

Introduction – Setting the Scene: Plays and Playwrights

The reinvigorated phenomenology of text-based theatre should rate among the most vital developments in contemporary performance. In the twentieth century, performance theory and the concept of postdramatic theatre seemed to suggest that the key developments in theatre defied and transcended the logocentrism of playwriting. Contemporary playwriting, however, markedly mobilizes text for a spatial imaginary, scenographically, even on the page. This Element analyzes the text and production of one play each by Caryl Churchill, Naomi Iizuka and Sarah Ruhl to explicate the larger currents around playwriting and space. Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl are all illustrative examples of some of the most distinctive elements of twentieth- and twenty-first-century playwriting in both the United States and the UK. The analysis here focuses on the scenographic aspects of contemporary playwriting, which are its phenomenological and spatial dimensions.

Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl's work exemplifies the way contemporary playwrights compress the linguistic and imagistic aspects of theatre for phenomenological and spatial impact, and how text-based theatre continues to be a site of great artistic vitality in our vastly expanded performance landscape. I have linked these three writers together because their works so often move into production through an unofficial network of influence connecting them through their collaborators. The direction of Les Waters and design of Annie Smart in particular make a relationship between the three writers in terms of scenography and *mise-en-scene*. This points to a through-line about the phenomenological and spatial dimensions of their writing and how that quality of their work engages collaborating artists. Smart suggested to me that her point of connection for the quality of writing represented by these writers is Gaston Bachelard's (1994) treatise *The Poetics of Space* (first published 1958).¹ Importantly, Scott Cummings's *The Theatre of Les Waters: More Like the Weather* (2022) contains short pieces from all three playwrights alongside many others that track, in an evanescent, self-reflexive way, this shared spatial–phenomenological through-line in the contemporary new writing theatre to which Waters has primarily dedicated his career.

Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl are associatively and analytically linked in other ways as well. In her analysis of the “two traditions” of contemporary theatre in *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* (2019), Elinor Fuchs cites the plays of both Churchill and Ruhl as examples of the way that elements of the text-based

¹ Smart introduced me to Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* during a guest artist visit to the University of Puget Sound in 2015, noting that it was the book that most helped her find her way as a designer for new writing early in her career.

tradition and the performance-based tradition are co-present in the same works of art. The “story of dramatic and theatrical form is increasingly interesting as the two stands attempt to accommodate each other,” she writes (29). Along these lines of combined traditions and shared influences, Sarah Ruhl writes of her experience seeing Churchill’s plays in performance and how that transformed her consciousness. For Ruhl, working with Churchill’s directorial collaborators Waters and Mark Wing-Davey (who has also staged Iizuka’s plays) and heeding Churchill’s example was a foundational part of how she continued to learn to be a theatre maker – a collaborator, and a mother, and a political commentator (Ruhl, 2019).

Ruhl’s reflections capture her awareness of being part of a lineage, part of a thrust in contemporary theatre practice that simultaneously reinvents forms and vindicates the playwright within the field of practice. The examples she describes of experiencing Churchill’s work include watching her mother perform in a production of *Top Girls* (resonating with the genesis of *For Peter Pan*); seeing *Blue Heart* and understanding that language only did part of the work in theatre but also held infinite capacity for experimentation; and of watching the New York premiere of *Far Away* and thinking about both surprise and spectacle in the simultaneity of the production. These insights map exactly onto the scenographic qualities of contemporary writing tracked in the sections of this Element: how plays call for the staging of overlapped worlds and simultaneous realities like in *Top Girls*; the explosion or disintegration of language like in *Blue Kettle*; and the type of self-reflexive consciousness of perception a fully theatrical moment allows, coaxes forth, invites and holds for its audience, like Ruhl experienced watching *Far Away*.

