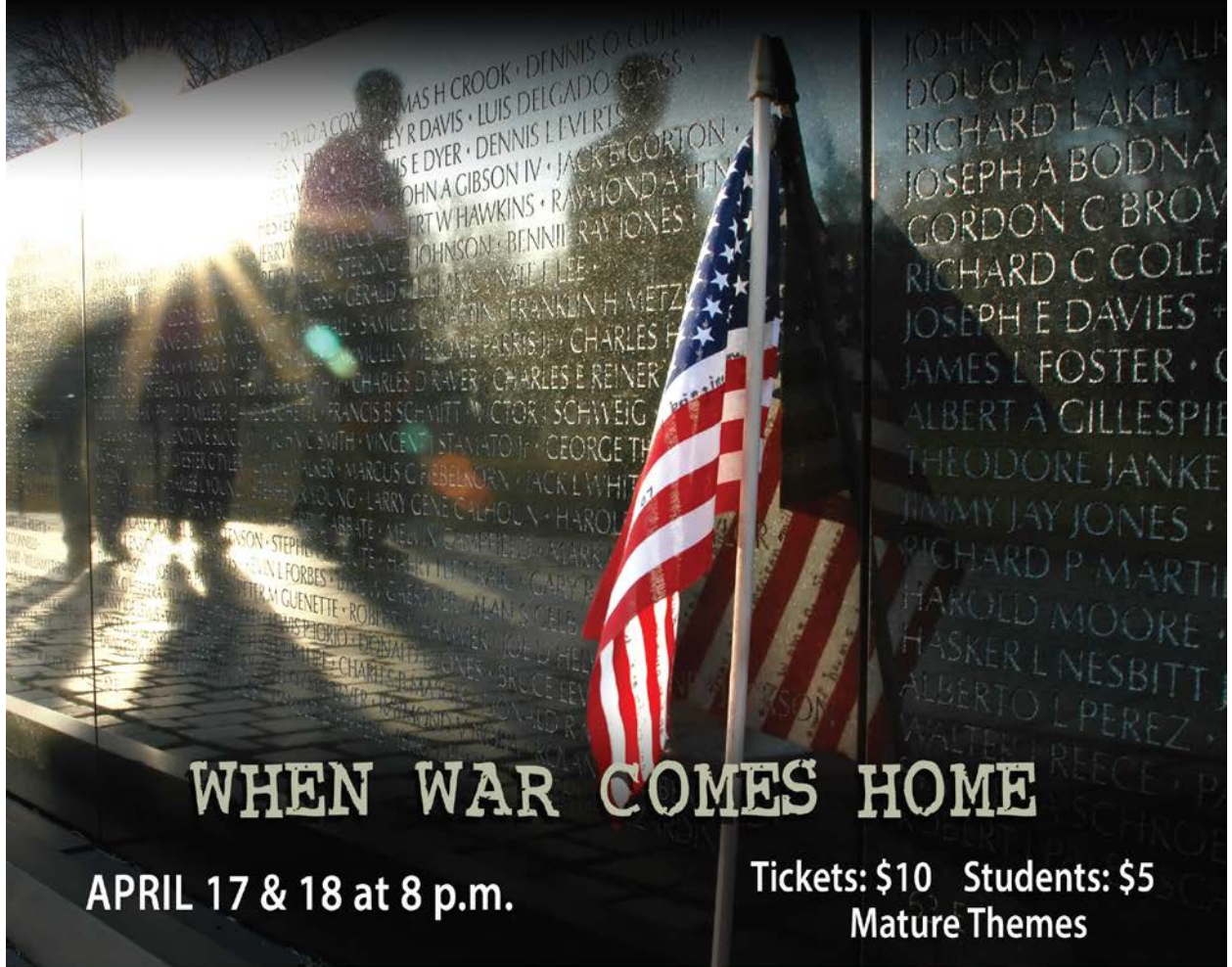


Governors State University Presents

STILL LIFE

A Documentary by Emily Mann

Directed by Dr. Patrick Santoro



WHEN WAR COMES HOME

APRIL 17 & 18 at 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$10 Students: \$5
Mature Themes

 **Governors State**
UNIVERSITY
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SYNOPSIS

Shaped by the author from conversations with the people whose experience she sets forth, the documentary play explores the way that Vietnam has affected three lives: a Marine veteran, his estranged wife, and his mistress. The man confesses that he killed a Vietnamese family in cold blood and, carrying the seeds of violence with him, returned home to brutalize his pregnant wife. The wife, disillusioned and unhappy, wants to ignore the terrors that haunt her husband, believing that in time the awful memories will fade, while the mistress, an angry feminist, blames the man's destructiveness on the forces that conditioned him before he went to Vietnam. In the end, these three become a metaphor for the nation as a whole—still trying to understand, and overcome, the lingering trauma that is the bitter legacy of the Vietnam experience.

CHARACTERS

Mark: 28, ex-Marine, Viet Nam vet, husband, artist, lover, father

Cheryl: his wife, mother of his children, also 28

Nadine: his friend, 43 years old, artist, mother of three, divorcee, a woman with many jobs and many lives

PRODUCTION CONCEPT

Still Life is a still play. It methodically and abrasively tells the story of three without much interaction at all; they speak in monologue as if they are being interviewed—their words and worlds juxtaposed with one another. Each character sits in isolation from the others (a visual representation of their emotional states), though sometimes break that frame and see one another across the stage. Our production utilizes multimedia strategies to create the docudrama feel¹: television monitors, video cameras, etc. that reveal not only historical images of war but of the characters' war-torn psyches. *Still Life* is a dream world—a nightmare etched in pain. It is my intent that *Still Life* will offer a powerful and resonant experience of the myriad effects of war. Although Vietnam might seem like a distant memory, war is still our present and, perhaps, our future constant.

Dr. Patrick Santoro, Director

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¹ The docudrama is a fact-based representation of real events. Unlike other forms of drama, the docudrama tries to represent the truth of an event that really happened. To think of it in another way, you might say that a docudrama is a non-fiction play.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Emily Mann is in her seventeenth season as Artistic Director of McCarter Theatre, where she is also the resident playwright. Ms. Mann wrote and directed *Having Our Say*, adapted from the book by Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, which had its world premiere at McCarter Theatre prior to its successful run on Broadway, a national tour and a production at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Broadway production was nominated for three Tony awards, an Outer Critics and a Drama Desk award. Ms. Mann also wrote the teleplay for *Having Our Say* which aired as a Kraft Premiere Movie on CBS TV April 18, 1999 and received a Peabody Award, a Christopher Award and a nomination for outstanding achievement in television and radio by the Writers Guild of America. Ms. Mann wrote and directed *Meshugah*, adapted from the story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, which had its world premiere at McCarter and was recently produced Off-Broadway. Her play, *Greensboro (A Requiem)*, had its world premiere at McCarter in 1997. She received an Obie Award for her direction of the New York run of Edward Albee's *All Over* with Rosemary Harris. Ms. Mann made her Broadway debut as a playwright and director with *Execution of Justice*, for which she received a Bay Area Theatre Critics Award, a Playwriting Award from the Women's Committee of the Dramatists Guild, a Burns Mantle Yearbook Best Play Citation, and a Drama Desk nomination. Her play, *Still Life*, premiered at the Goodman Theatre, and opened Off-Broadway under her direction in 1981, winning six Obie Awards, including Distinguished Playwriting and Distinguished Directing. Her first play, *Annulla, An Autobiography*, premiered at The Guthrie Theater and was produced at The New Theatre of Brooklyn with Linda Hunt. A recipient of the prestigious Hull-Warriner Award and the Edward Albee Last Frontier Directing Award, Ms. Mann is a member of the Dramatists Guild and serves on its Council. A collection of her plays, *Testimonies: Four Plays*, has been published by Theatre Communications Group, Inc.

For more information about Mann and her theatrical process, consult the interview, "In Conversation," at the end of this packet.

THEMES

War

Trauma/Loss

Violence

Memory

Documentary/Docudrama

Interpersonal Relationships

Identity

Ethnography/Ethnographic Methods

DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Theatre and Performance Studies

Anthropology and Sociology

Communication Studies

History

Gender and Women's Studies

Media Studies

Identity Studies

Film Studies

Psychology

Counseling

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How did the media of the period influence Mann's portrayal of the war?

