com, at <http://www.salon.com>. An online version remains in the Salon archives. Quoted with permission.

### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).
- Amine, Khalid. ‘Re-enacting Revolution and the New Public Sphere in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco’, *Theatre Research International* 38.2 (2013): 87–103.
- Auslander, Philip. ‘Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre’, *Theatre Journal* 39.1 (1987): 20–34.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
- Beam, Alex. ‘Trashing the First Lady at the ART’, *The Boston Globe* (3 February 2004): 5.
- Bishop, Claire. ‘Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?’, in Nato Thompson (ed.) *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* (New York: Creative Times Books, 2012): 34–45.

- Bumiller, Elisabeth. 'White House Letter: Quietly, the First Lady Builds a Literary Room of Her Own', *The New York Times Online* (7 October 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/07/us/white-house-letter-quietly-the-first-lady-builds-a-literary-room-of-her-own.html>
- Butler Judith and Athenasiou, Athena. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2006).
- Bush, G.W. (2001), 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 September, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>
- Caroli, Betty Boyd. *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Chomsky, Noam. *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004).
- Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 'Mic Check! Media Cultures and the Occupy Movement', *Social Movement Studies* 11. 3–4, (2012): 375–385.
- Dean, Jodi. *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012).
- Hil, Richard. 'Civil Society, Public Protest and the Invasion of Iraq', *Social Alternatives* 27.1 (2008): 29–33.
- Kennedy, Randy. 'The Dead and Dostoyevsky, in a War with Bush', *The New York Times Online*, (4 August 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/04/theater/the-dead-and-dostoyevsky-in-a-war-with-bush.html>
- Kruger, Steven F. 'Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*' in Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (eds.), *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 151–169.
- Kushner, Tony. 'Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy', *The Nation online*, (24 March 2003), <http://www.thenation.com/article/only-we-who-guard-mystery-shall-be-unhappy>
- Kushner, Tony. 'First Lady Fights Back!' (Scene Two, *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*), Salon online, (5 August 2004), [http://www.salon.com/2004/08/04/kushner\\_scene/](http://www.salon.com/2004/08/04/kushner_scene/)
- Moveon.org: Democracy in Action website, <http://front.moveon.org/about/#.UyuyALbj3Kg>
- Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
- Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).
- Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (London: Flamingo, 2004).
- Shepard, Benjamin. *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
- Spencer, Jenny (ed.). *Political And Protest Theatre After 9/11: Patriotic Dissent* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- Taslaman, Caner and Taslaman, Feryal, 'Contemporary Just War Theory: Paul Ramset and Michael Walzer', *Journal of Academic Studies* 59 (2013–2014): 1–20.
- Thompson, Nato. 'Living as Form', in Nato Thompson (ed.), *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* (New York: Creative Times Books, 2012): 16–32.
- Traister, Rebecca. 'Laura Bush hits Broadway: Review', *Salon online*, (2004), [http://www.salon.com/2004/08/03/kushner\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2004/08/03/kushner_2/)
- York, Byron. 'Laura Bush and Her Killer Bushie', *National Review Online*, (2004), <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/212085/laura-and-her-killer-bushie/byron-york>
- Zahrouni, Rafika. 'The Tunisian Revolution and the Dialectics of Theatre and Reality', *Theatre Research International* 38.2 (2013): 148–157.
- Ziter, Edward. 'Clowns of the Revolution: The Malas Twins and Syrian Oppositional Performance', *Theatre Research International* 38.2 (2013): 137–147.

LARA STEVENS (stevlara@gmail.com) is the Hugh Williamson Postdoctoral Fellow in the Australia Centre at the University of Melbourne, where she is writing on ecofeminism in contemporary Australia. Lara's research areas are twenty-first century anti-war theatre, Brechtian theory and French feminist philosophy.