As for Iizuka and Churchill, their plays are frequently anthologized together, as in *Theater of the Avant-Garde 1950–2000: A Critical Anthology* (Knopf and Listengarten, 2011), and they are discussed in parallel in manuals about how to read, stage and design contemporary plays, especially related to the directorial methods of Waters and Wing-Davey.² Meanwhile, moving from following the threads of connection following the threads of connection from Churchill to each younger woman to those between Ruhl and Iizuka shows how they travel related career paths in the contemporary US theatre. Though separated by the thin dividing line of a decade’s difference in age, they are frequently staged by the same theatres, win the same fellowships or awards within years of each other, or get cited as influences by developing playwrights looking for models.³

² See *How to Rehearse a Play: A Practical Guide for Directors* (Kiely, 2020), *How to Read a Play: Script Analysis for Directors* (Kiely, 2016) and *Sound and Music for the Theatre: The Art and Technique of Design* (Kaye and LeBrecht, 2015).

³ See for instance this conversation with emerging playwright Christina Anderson during the 2011 production of *Man in Love* at the 7th Annual First Look Repertory of New Work at Steppenwolf

In 2016, Iizuka and Ruhl were jointly named as the Berlind playwrights-in-residence at the Lewis Center at Princeton University, a move that recognized the McCarter Theatre and Princeton's role in supporting the development of their work early in their careers which between and spoke to their parallel roles within the contemporary playwriting scene.

Together and apart, these three playwrights are justly famous and are already regular subjects of deep literary and performative analysis. Yet, to put playwriting and space together, to read these writers as Smart does, in dialogue with Bachelard, is to read them through a lens that needs more attention in the field of Theatre Studies. Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl all function as writers in a field where distinctions between text-based and non-text-based work have both opened and closed theatrical pathways for them. Twentieth-century critical theory provided many tools for reading dramatic text and embodied performance, with particular emphasis on ways of dislodging ideological implications and surfacing social and political contexts through analysis. The phenomenological aspects of writing for the theatre, and the spatialized realization of text-based performance, have fewer critical tools. As Julia Jarcho argues in *Writing and the Modern Stage: Theatre beyond Drama* (2020) there is not yet full critical embrace of playwrights as part of the fabric of experimental performance. Sarah Sigal's *Writing in Collaborative Theatre-Making* (2016) explores different strategies for writers who may work with experimental companies (and vice versa), but her sense of process dramaturgy in contemporary theatre making has not fully infused critical treatments of text-based theatre. Concepts of space and spatiality help to reveal how contemporary playwriting works on perception and consciousness and how innovations in playwriting are undoing drama-performance binaries and creating new fusions. Experimental, non-text-based theatre is treated as a spatial act in contemporary analysis. Playwriting is also an act of spatial imagination. Current text-based theatre works as a spatial act as powerfully as non-text-based theatre.

Smart's scenographic embrace of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* opens up the role and meaning of text in theatre. This is because Bachelard writes a theory of form, that is, a poetics, that links textuality and spatiality. A poetics is an explanation and vocabulary about what is artful in a medium and how the properties of that medium work on human consciousness if well executed. Bachelard's phenomenology asserts that the human imagination is spatial, that imagination and memory distill our vivid perceptions of embodiment into spatial images. Bachelard addresses questions of freshness, intensity, recognition, wholeness,

Theatre in Chicago: www.steppenwolf.org/articles/man-in-love-playwright-and-director-in-conversation/.

memory and the sacred in relation to the human perception of language and imagery. Bachelard likes to write of “shimmer,” the living sense of aesthetic experience and of contact with the soul. For text-based theatre, Bachelard suggests that space is the encounter between the text and the staging.

Working with Bachelard and the parallel sociopolitical aspects of the spatial turn in critical theory outlined in the next section, this Element takes the work of Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl as outstanding examples of how space matters in contemporary playwriting. Close attention to their work helps reveal how syntheses of text, visibility and physicality manifest more generally in writing from dramatists who collaborate with designers and directors rather than only in the work of artists who bridge or hybridize roles, like director-designers and director-authors such as Joanne Akalitis, Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman. It matters that the careers of these writers and their collaborators span the United States and the UK, because the trends of contemporary playwriting, design and staging are not localized to nations, though this study focuses on anglophone theatre and the changing relationship of text and performance in the postmodern period, which may have different timelines in different national or linguistic traditions and contexts.