How does storytelling function in *Still Life*?

Emily Mann grew up in the Vietnam era. Was there any evidence of personal bias about the war in *Still Life*?

Discuss the depiction of violence and the underlying American myths regarding manhood/masculinity, male/female relations, and heroism in *Still Life*.

How were soldiers expected to deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a time when such a term did not exist?

Mann has adopted the term 'theatre of testimony' to describe her work. Why did Mann decide to use the docudrama format, and what statement is she trying to make?

How is *Still Life* and its portrayal of the Vietnam War still resonant today?

CRITICAL ESSAY

“At War with John Wayne: Masculinity, Violence, and the Vietnam War in Emily Mann’s *Still Life*”²

By Marta Fernandez Morales
Publication: *American Drama*
Date: January 1, 2007

What, a man? Where's the model? (Matin 70)

The United States has gone through more than one war since the 1970s and is currently involved in a confused "postwar" in Iraq that will undoubtedly call forth its own discussion and literature. Yet, Vietnam seems to have left an everlasting and so far unequalled imprint on the memory of millions of North American citizens. At the time, it meant tens of thousands of deaths, numerous permanent physical injuries, many long-term psychological problems, and many shattered lives and broken homes. The Vietnam conflict was perceived as an unjust cause by half of the population and as a shameful loss by the other half. Being such a relevant historical event, this war has found its place in art and engendered novels, films, poetry, autobiographies, essays, and of course, plays. Of the many plays that explore this subject, Emily Mann's *Still Life*, first produced in 1980, "gets it right by doing it wrong," according to Don Rignalda's analyses. It fails because it was written by a non-veteran, it does not happen "in country," and its focus is definitely not on the Vietnamese rice paddies. Throughout *Still Life*, Emily Mann reveals that behind the curtain of the armed conflict there was a kind of victim that was not included in the daily body count.

As a writer, Emily Mann developed her career mainly in Documentary Drama. Her plays have been called Theater of Testimony because they reproduce the words of people she interviewed, as well as using sources like recordings, trial transcripts, etc., in the line of work initiated by Erwin Piscator in 1929. (1) My essay centers on the playtext of *Still Life*, based on the author's encounters with a Vietnam veteran (Mark), his wife (Cheryl), and his friend and lover (Nadine). Mann met them in Minnesota in 1978, and their stories left a profound trace in her memory. When she realized that the way to overcome the pain--her own and the characters'--was to write about it, she devised this peculiar drama piece, structured in three acts and reflecting the protagonists' struggles with their most intimate traumas.

Mann contends the play is her "traumatic memory of hearing their stories during the interview sessions" (qtd. in Betsko & Koenig 281), and she organized the long hours of recorded material in a way that reminds some critics of a fugue. *Still Life* is basically a collection of juxtaposed monologues in which the characters speak their minds independently, hardly talking to one another, and yet their words are not unconnected. As in a three-voice fugue, there is a "subject," there is an "answer" to it, and there is a "counter-response" to both, which brings about a Brechtian breach of expectations. The spectator is introduced to a line of thought which then breaks into two more, very different voices, and, as it happens to the listener of a fugue, his/her

² http://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=156552250

ability to predict what will come next is debilitated (Di Liscia 2). In this kind of musical piece, as in Mann's play, the voices and points of view sometimes overlap. In the text, this is represented in the special layout in some of the editions:

NADINE:	CHERYL:
I have so much to do Just to keep going.	See, I got kids now.
Just to keep my kids going, I don't sleep at all.	I can't be looking into myself. I've got to be looking out. (53)

Scenes like this one give the audience-hearing the simultaneous voices--or the reader--seeing the typographical layout of the page--an insight into the contrasting versions of the same topic that the characters offer. With this apparent disconnection, and continuing with the line of Brechtian tendencies I have already pointed out, the play demands an active audience, one that will listen in full conscience and decide what the relevant links are within all the talking done on stage. In the play, Cheryl and Nadine describe a reality that has little to do with the image of the Vietnam War shown in mainstream movies or in literature written by male authors (especially by veterans).

In her personal memoir *Lonely Girls with Burning Eyes*, a veteran's wife, Marian Faye Novak, writes about the home front terror and how the Vietnam War provoked a domestic statistic of wounded individuals that has been ignored historically:

Today, many bookstores and libraries have a section on Vietnam, with book after book detailing the vivid and powerful experiences of veterans of that war. But my story is not there.

There must be thousands of women like me -wives who waited, who in some sense are still waiting. But we have been silent ... there is no time or energy left to tell the story. Worst of all, we have been quietly condemned to silence because of who and what we are: wives. (3, 4)

In her piece, Emily Mann, following the path opened by other feminist playwrights, recuperates the female view and saves the wives' voices from oblivion through the character of Cheryl, who is given a chance to speak her truth about a conflict that has been interpreted mostly from a male perspective. After all, war and violence have always been "boys' stuff" American youngsters went to Vietnam, among other things, to become men through (rough) training, (sexist) education, and (virile) exercising with their bodies and guns. That Marines, for example, would repeat the following chant during their basic training shows the female standpoint was neglected in everything around that war, even though there were some women (mainly journalists) in country: "This is my rifle [GI holds up M-16] / This is my gun [puts hand in crotch] / one is for

killing / the other for fun" (Bergman 60).

In this essay, I focus on the question of constructing masculinity through sexism and violence, how Mann uses the stage to uncover myths and fallacies that moved men first, to go to war, and then, to bring that war home with them and, sometimes, to take it out on the women around them. In *Still Life* the audience is allowed to enter the home front scenario during and after the Vietnam conflict and to see and understand how the veterans' wives were turned into invisible victims. Domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental disorder left as deep an imprint on United States society as the Viet Cong's bullets, and Mann, as a woman and pacifist, uses her ability to dramatize life to compensate somehow for the absence of her peers' plight in history books. If all her plays have a personal component, this one does even more so: "In *Still Life* each of those people, and especially each of the women, was me. But especially the wife. I got into the wife totally" (Mann, qtd. in Buchanan 210).

Mann exerts her feminist viewpoint in the construction of the character of Mark, who in the play works his way towards a terrible final confession, progressively going through moments of self-criticism, justification, anger, and deep pain. However, after one hundred pages, we come to the conclusion that the whole piece was not only written to serve Mark's purposes of undergoing a sort of "talking cure" but also to create some historical balance and restore Cheryl and Nadine's value as warriors in their (home) front and as subjects of their own her-stories. As the real Mark told Emily Mann when he finished his interview with her, "my wife ... really is another casualty of the war" (qtd. in Savran 153). That phenomenon is what the playwright explores in the text: are battered wives like Cheryl mere collateral damage, or are they first-hand victims of the Vietnam War and the culture, politics, and myth-making practices that took the nation into it?

At the end of the 1960s, the Vietnam War provided a rite of passage for a whole generation of American men. Some realized that peace was their only option and avoided the draft in different ways (fleeing to Canada, getting a study permit), but many (mainly draftees) found their path into adult manhood in Asia: "In one short year, Vietnam took the measure of a man and of the culture that put him there. War strips away the thin veneer applied slap-dash by the institutions of society and shows Man exactly for what he is" (Baker xiv). The pressure to grow up in a few weeks in order to be able to face fear, atrocity, and death during their thirteen-month tour of duty made the very young United States soldiers cling to impossible masculinity myths they were obviously unable to reproduce fully. In Vietnam, reality and popular culture references clashed, creating a sudden loss of innocence that left thousands of "veterans" in their twenties psychologically maimed, sometimes for life. Emily Mann's protagonist in *Still Life* is one of them. At the beginning of the play he analyzes: "My biggest question to myself all my life was / How I would act under combat? / That would be who I was as a man" (43).