In the United States and the UK, the traits of scenographic playwriting are to some degree present in almost three generations of anglophone writers, including waves of writers from the 1970s to the 2010s, notably some of Ruhl’s teachers like Maria Irene Fornes and Mac Wellman; playwrights whose work foreshadows Iizuka’s like Adrienne Kennedy and Cherie Moraga; and peers of Churchill’s like Harold Pinter and of course Howard Barker. Some scenographic aspects of contemporary playwriting reach directly back to the work of Samuel Beckett (McMullen, 2012). Markedly, most twenty-first-century playwrights engage with at least some heightened sense of spatiality – and profit from analysis that attends to it – because there has been a decisive shift in how playwrights target their word artistry for collaboration and staging, participating in postmodern and postdramatic re-ordering and dehierarchization of theatre’s expressive elements.

The shows discussed in this Element, all directed and designed by Waters and Smart, shake up theatre’s expressive elements even as they present iterations of feminist dramaturgy, documentary theatre and family drama structures. They had first productions that shared a Bachelardian “shimmer” and which mobilized both material and conceptual registers of space in thrilling ways. The plays under consideration are Churchill’s *The Skriker* (National Theatre of England, 1994), Iizuka’s *At the Vanishing Point* (Actors Theatre of Louisville, 2004 and 2015) and Ruhl’s *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday* (Humana Festival of New American Plays and Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2016). After some more reflection on the context of these works and the nodalities of connection

between them in this introduction, the rest of the analysis in this Element employs close textual reading and analysis of my experience in the audience for each play. My direct observation registers the phenomenological impact of the spatiality of the shows, following through on how the scenographic aspects of the writing get realized in production as the writing intertwines with design and direction. As an audience member and scholar, the vivid experiences of these performances propelled me to investigate how text-based theatre shape-shifts because of new modes of theatrical creation and engagement.

While *The Skriker*, *At the Vanishing Point* and *For Peter Pan* span twenty-five years of theatrical trends and developments, they all share ways of foregrounding scenographic aspects and the space-building processes of theatre. First, they each present at least two realities at once. Second, they use fractured language in mimesis-disrupting ways that implicate embodiment and visuality in line with experimental performance traditions. Finally, they require theatrical transformations (*coups de theatre*) that produce intense moments of consciousness in a way that is not just metatheatrical, but also the activation of the spatial imagination in Bachelard's mode.

It might seem odd to position *The Skriker* as an exemplar since even in the midst of Churchill's widely varied oeuvre it can feel like an outlier among her shows. Yet, doing so helps capture the way that theatre artists in the 1990s were exploring and bridging the techniques of dramatic writing and live art, movement-based, cross-over and hybrid forms of performance. Churchill's explorations manifest the ways legacies of avant-garde experimentation and collective creation impacted playwriting. Her plays fragment their storytelling and character development in vital and experimental ways, with feminist and eco-critical impact. *The Skriker* comes from a phase of her work where she most actively melded speaking, dancing and singing in collaboration with a director, designer, composer and choreographer. Churchill describes these works as experimental "dance-operas" (Churchill, 1998: viii).

When *The Skriker* premiered in 1994, Churchill could already depend on her reputation for innovation as a dramatist earning her recognition. She stood parallel to Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard as playwrights who would dazzle in form and content during the late twentieth century. At that point, her use of the backslash and asterisk in dialogue to indicate overlaps and staggered line cuing was most strongly exemplified in *Top Girls* (1982). *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) and *Cloud Nine* (1979) featured her brilliant negotiation of history, historicization and Brechtian double-casting displacements. But in her body of work, *The Skriker* rises paramount in a string of plays where she explored a mode of play-building concerned with creating the occasion for perceptual overlaps through the use of text, movement and space configuration

which prefigures her sparer works *Far Away* (2000), *A Number* (2002), *Love and Information* (2012) and *Here We Go* (2015).