Just as some forms of theater are based on mimesis, the Vietnam War soldiers' learning process was a bad imitation of a popular icon internalized by millions of North American youths. The drafted men were, in fact, only teenagers sent into a hell of violence after a short basic training that was designed to turn them into a herd of John Waynes. As writer and professor Robert Flynn explains, the Marine camps were flooded by images of this Hollywood persona:

When I was in Marine boot camp they showed us
John Wayne movies. In Marine boot camp you
couldn't leave the base, you couldn't go to the PX,

you couldn't buy soft drinks, ice cream or candy.
You couldn't have cigarettes, beer, or women.
Instead, we had John Wayne. Usually, he wore a
Marine uniform and killed a lot of Japanese. (2) (1)

In his films, Wayne attacked every enemy with the same zeal, with no questions as to the fairness of the conflict or its moral implications. If there was something that the mythic Wayne was not, that was definitely a feminist. Flynn refers to his macho behavior explicitly when he writes:

John Wayne didn't kill women. No need to. Some things were lower than Indians. John Wayne didn't marry them either. He wasn't afraid of bad women, although good women gave him a scare or two. Nothing scarier than a good woman when she was breathy and in heat. John Wayne put women in their place. A little higher than a prairie dog. A little lower than a dead horse. (2)

Wayne's public image was one of roughness, close to verbal inarticulateness, and lacking any consideration toward women or any other group that could be labeled as "other"; "he doesn't feel comfortable with women. He does like them sometimes--God knows he's not 'queer.' But at the right time and in the right place" (Bergman 63). During a war, with an overwhelming majority of men around, "the right time and place" for soldiers to have contact with women is mostly during raids into enemy villages. In this respect, Vietnam was not different from other armed conflicts, and rape was a normalized practice, alongside other forms of aggression. (3) In the play, Mark acknowledges the United States Army's abuse of women, and translates it into his personal homecoming experience. Having witnessed and tolerated gender violence overseas, he comes to accept it as a means of interaction with his wife, creating a battlefield in his own bedroom: "I saw women brutalized in the war. / I look at what I've done to my wife" (45).

The Vietnam frame provided thousands of men with a new environment in which being a "real man" was the only option available, and where everything or everybody alien took on female characteristics. From the first moment of their training, as has been noted in the "this is my rifle" chant above, masculinity was taken to imply female inferiority, and contempt for women was pervasive. The connection made between the penis and the weapon, and a whole range of sexually loaded imagery and language typical of military environments appeared: "Sexual imagery applied to weapons is shown graphically in advertisements that appear in military magazines, where weapons are described in terms of hardness, penetration, and thrust" (Ashford & Huet-Vaughn 194).

In Emily Mann's playtext, the link between violence and sexuality is one of Mark's clearest characteristics, condemned by his wife who comments upon his return: "Everything Mark does is sexually oriented somehow" (76). In a strategy that underlines the parallel between the structure of *Still Life* and a musical piece, Mann includes this line in the first scene of Act II, where Mark's monologue--the subject of the "fugue" answered by Cheryl--deals with the brutalization of Vietnamese women and its invisibility within the Marine Corps: "I never saw our

guys rape women. I heard about it / ... But you never took prisoners, so you'd have to get / involved with them while they were dying / or you'd wait until they were dead" (76). In the same way, the mistreatment of the veterans' wives was kept hidden in the mainstream narratives and dramatizations of the Vietnam War. Mann's play is a breakthrough, since it offers a voice to the silenced battered women through the mouth of Cheryl: "Mark's hit me before ... He's hit me more than once" (63).

Emily Mann emerges as an example of a successful feminist playwright because in her dramatic pieces, themes traditionally taken to be domestic and private, such as violence against women, take center-stage in a militant fusion of the personal and the political. In *Still Life*, the typically male topic of war provides the public context for the denunciation of an inequality present in millions of real-life homes. Gender violence raises questions of power, i.e. a political issue, that Mann wishes to name and make visible for her audience:

In the kind of theater that I make, there's a conversation going on between the actors and the audience. And hopefully it shakes you up enough, or stimulates or moves you enough, so that when you walk out you are continuing the conversation ... in order to have a public conversation that matters you have to have lived very intensely and have that private story to tell. Conversely, you must be able to glimpse that private world, to have a full understanding of what the public conversation is. Or isn't.
(Mann, qtd. in A. Greene 287)

On this occasion, the public dialogue takes place between the characters and an audience constructed as a jury who will listen and judge. Mann's play, contrary to some novels and other fictionalizations of the Vietnam War, eliminates the idea of glamor in the conflict, and deals with its subtext: "[The] battlefield is located between the war and the home front epistemology that started, maintained, and lost it ... The Vietnam plays bring the war back home where it started and is still being waged" (Rignalda 73). Explicit and implicit myths about masculinity appeared and applied subtly in American life, and Mark and his contemporaries unconsciously assimilated a concept of manhood directly related to the idea of blind loyalty to the group and unlimited duty toward their country. To be a man, in this line of thought, meant to always do as you were told: no questioning, no thinking, just acting. In this sense, the soldiers' bodies in Vietnam were perceived back home as destruction machines with no human identity attached, hence the recurrence of insults like "war-monger" and "baby-killer" applied to the returning veterans. Many of the soldiers recall the pain of being rejected as monsters by the same society they thought they were defending: "My people' were angry. At me. It blew me away ... there is no forgetting the spitting. They aimed at my feet. They missed. I kept walking, to the tune of 'baby killer, baby killer'" (qtd. in B. Greene 25). This gesture of spitting at the veterans was not an isolated incident. Hundreds of men remember this as another traumatic rite of passage; the painful (un)welcome back into their homeland; the evidence that their new identities--their former, innocent ones destroyed by the war--did not fit among the "flower children" of America.

The construction of a Vietnam veteran's identity was based on a chain of paradoxes that too often

led men into a no-way-out situation of anger and repressed violence. First, they underwent a harsh training during which their individuality had to be replaced by a group identity, "designed to replace the existing social ties with much more intense, if shallower, ties to the immediate group" (Cronin 203). At the same time, drafted men returned from their time in Vietnam alone; "each soldier arrived alone and left alone ... the shedding of the military identity was performed alone and without a meaningful ceremony. This lack of clear boundaries between one phase of life and another caused many incomplete transitions" (Cronin 204). This blurred passage from military into civilian life provoked confusion in the men, who had to adapt abruptly to the new social rules in America, a country that had experienced serious domestic changes in their absence. Emily Mann's male protagonist comments on the shock of being deprived of power and a certain type of freedom and thrown into a society at peace but with many internal injuries unhealed: "I wanted to live so much life, but I couldn't. / ... I don't know. / I was afraid. / I thought people were ... uh ... I mean / I was kind of paranoid" (93).

Another cultural construct that defined the soldiers' identity and performance during the Vietnam conflict was the concept of patriotic duty. In the 1960s, masculinity was identified with preparedness to die (Wheeler 141), and in 'Nam the alleged reason to die was one's country; everything seemed to be justified by the duty towards one's mother nation. The problem came when, back home, this idea was revealed as a fallacy, and the veterans were made to assume individual responsibility for the violence of the whole group. Most of them were not ready for this, and their guilt over wartime conduct, together with the survivor guilt caused by the death of their "buddies" in the field, brought about serious mental disturbances like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Emily Mann's view is made evident in her choice of the veteran's words when he tackles this issue in her play. Mark tries to rationalize his violence and sometimes looks for excuses, but on this point, he shows a resistant attitude toward the prevailing social code of accepting imposed duties at whatever price:

I could have just said:
I won't do it.
Go back to the rear, just not go out,
let them put me in jail. I could have said:
"I got a toothache," gotten out of it.
They couldn't have forced me.
But it was a duty thing.
It was like:
You're under orders.
You have your orders, you do your job,
you've got to do it ...
But I don't make excuses for it.
I may even be trying to do that now.
I could have got out.
Everybody could've.
If everybody had said no,
it couldn't have happened. (69)

Within the dramatic polyphony that defines *Still Life*, we can see here a new voice appearing: to Mark's, Nadine's and Cheryl's, we can add Emily Mann's. She wrote the play as a pacifist

response to her pro-war father, and that ideology is implicit in her selection of materials for the text. This making public of private beliefs obliges the audience to take a stance, activating their own ideologies to interpret the play, "because the audience is repeatedly and directly told that we are all implicated in the Vietnam War" (Rignalda 77).

Mann's feminism also becomes transparent in the fact that she presents domestic violence as a variant of the typical wartime forms of aggression, within a continuum marked by gender. My reading of the play concludes that she intended to implicate the audience in a dialogue about that continuum of violence that makes us all capable of aggression, but marks women as the most likely victims. In the atmosphere of a battle, every person or attitude perceived as alien ("other") is branded female. Following the traditional modes of masculinity at war, the enemy is feminized prior to complete dehumanization, a soldier who does not agree to kill blindly is labelled a coward and a homosexual ("sissy"), and the unknown territories are perceived as virgin lands to be raped and conquered. As it happens with men who batter, whose attitudes toward women are highly stereotyped, in Vietnam "men who carried out atrocities had highly prejudicial views about their victims" (Bourke 205).

When reading about the attitude of the most violent soldiers in Asia, one cannot help recalling the feminist literature about gender violence. Thus, for instance, Joanna Bourke explains how in Nam "such racism contained an element of fear ... These people [the Vietnamese] needed to be put in their place" (205). In a similar manner, gender-conscious analyses of domestic violence have proved that one of the reasons behind the atrocities committed on wives and girlfriends is the men's fear of female independence and power, which they perceive as a threat to their own masculinity. Furthermore, their favorite rationalization for their violent behaviour is that the women have gone astray and need to be corrected, which allows them, as men, to take the role of parent or trainer in what has been called the "teaching model" (Browne 60).

United States soldiers in Vietnam were fighting against a powerful but invisible enemy that could come out of nowhere, making them constantly aware of their vulnerability. Back home, those same men, a lot of them victims of PTSD, saw their women as "Others," unknown beings who shared their beds and their lives but could not share their pain (mostly because the men were, 21 la John Wayne, hopeless in trying to articulate it). Plus, contrary to their power of destruction, women had an overwhelming power to give life, to nurture, and to heal, as Mark affirms in Mann's play: "Cheryl is amazing. / Cheryl has always been like chief surgeon. / When the shrapnel came out of my head, / she would be the one to take it out./ ... Just like Danny. / She delivered Danny herself" (52).

The polarization of life into masculine (forcing, killing, invading) and feminine (caring, waiting, healing) drives provoked a clash in the homes of those veterans who could not overcome the trauma of being emasculated by giving back their guns, which provided them, as Mark acknowledges, with "the power of life and death" (59). This kind of power, as we have seen, is closely connected to sexuality. Mann's character compares killing to "the best dope you've ever had, / the best sex you've ever had" (59), which confirms the arguments of feminist analysts that describe the erotic act as "the occasion for the transgression of the boundaries between life and death" (Jeffords 110).

For Cheryl's husband, as for many shell-shocked veterans, the sexual act became a form of confirmation of their virile identity. Back to "the world," as they called America, with their lives disintegrated by trauma and pain and their emotions numbed, PTSD victims found in violent sex a way to re-member their bodies and their selves: "because the violating body remains intact while the violated experiences discontinuity, the act of transgression is simultaneously an act of confirmation that boundaries exist and can be maintained, if only through force and violence" (Jeffords 110). In *Still Life*, Mark violates Cheryl physically during his feats of anger and symbolically in his art. The veteran's artwork are "artifacts of war," strange jars and pictures that serve a fetishist purpose for him. In them, Cheryl perceives his brutal tendencies, which fuse blood and sex:

He had a naked picture of me in there,
cut out to the form,
tied to a stake with a string.
And there was all this broken glass,
and I know Mark.
Broken glass is a symbol of fire ...
there was a razor blade in there
and some old negatives of the blood stuff, I think.
I mean, that was so violent.
That jar to me, scared me.
That jar to me said:
Mark wants to kill me. (44, 43)

The ever-present fear that Mann presents as the defining feature of the character of Cheryl is another link between the atrocious violence wrought by the armed conflict and the gender violence in the home front. In the testimonies of battered women, fear is a constant and probably the most difficult factor to deal with in the problem of domestic violence. This terror, together with the psychological damage caused by habitual battering, brings about a kind of mental disorder that psychologist Lenore Walker has called the Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS). Since Walker devised the label, BWS has been classified by experts as a variant of PTSD and has been diagnosed in a significant majority of the victims of repeated domestic abuse. In this respect, as I have stated elsewhere, Mann goes with the times in drawing a parallel between Mark's PTSD and Cheryl's BWS, while looking for the reasons behind both and the way to overcome them without generating more violence. (4) For the playwright, it is more than clear that male soldiers were not the only victims of the Vietnam conflict. The loneliness, sorrow, and mental disturbance of many women who found themselves living with strangers after waiting for their husbands to return untouched was much more than collateral damage. Gender violence and its consequences in the 1960s and 70s America had a lot to do with the Vietnam War, an episode of patriotism, militarism, and a dangerous ritual of socialization into violent manhood. Men had to adjust to "the world" again, but so did women who became nothing but "soldiers' wives," invisible in history and for the American institutions. Marian Faye Novak laments this neglect: "I had forgotten who I was ... it takes restructuring of the psyche to really absorb a new identity" (82).

In spite of being a play about violence, Emily Mann's way of dramatizing atrocity in *Still Life* has little to do with gory films or detailed in-country narratives. Her characters have but their

words, and that is what the audience receives. Mark has his testimony of failed adjustment supported by some slides, in which we can get glimpses of blown-up corpses and lost "buddies," but what he says (or not) is much more important than what he actually shows. The images place a second layer of narrative on top of the drama (Meyers 113), but a secondary one in a theater of words like Mann's. The real story of *Still Life* is to be found between the lines, in the tension between the said and the unsaid, in the silences between the monologues. There is no dramatic dialogue *stricto sensu*, but "an investigation of consonant and dissonant relationships" (Rignalda 77). The audience is required to interpret the polyphony and find the points of encounter and departure between the characters. Mark's final confession that he killed a whole family in Vietnam cannot surprise us much, since we have heard testimonies of pain and atrocity for ninety minutes; it is just the final step in the veteran's fall. As I see it, the author's intention in bearing witness to the war is finally fulfilled, not in Mark's description of his brutal murder of five people--scarcely new in a war situation, after all--but in the last line of the play, the stage direction that reads: "The women's eyes meet for the first time as lights go down" (132).

Still Life is the dramatization of a series of ruptures, dismemberings, and re-memberings. Mark's identity has been fragmented by his experience, and his guilt about killing and surviving is somehow healed in the process of giving testimony. Cheryl's life has also been blown apart by the conflict, which destroyed her family, her faith, and her self-esteem. In the path towards inward peace she needs to verbalize the anger against her husband-batterer, which will allow her, at least in the process of communication with Mann's audience, to claim the status of victim of the Vietnam War, because "she is a casualty too. / [but she] doesn't get benefits for combat duties" (63).

The character of Nadine, Mark's mature lover, acts as a kind of mediator, to balance the two main points of view and to remind us that women are also capable of violence. In the final gesture of looking at each other, Cheryl acknowledges her rage before the more articulate Nadine; Nadine recognizes herself as a victim in front of her peer Cheryl. Both women have made their demand for a space on stage and in history; thanks to Emily Mann's craft and political commitment, they have proved that women should also have their say about the most painful war so far for the United States. After all, they have bled and cried in their own front, too, just as the "John Waynes"/veterans have done in the movies and in real life. As Marian Faye Novak reminds us from her own experience, "for the wives, too, the war had its legacy" (266). Emily Mann passed this legacy on to the coming generations, with the hope that they, too, will "come to understand the violence in ... all of us" (126) and will be able to protect themselves from the myths, the fallacies, and the socializing pressures in order to "come out on the other side" (126). Mann hopes this will be the same side for women and men, so that *Still Life* can stop being a fragment of painful reality on stage and become simply an historical drama.

NOTES

(1.) I wrote about the origins, history and current trends of Documentary Theater in the U.S. in *ENTEMU XIV* (2002): 13-25.

(2.) Although Flynn actually trained for the Korean War, his experience is applicable to the Vietnam context, where Wayne was also placed in some of his films.

(3.) During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first half of the 1990s, for instance, more than 20,000 women were raped as part of the genocidal policies of the Serbian army. In Iraq, reports of women (Iraqi civilians as well as female soldiers) being raped by the American and Allied armies are beginning to appear as this article is revised (see, among other sources, the following websites: <<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines04/012508.htm>>, <<http://www.vialls.com/myahudi/rape.html>>, <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140012005?open&ofENG-IRQ>>.