The Skriker forms a loosely connected trilogy with two other plays of Churchill's that all explore the interaction of the material world and an unseen, spiritual world: *Fen* (1983) and *Mouthful of Birds* (1986). In fact, Churchill's work from 1982 until 1994 included two overlapping "trilogies": there's a triad of works produced at Joint Stock, the Royal Court and the National Theatre – *Fen*, *Mouthful of Birds* and *The Skriker* – for which Ian Spink collaborated as choreographer, Waters directed and Smart was the designer. There's also a triad of works – *Mouthful of Birds*, *The Lives of Great Poisoners* (1991) and *The Skriker* – joined by Churchill's collaboration with the writer and director David Lan and the composers Orlando Gough and Judith Wier. These four plays investigate the embodied dynamics of gender in the experience of economics, sexuality, parenting, justice and mental health. These plays may be her hardest to categorize but are as vital to her profile as her early masterpieces and her later innovations.

As with Churchill's body of work connecting to Joint Stock, the Royal Court and the National Theatre in England, Ruhl and Iizuka's oeuvres are inextricably intertwined with the United States institutions the Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Actors Theatre of Louisville, especially its Humana Festival of New American Plays.⁴ These artistic homes are where Churchill, Iizuka and Ruhl's mode of playwriting are brought to fruition in its tradition-blending complexity and not forced into binaries about playwriting, on the one hand, or experimentalism on the other. In *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, Todd London calls it a default choice to put new plays into small spaces – second stages and studios (London et al., 2009: 187–8). This happens both to protect unknown plays from what in the British context Peter Hall calls "unreasonable" box office pressure and because smaller spaces are often programmed more flexibly than large ones (qtd in Sierz, 2011: 364). The lowered risk also often translates into lowered resources, however, and nonnaturalistic conventions can be hard to do in small spaces with little design support.

In the United States, by the early twenty-first century, new play development programs were very explicitly grappling with the legacy of collective creation, cross-over work and fragmented construction. While experimentation with dramatic form has been a consistent goal of new play production as a category and of movements to encourage new writing for the theatre, ideas about what

⁴ Founded in 1977, the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL) continued the post-war goal of raising new playwrights to awareness and supporting new waves of play development and an expansion of styles (Ullom, 2008: 1–10).

a dramatic text might do and what sorts of structures a playwright might employ continued to be contested terrain. New play development programs often found that institutional theatre structures were not well set up to support more open-ended, scenographic dramaturgies. This is the context in which Iizuka's work has most often moved. Many of Iizuka's plays adapt historical, mythological, literary and folkloric material, but *At the Vanishing Point* taps into her seam of quasi-documentary, community-embedded work. Her plays negotiate a complex blend of identity-based, place-based and style-based maneuvers, including an incorporation of documentary theatre techniques and the energies of site-based performance.

In its experimentation, Iizuka's work takes its place among that of nonrealist playwrights like Charles Mee, Len Jenkins, Ruth Margraff, Caridad Svich and Erik Ehn who were opening up form on US stages in the 1990s. She is also part of a generation of global majority playwrights starting to make a mark around the turn of the twenty-first century like Eugenie Chan, Sandra Rogers and Diana Son (Miyagawa, 1997). Esther Kim Lee positions Iizuka as part of a third wave in Asian-American theatre history that rejects all forms of essentialist identity and questions both perception and expectation about identity in their playmaking and performance (2006). Iizuka's early work also appeared in collections about Latino theatre and she is part of the advisory board for the Latino Theatre Commons (Svich and Marrero, 2000).⁵