(4.) A discussion about the gender variable in the psychological consequences of Vietnam can be found in my article "Emily Mann's Testimonies of Collateral Damage: Gender and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Still Life" (in press).

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In Conversation

Emily Mann

Continuing a practice inaugurated a year ago with our publication of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's 1998 ATHE keynote address, *Theatre Topics* is pleased to open this issue with a conversation with playwright and director Emily Mann, the keynote speaker at ATHE's 1999 conference in Toronto. From *Still Life* (1980), the story of three individuals coping with the aftermath of the Vietnam War, to *Greensboro* (1996), an account of the Ku Klux Klan's assault on an anti-Klan rally in 1979 that left five people dead, Mann has won international acclaim for forging a compelling approach to documentary political theatre. This "theatre of testimony" weaves oral history and verbatim interview into often chilling dramatizations of private stories and public events, particularly those dealing with both victims and survivors of violence and oppression. Her canon also includes such celebrated works as *Annulla* (1985), the recollection of a Holocaust survivor; *Execution of Justice* (1986), a courtroom drama of the trial of Dan White, the man who killed San Francisco's openly gay city supervisor Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone; and *Having Our Say* (1994), an oral history that documents the struggles and achievements of two centenarian African American sisters.

This conversation—an open conference session in which Mann informally answered questions about her work—is presented here substantially as it took place on 29 July 1999, the day following her keynote speech. The editor would like to thank Jeffery Elwell, who moderated the forum, and Julie Jordan, who prepared and edited the transcript.¹

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've been thinking about this idea of a theatre of testimony, and how Anna Deavere Smith and others of our generation have pioneered taking people's words and constructing them as stage pieces. Is there anything generational in the urge to do this? I've been struck by the ideas of "testimony" and "witness" as huge phenomena in theatre practice—surviving is finding the safe places where you can testify and witness, have your experience affirmed and confirmed. I've been thinking about how the power to control your story and voice is the act of empowerment. And I'm curious about your own personal legacy—having your own parents involved in testimony. Do you have thoughts about why this practice is so appealing at this particular time?

2 *Emily Mann*

EMILY MANN: You're bringing up a lot of points: generational, experiential, and the memory of who one is and where one comes from, as well as the question of, "Why at this moment?" I don't know if I can answer all of those questions. I can just give you a story. In some ways, I was influenced deeply by two men simultaneously in my life who were spiritual fathers to me. One was my real father, Arthur Mann. The other was Professor John Hope Franklin, my father's best friend when I was growing up. Professor Franklin is eighty-four years old now and doing very well. He was and is responsible for the study of the black experience in America. I was blessed to be part of his changes from the time I was a little girl. I've known him since I was eight years old.

Franklin was always with my father in terms of an historical understanding of this country. And they both backed the idea of learning about history through authentic experience. Through oral history. Talk to the people who lived it. If they're alive now—catch them. So, when the tape recorder became available more and more to people, my father was dealing with the American Jewish experience and John Hope with the African American experience. Since we had weekly dinner together as two families, whatever these men learned from their students, or whatever their students were doing, whatever things were being collected, seemed to come to dinner with them. I learned a lot about history by hearing about what happened to real people. And this just became part of my life.

When I started directing plays, people kept saying, "Why don't you direct more new plays?" I found that plays were less interesting than the stories I heard at dinner, than the people I met at the Franklins's. Or at my house. Or on the train going wherever I was: America, Europe, Africa. It became a natural step for me. If I was going to tell stories, they should be as stimulating and exciting as the stories I had heard.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How has this sensibility affected your role as artistic director of the McCarter Theatre?

MANN: How do I choose a season? I don't think there's an easy answer to that one either. I've been told that, if you look at my seasons, many of them are the stories of women. Often the plays are by or about women. I'm not being coy when I say I didn't notice that pattern until it had established itself as a pattern. It wasn't an agenda where I thought, "This is what I am going to do." However, I do think the act of choosing plays and a season is obviously a subjective thing. For me, it's always a gut thing about what I need to hear about. And it's also artist-driven. Sometimes artists come to me and say, "Right now I need to look hard at *Electra*. I need to reinvestigate that play for the following reasons. Can I come to your house?" If it's an artist that I care about, then I can make a home.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've appreciated your work at the McCarter very much. But I did want to ask you about the McCarter and Princeton. One thing I haven't seen there are Princeton undergraduates. What are your thoughts about the younger generation and their connection to your theatre?

MANN: When I first went to the McCarter, I immediately knew the work I wanted to do would not interest that audience. I mean, these folks were falling asleep! You had an almost entirely white, older crowd. You had the feeling the wives had dragged their husbands there off the train—they had made a lot of money in the city and didn't want to be there, but their wives were saying, "This is culture." It was very hard to watch. So I did things, ignorant of how radical they were. I just put on the work that I wanted to do. For example, Ntozake Shange and I got together to put on *Betsey Brown* on the mainstage, which was something we had been working on for seven years. It was time to do it already! I didn't know it was the first time the work of an African American artist had ever been staged in the history of the McCarter, which was built in 1938, I think. It brought in a different audience.

I wanted to get younger people in. I wanted to have the audience reflect what America was, racially, ethnically, economically, in terms of age, in terms of interest. So we worked hard in different areas of the community. One of the things that meant was getting the undergraduates in. I mean, here we were at the Princeton campus and there were no students here! What were we doing wrong?

Now, the numbers aren't as high as I would like, but 500 subscribers are actually undergraduates, which makes me very happy. Depending on the event, we'll get a lot of younger people. We work so strongly and dedicatedly with the program of theatre and dance that we get those students now. Or through literature. If we're doing Marivaux, the French professor will make it an assignment. I'm not above this! If it becomes a requirement to come, they'll at least get in the door, and then we find they do come back. We're also a presenting house, so when we have rock groups or Laurie Anderson come, we'll get a young crowd. But we try to build on that and get them to come to some plays.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have two questions about what you call "theatre of testimony." One is about technique. How free do you feel working to reconfigure or shape or even invent material? The second is about theme. Have you ever come across a subject or event that you thought was going to work as theatre of testimony and then, as it turned out, didn't?

MANN: I'll talk about technique first. I am a purist. I feel it's my job to conduct an interview well enough that, through editing and boiling down, I will get all the poetry of that person's speech. I will get what they want to say. I'm very careful about not changing what they want to say. That is, I don't bend a person's testimony to my personal needs. I want people to be able to speak in their own voice. I actually love how real people talk, especially about what is essentially their experience and their story. Sometimes that means they'll meander or wander. When David Duke in *Greensboro* has a hard time talking about his racism, I put in those "uh's" for a reason. A good actor knows what to do with them. But I do not distort. If I ever have, I didn't mean to, and it was a mistake. That's part of the technique, and you learn it as you do it over the years. A good interview consists of setting up the situation and the environment for someone to finally let go and reveal to you

who they really are and what they really need to say and what their story really is. That means you have to learn how to shut up. The impulse, as people reveal more and more, is to have that conversation, but the key is to be quiet and be able to deeply listen.

The other difficult technique is taking that material and making a play out of it. To me, it's the difference between painting and sculpting. When you're painting, you're working with a blank canvas. When you're sculpting, you're trying to find a form within the rock by chiseling away. Find the beauty there. Or, if you will, when you're writing fiction, you want to see the pages getting higher and higher in a stack on your desk. When you're doing documentary work, you want the stack to get smaller and smaller.

As for subjects that can't be made into a play, I've abandoned projects because I didn't think I could make a play out of them. I don't think that means that a play can't be made, but simply that I didn't know how to do it. Or wasn't possessed by it. I find that, the more I'm at dinner with friends talking about how much I don't want to do something, over a period of time, the more it means that a project won't let me go. And I'm going to end up doing it. But I resist this as long as I can. It means years of your life. And it usually costs a lot. When I sat in that room with that Klansman [while doing *Greensboro*], I had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I was not walking well, but I had been breathing all morning to be able to walk in the room and sit there. And I did. This was on the fifteenth anniversary of the massacre that this man instigated and led and then never served a day of jail time for. In a way, it was like sitting in a room with the devil. I was confronting evil. Yet, in order to get him to speak to me, I had to charm him. There we were. He was filling out the release form, and he said, "Oh. November 3." And he started to laugh, which I put in the play because it was so astonishing. And he says, "Yeah, I should remember this day." I said, "I bet you do." And he said, "Oh yeah, I remember the night before. Those guys didn't know the angel of death was waiting for them." That's how it started, and it went from there.

I didn't walk out of there. That's an obvious example of, emotionally and physically, how much it can cost.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Should universities, meaning professional training programs, be involved in trying to serve the profession, or should we also be trying to challenge it? Here's the context for my question. Our MFA class looks like a lot of MFA classes. A few more men than women, because there are more roles for men, or so the story goes. And unless somebody is a character actor, they're good-looking.

MANN: I think the whole profession needs to be challenged. I'm at a crossroads right now. I'm going on a sabbatical July 1, 2000, and part of this sabbatical is to start to think about your question. A lot of things have come up while I've been here at ATHE. I find this to be an extraordinary conference, by the way, and one I wish the profession would have. I don't mean to put down my wonderful colleagues in the profession or in TCG, without whom we couldn't function. But their

conference was doom, gloom, the death of the theatre. Everyone had opinions about why we can't do our work. It wasn't about the work, and it wasn't about inspiring us to change or do our work.

I'm sad to hear you say this, because I didn't know that was how acting programs are set up. I'm also not sure that is even a correct assessment of who gets work once people are out. I'm in the midst of trying to cast Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* with Sam. We can't find a Martin. Now, Martin is not supposed to be gorgeous. Sam didn't write May to be gorgeous. Or the kind of gorgeous coming out of Juilliard, the leading-lady-ingenu type. Modern writers aren't writing that way. If you're talking about questions of racial and ethnic diversity, there's more and more of it—not enough, but more and more. And there is a mandate in the profession to do what's called—and I don't like this term, actually—nontraditional casting. I say you cast the best person for the role, period. That is how our theatre has operated.

So I guess I can answer the question with a request: I would like to see more dialogue between the profession and the academy. I would like to see a lot more talent going back and forth, a lot more investment in interaction. Only then do I think we're going to see a healthier professional theatre, and also, possibly, a healthier academy.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was an artistic director of a small professional theatre for three years and felt the weight of never having enough money. Aiming high with the arts, but struggling with compromise. We're protected in the academy. My question, maybe for this entire room, is, what about the profession's automatic resistance to hearing from us in the academy? The feeling of, "You don't understand box office bottom line and therefore you can't really be helpful"?

MANN: It's a very good point. I would like to reframe it. There's probably a reflex knee-jerk reaction because, if you don't have to deal with the money issue, you don't "get it." I'd like to say that because you aren't dealing with the money issue, you have the time to think, the time to get in a room and, without pressure for box office or critics, engage in the work. In an ideal situation, I would hope that is what's going on where you are. We have the money for four weeks, whether it's *Fool for Love* or *King Lear* or a new work just being discovered. Does that make sense? Obviously not. I would think you don't have that constraint. Am I right? I'm asking because one of the things I'm planning on doing is going into university and academic situations.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sometimes yes and sometimes no. I moved from the small professional theatre world to the academic world with high hopes—

MANN: High hopes and idealism like mine, right? And these hopes were dashed?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I just met with my dean. We're a small program, and part of our mission is not to do musical theatre. He said, "You know what you need to do? You need to do a musical. You need to get the box office in there. You need to

get the community excited about the work. And by the way, you need to do it with half the budget you did last year.”

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Our box office funds are assistantships. So our box office funds are how we get graduate students.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I would say, except for a few lucky ones, most academic theatres rely on box office for at least a third of their budget.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sometimes we’re not creative enough with what we do have. We all have theatres that market to audience, that rely on box office monies and ticket sales, but we also have our classrooms. I’ve been thinking, “Why am I not workshopping more just because I’m in academia?” You know, sometimes I feel, “I have stuff! I have stuff!” I’m always focused on getting directing work outside of academia, but we could be bringing in more playwrights to work with us. You have to be creative and switch around your thinking. Unfortunately, a lot of our college and university theatres are basing themselves on regional theatres.

MANN: That’s a really bad idea. [Laughter] I’m serious. Because there are very few regional theatres running in a way that’s based on the art. I do think that ours is artist-driven. We’re always looking for ways to serve, create, nurture, find ways to make new work, and reinvestigate classical work. Each project is set up differently, as much as we can within certain structures having to do with money, space, time. But we try to bend the rules as much as we possibly can. We have only one huge theatre, which once a year we transform by putting all the seats onto the mainstage and doing some work there. I have made the rehearsal room a laboratory, so that every time there is not a rehearsal in it, somebody is working out. Sometimes we invite people to see the work, sometimes we don’t. But it’s always filled with artists working.

I do believe one of the ways I keep sane artistically is to know that, when artists are coming to us, we’re trying to find ways to serve a vision. But I think there’s an exciting challenge coming from universities, schools, higher education, this conference, if you will—these places where people are obviously thinking deeply about the work we’re doing. It can challenge us, make us better at what we do, and also give us space to do different work with different students, who will come back out and work with the profession. There’s a lot more that should be happening.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question has to do with how theatre relates to society. For instance, when you were working on *Execution of Justice*, did you ever find yourself on the leading edge of the news? Did you ever find yourself having to incorporate on the stage things that were happening on the streets? And, in that sense, how do you see theatre as relevant in the world that we live in today?

MANN: I’ve dedicated my life to the belief that theatre is not only affected by the society we are in, but that theatre affects the society that we are in. I don’t

know how to talk about it because it is something so huge and so deep, and I don't want to be amusing or glib or flip about the answer. I'll give you some stories. One night we did *Annulla* with Linda Hunt at The New Theatre of Brooklyn. It was Kristallnacht, 1988, and the entire audience was filled with survivors. No one had told Linda this was going to be the case. She had spent a wonderful two weeks with humor and laughter and applause, and suddenly it was a completely different event. When she asked the question at the end of the play about being plagued by recurring dreams, "Have you had this experience also?" the entire audience groaned. [Laughter] And one old man started to talk about how he wasn't with his wife when she died at Auschwitz. That was his recurring thought. At the end, the entire audience was sobbing and quiet and just sat there. Curtain call: no applause. Linda began to get exhausted and enraged all at once, and then, all of a sudden, the whole audience stood and applauded her. It is something that theatre of testimony can do. It is something they felt—it was so real that they were finally with someone on this night who understood.

A similar thing happened at *Still Life*. I don't know whether this is a good thing or not. One night there was a group of Vietnam veterans with their wives next to them. It was like a combination of being at a trial but also in a psychiatric ward. Again, no one had told the actors. They were used to doing a play with certain responses. Laughs here, groans there, gasps there. All of a sudden the audience was talking back. One guy yelled at the character named Mark, "What unit were you in?" [Laughter] And John Spencer, who's a very good actor and does his homework, realized he didn't know how to answer. Another woman kept saying to Mary McDonnell, who was playing the wife, "Leave him! Leave him!" During the spaghetti speech, this woman was sobbing hysterically in the front. Mary thought, "Oh my God, I can't get through this!" And they all hated Timothy Near because she was playing Nadine—she was the mistress and she got all the good stuff from him. The wives were enraged. It was one of those nights. At the end, again, there wasn't a real curtain call. Someone hadn't told the people they were watching a play, and they had expected they could talk to the characters. At the end, though, a facilitator, who had been asked to come by the VFW, got up to lead a discussion. Then, of course, all of this stuff just came out. Which, of course, the actors were completely unprepared to handle. Why should they? They're not professionals in that field. But it ended up being a very good thing. People again felt cared about and understood.