At the Vanishing Point differs from Iizuka's other works in that it does not appropriate another literary work, though it refers to both myth and Shakespeare. Elsewhere, Iizuka has directly reworked *The Odyssey*, *Agamemnon*, *Hamlet*, *Woyzeck*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, plays from Chikamatsu and Japanese folktales, among other sources. *At the Vanishing Point* is also not a play created for or with children, teenagers or college students, which is an aspect of Iizuka's work from *Polaroid Stories* (1997) to *Good Kids* (2014). Instead, the time-looping, haunted interaction with history that *Vanishing Point* pursues resembles *36 Views* (2000) and *Concerning Strange Devices from the Distant West* (2010), but without the direct Asian and Asian-American histories those plays vivify.

At the Vanishing Point may be Iizuka's only play where the historical context and the text itself suggest that the characters are all white. *Polaroid Stories*, *Skin* (1995) and *Tattoo Girl* (1994) function mythically, with not always racially demarcated characters, yet production history shows them to be frequently cast with ensembles made up of actors from a range of racial and ethnic

⁵ See also <http://howlround.com/showcase-of-the-new-american-theatre-latino-theatre-com-mons-carnaval-2015>.

backgrounds. In other situations, when Iizuka writes specific political and community histories, the subject matter often intertwines with her own Latina and Asian heritage. *At the Vanishing Point* treats Kentucky with the same ethnographic, community-based engagement found in some of her other place-based work.⁶ This gives Louisville's history a similar mythic and metaphysical nonlinearity to that at work in *Polaroid Stories* and *Anonymous* (2006).

Ruhl's plays do not trouble the notion of form quite as aggressively as Churchill's and Iizuka's do, nor are they as thoroughly fractured in structure, but they employ circularities, repetitions and mirrorings that mean that the story of the play may be attenuated even as its phenomenological impact is profound. Ruhl's play structures invite comparisons with musical or poetic forms. She divides *For Peter Pan*, for instance, into three "movements" rather than acts. Across the board Ruhl's plays make people laugh, but they insist on talking about mortality and heartbreak, and her experimentalism can be underestimated (Al-Shamma, 2011).⁷ In the second half of her career, Ruhl has shifted from writing what might be called father and lover plays to writing marriage and mother plays. Written as a gift for Ruhl's mother, but still deeply concerned with the presence and absence of fathers, *For Peter Pan* may represent the best synthesis of these two strands in her work. Ruhl and her reception represent the complete mainstream embrace of a postmodern and postdramatic stylistic eclecticism made possible by five decades of sustained artistic, dramaturgical and educational commitment to expanding the role and aesthetic range of new plays in anglophone theatre.

Ruhl's signature is the blending of the real and surreal, which is accomplished with a type of brilliant lightness around space, language and image. Her peers include Lisa Loomer, Jenny Schwartz, Kate Fodor, Young Jean Lee, Julia Jordan, Quiara Alegria Hudes and Kia Cothron, but she also takes her place in comparison to writers who were her teachers, specifically Paula Vogel, Maria Irene Fornes, Nilo Cruz and Mac Wellman (Durham, 2013; Ruhl, 2001). *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday* begins with a deceptively prosaic first section for a piece by a playwright associated with a theatrical version of magic realism. Ruhl's play creates an uncanny seeming-like realism: it feels recognizable and then it slips away into something else. The play feigns to be almost purely

⁶ Such as *100 Years After* (2008) and *Ghostwritten* (2009) which treat the history of Cambodian genocide and the Vietnam war; *17 Reasons Why* (2003), driven by histories of the residents of San Francisco's Mission District; and *3 Truths* (2010) which took on California border and immigration histories as part of Cornerstone Theatre's Justice Cycle.

⁷ Al-Shamma discusses Ruhl's postmodern asynchronicity and intertextuality, though it strikes me that he misses how her plays resonate in space once designed and staged, so he characterizes her as fairly "traditional" in her treatment of plot, character and agon because he does not consider the plays as fully in space (186).