I could go on and on about these kinds of experiences. It happened all the time. With *Having Our Say*, when we took it to the Market Theatre in South Africa in 1997, I was there with Mrs. Tambo and Mrs. Mbeki and a lot of the leadership of the ANC who had embraced me when I had been there ten years earlier. It was a completely different experience from the American experience. A lot less laughter, and much more intense listening. When questions were asked of the audience, there would be answers from a South African viewpoint that whipped the actors around so they had to deal with them in a different way from the American responses, which were more call and response, which is how the play is built. Mrs. Mbeki came up to me afterwards and said, "What I hope for is our young people will listen to

their elders and get their stories out of them. What I learned tonight is that your experience is very interesting. It's very different from ours and, quite frankly, I don't think the characters had big problems. We've got to tell our stories now." I said, "Well, I hope you do. Because theatre is handmade. And documentary theatre is for everybody. You just have to talk to people and listen. Get the word out."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was fortunate enough to be involved in a production of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona's *The Island*, and we were doing it in front of an audience from graduate school that contained all of our peers and a group of people from the South African Studies Institute. One of the people in the audience was a man who helped us with the accents—a black South African whose brother was on Robben Island as we were doing the play. I found myself for the first time confronting this dilemma. Do I impress this audience? Or do I just tell them the truth? The director kept telling us all the way through the rehearsal process, "You can't play games with this." It wasn't until I was out there that I knew what he meant. What does doing documentary theatre change for your actors in terms of the way they work?

MANN: The thing I love about documentary theatre is that you cannot lie. It's an exercise in truth telling. For actor, director, playwright. An audience will always tell you when you are. It's like great jazz. It's not taking all the great classics and playing them just the way you heard them on the record. No, it's creating them at the moment.

There are many, many truths, and actors can and should change every night, depending on what's happening with the audience. That's what keeps you honest. You must tell the truth. The whole culture is getting in that tricky situation of, "Do I show off, or not?" You know, we've got to hold firm at the last outposts. [Applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering, amidst these compelling and moving stories of audiences who have had similar experiences to the ones presented on the stage, what happens when the audience is businessmen and their wives, who were dragged there from the city for "culture"? And how has the response of critics to your work shaped your writing?

MANN: Let's take the first question first. I like always to have a mixed crowd because I find you learn so much sitting and rubbing shoulders with people who have had a certain experience. Athol Fugard talked about this in the introduction to my book of plays, and I can tell you a couple of things. Let's just talk about the McCarter for a second and *Having Our Say*. *Having Our Say* was built for multiracial audience. It's built for people to come together. It's a healing piece about how we're all Americans, or we're all human beings, and let's look at this particular experience and connect. There's a lot of humor in this piece. There's a lot of laughter, a lot of talking. One night, I was in the back of the house, watching this white couple, with black people on either side of them. The white couple was very quiet. I'm thinking, "Oh, this is very interesting. They're having a terrible time." She had her tight-

done hair, her little suit—and they hadn't moved. Really and truly, their bodies hadn't moved! And the people all around them are laughing and going on, there's crying, there's all kinds of emotional work from the audience. At the end, this white woman turned around to me and said, "Thank you for this experience. I've never known a black person who I felt was my family, and this was it. They're my aunts. And I've learned so much today about what their story is. Thank you, and bless you."

Another interesting response happened at *Still Life* a lot, when people were sitting next to vets. There was humor they didn't understand. They'd go, "That's such a terrible story. They're laughing?" That's another part of the experience of my plays: learning about human beings you don't know about but might connect with on a human level, and it changes you. I want to see people sitting with each other.

I built two intermissions into *Having Our Say* so people could talk to each other. And people talked. And talked. Everywhere we went all over this country, 183 cities, people talked to each other, when I had a feeling that they hadn't before. At *Greensboro*, people didn't talk as much, although I did get the best comment ever. My friend has a husband, who I actually like very much. She's an old lefty, and he's so far right you don't know where he is. They agree not to talk politics—it's a very interesting marriage. He said to me, "For the first time in my life, I don't know if I can vote Republican because, if David Duke is in my party and Patrick Buchanan is in my party, I don't know that I can support my party." I like that sometimes you can actually hit nerves. I've always tried to respect the experience that the audience comes in with. And then see if I can expand that experience in a positive way. Challenge it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I love hearing examples of this kind of emotional engagement, but it reminds me that it's very rare in theatre. I keep thinking that it should be business as usual, instead of this ideal of professional work being disengaged. I'm wondering if there's a group, for instance, in Princeton—students, members of the community—who get together to write. To create their own work. To take advantage of your presence.

MANN: That's a great idea. I don't think there's such a group. If there is, I don't know about it. You are touching on things that Athol spoke to me about—that *he* did. That *I* might do on my sabbatical. I had thought about going into the high school. But it's interesting that you talk about going into Princeton.

At the end of apartheid, Athol didn't know if he would ever be able to write again. He didn't know if he would have anything to say. So he got together with a group of young people who he thought could lead him, the old blind man, into the future of his country. It was a multiracial group of young people. It ended up being all girls. He thought they were most articulate, very interesting, very funny. And he learned from their writings and expressions and testimony. He made a play for them. Then, he wrote *Valley Song*.

There's a lot going on in the world right now that I simply don't understand. And that my son, who is going to be sixteen, doesn't want to explain to me. [Laughter] So I was thinking of going into the high schools, and talking to these kids, and helping them make plays about themselves.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Could I ask you about your responsibility regarding feedback from the subjects in your dramas? When you were talking about *Still Life* at the keynote last night and you brought up the Nadine character, I was thinking, "Okay, what happens when they all come see the play?" There must be some tricky moments about being entrusted with all this information.

MANN: When the Delany sisters came to *Having Our Say*, I was worried they wouldn't like it. But Bessie went up to the actress playing her and said, "I couldn't have done it better myself." For *Still Life*, Cheryl wouldn't come. Nadine came and didn't think it was romantic enough, so she was not totally thrilled. When Mark came, he admired it, and then wasn't seen for a couple of weeks. He got very upset. It's hard. You know, they say the subject never loves the portrait. And you can't do it so that they will love it. With *Greensboro*, I felt such a sense of responsibility to the survivors. What I worked on was to be truthful. I found they ended up respecting and loving that it was truthful.

I'm going down to Greensboro on November 3, which is the twentieth anniversary of the events. UNC [Greensboro] is doing it, with North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, working with the survivors of the massacre. And Eddie Dawson will be there, as well as other Klan members who were part of it. I mean, they live right up the road! We also now know that two of them are responsible for—although they haven't been able to prosecute properly—two of the church bombings. You know, when I first was writing *Greensboro* for NBC, they tried to make it a love story or a buddy picture. [Laughter] Of course they did! And that's when the survivors started to tell me, "Uh-oh. We thought it would be different with you." So I pulled it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did you feel satisfied with the screen treatment of the Delany sisters?

MANN: Well, I wrote the screenplay and I was there all the time. It was a war to get it on. They wanted to turn them into the "Golden Girls." They wanted to take all the content out, all the character out, anything that was difficult. We fought for every word. And because we got in what we did, no fluff and garbage, I am pleased. I think Ruby Dee showed she's one of the best actresses in America, and she thinks it's her best work. That makes me very happy.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was wondering if you might talk about your approach to directing this kind of material versus more established or classical work. Has documentary theatre changed your approach to directing? And how does this relate to the often antagonistic relationship between author and director?

MANN: No one is asking small questions here—which reminds me, did you see how I managed to skirt the question about the critics? [Laughter] I don't know if after all of these years I can codify my approach to directing. I don't actually have a way of articulating the methodology. And so listening to Anne Bogart earlier today was very helpful. Because it helped me realize what I do. The problem is, when you don't have an ideology, when you hit a wall, it's hard to find the door. When you dry up, it's hard to get yourself juiced up again.

I guess how I start is very much the way I was talking about earlier. You have to find out what interests you. That's not easy. Now, when I've written it, I usually know already. Because, as I told you, I've usually been resisting, resisting, resisting, and I find out I have to do it, so obviously I know what has been grabbing at my kishkes, right? So, when I'm picking up someone else's play, I also need to be obsessed by it to do it well. I have to start with that.

The other thing Anne said this morning, is that I realized that all of my best work is often done for one person. *Still Life* was written to convince my father of certain things. *Annulla* was written to show my mother how much I loved her and the family's sacrifice. I'm not going to reveal too much of the others. Often they're secrets. When I come in with a deep knowledge of that secret, that I may or may not reveal privately to an actor, designer, or composer, but find a way to make it vivid for them through my self-knowledge of the work, then every single element stems from that. You know how to go into the room every day. You know how to make the choices you need to make when you're onstage with lights, final visuals, final questions, from beginning to end. It begins to make a lot of sense. It means you are moving yourself.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'd like to follow up on that. You're speaking about how you direct the whole piece, but when it comes to working with individual actors, is there a big difference between the style required for something like *The House of Bernarda Alba* and for one of your plays?

MANN: Speaking on an idealistic level, to me, there's no difference between the kind of acting required of *Still Life* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Did anyone see my production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*? You did? And you think there's a difference? I hope there isn't. Because the naked truth about what was happening to those women on that stage is, I hope, as transparently truthful and naked as what happened with *Still Life*. That's what I would say I'm always doing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm intrigued by how you approached Lorca's work, yourself a playwright, in this case choosing to adapt and direct a very canonical play.

MANN: I find that when I've adapted a work, I have such an intense relationship with the writer and the word that I feel almost as if I've written it myself. I mean, there's a lot of humility here—I am *not* Federico García Lorca, but I feel like I know why he chose each word by the time I'm finished doing the

adaptation. I so know the play that when I go in to direct it I'm light-years ahead of where I would be if I were just approaching it usually.

In this case, I worked with a woman who was completely bilingual. I don't know Spanish, so I was very much in her hands. I looked at lots of other texts, at how others had translated it, and she would say, "Well, actually . . ." I think it's his most spare, poetical piece. I actually counted syllables in a line because rhythmically I think he was doing something absolutely new. He thought he had pared away all the poetry—of course he hadn't!—and made it muscular lines. It was like a piece of music to him. It's a vicious play, and it's viciously funny. It's what happens when women are all together. It's about tyranny and power. It's about sexual obsession on a level that I cannot believe he understood. Every single role is perfect.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's terribly impressive that you play all these different roles. You manage a large company, you direct, and you also have this large body of work as a playwright. How do you handle it in terms of your time? What do you gain from it and what are the problems of it?

MANN: [Laughs] I laugh only because I'm so tired.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And you have a sixteen year old!

MANN: I have a sixteen-year-old boy. I was a single mother for a long time, and now I have a lovely person in my life who is helping me with him. I'm asked that question a lot, and I guess for a long time it was just very natural. When I was a freelance artist, I found that I was often having to produce my own work at other people's theatres because things were so badly run. I never thought I could write, direct, and manage a theatre, so I was always turning down these artistic directorships. Finally, I realized, "I'm a single mother, I have a little boy, and I need to be in one place. He's going to go into first grade, and I have to be somewhere." That's why I chose to be an artistic director. Then McCarter came up, and family friends were at Princeton, and the rest is history.

I guess, *how* I did it was this incredible act of will. I wanted to have a place that, number one, was the kind of theatre I would have wanted to visit when I was a freelance artist. I wanted it to serve my needs as a playwright, as a director, as a mother. I've often come with a child. The person who taught me that was Mark Lamos. He taught me that I could direct a play and have a baby. The first time I went to his theatre, he had a person there, saying, "Where do you want the crib? Where do you want your baby-sitter? How do you want this set up?" He was just magnificent. And paid the baby-sitter's way to be there! I wanted to be able to do that for other parents—men and women. I haven't had a guy come with a child yet, but we're open and ready to handle it.

I also wanted a place where designers felt they were truly served, where we have the greatest shops anywhere. Our painters and our artisans and our carpenters—everyone in our technical department does superb work, all the way down the line:

our costume shop, our prop shop. I wanted to make sure that when the lighting designers came, it was a joy to work in our theatre. That they could build their vision.

When I got there, it took about a year and a half. It got a little bit brutal at times. I had to clean house. But once it was set up, people were proud of the work they were doing. So I didn't have to work hard at that. I had to work hard at setting it up so it would happen. And we were constantly self-critical. After each artist, we would talk to them to make sure. That freed me up, actually, because I used to work so very hard at other theatres where the needs of the artist were not taken care of. I had more time now for other things as a creative person.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you have a period of the year when you're off writing something?

MANN: The other key is schedule. I was able to make plays by saying, "When I'm at home, you can't call." I have dinner with my child every night, and I'm up in the morning when he leaves. I direct two shows a year. Some of them I write. When I'm in rehearsal, that's what I'm doing. Between the shows I'm producing, there are some down times, where I can be thinking about a project, taking notes on a project.

I usually write when it hits me. I'm not able to do three hours in the morning or just write in the summer. I never know when it's going to hit me. For example, I wrote *Meshuga* after I opened Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*. There was another show going on, it was going very well, they didn't really need me. I sat home one morning, started to write, and couldn't stop. So I called the theatre—it's an amazing staff now. I said, "I'm writing something, I can't come in. Can you handle this and only call me in emergencies?" They grumbled and groaned and said, "Sure." So I stayed home and worked. The phone would ring and I'd have to go in, but in five weeks, I had a draft.

Basically, I'm writing adaptations now instead of original work because I don't have the time either to research the material or write that all-important first draft. I have to have nothing else. When I'm running a theatre, I can't have "nothing else." Adaptation is a structure.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: When you have a successful stage play, is it difficult to adapt it for television?

MANN: Oh boy, it's very difficult. The usual approach in Hollywood for a TV movie or a feature film is, "You have to open it up." Those are the words they use. For *Having Our Say*, I had wanted a kind of independent approach with direct address to the camera, and obviously they are not going to allow it. I had to add some story line. So I decided to have Amy Hill Hearsh be a character, and watch her development. This was hard because I wanted her there as a way to hear their story, but I didn't want her to overshadow the sisters. I didn't want it to become about Amy's being educated. That was the trap of almost all black work in Hollywood,

and I just did not want to go there. And [co-executive producer] Camille Cosby and I were of one mind about that. At first, I didn't even want it to be Amy. I actually wanted it to be their great-great-great-great nephew or something. But nobody liked that idea. So, how to balance Amy's arrival into their lives with what they had a need to say and then come out the other side with a celebration of what they had given rather than how she had changed? That was the trick.

I also decided some stories they told were so fantastic we just had to see them. So we did flashback. We see the little girls to the mature women on the screen. The images they portray I don't think have ever been seen on film or television in terms of the American black experience, or at least that's what Camille tells me. Those images from St. Augustine's School in Raleigh, North Carolina. Or that long crane shot where they're all beautifully dressed, going to church. Boy, did we fight for that. We basically wanted to break the clichés and use the medium to serve the play.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How many people do you have on staff at McCarter, and how many of them are actors?

MANN: Forty people are on staff. And none of them are actors. We do not have a company. I made a decision not to have a company, which is interesting given Anne's discussion this morning. I may change my mind, but in the last ten years I have not wanted a company for two reasons. One—economically, I didn't think I could have an interesting enough company and pay them a living wage, at the skill level I needed. We would need very young to very old actors because that's the kind of work we do. Two—I wanted to do work that was multiracial, particularly black. If I couldn't give a whole year of employment to that group, if there were certain plays that were about the black experience and the characters were all black, then the nonblack actors would not have work. If we were doing a musical, then the actors who couldn't sing wouldn't have work. Each production usually requires particular kinds of actors and work, and I wanted the best people for each one. The work is so diverse. Now, that doesn't mean the people I work with don't end up doing a lot of overlapping. They often repeat, or appear in two or three shows in a season, or three shows over three years.

The question then is, how do you keep a company? One way is how Anne does it—with the kind of diverse work I'm talking about, have a diverse group of multitalented people. But they probably have to be very young. Because, financially, we cannot support people who have family obligations, paying school fees, wanting to own a home. I can't pay people on the level of a college teacher. We just don't have those resources. Or maybe I need to think about company in a different way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The reason I ask is, when I go to see regional theatre, I end up sometimes at intermission reading the staff list, and I fairly consistently notice a disconnect: the theatre employs forty or fifty people, and none of them are actors.

MANN: I understand what you're saying on a level of how life should be, but in reality, this is one of the biggest challenges that the professional actor has to deal with. It's not an easy decision one way or the other. Oskar Eustis has a permanent company in Providence, Rhode Island at Trinity Rep, and it's one of the better companies in the country. They can't make a living, the company members. And the people who are older get . . . well, I should let Oskar speak for himself. I hope he'll come to your conference and talk to you about this. It's one of his biggest heartaches. He wants to have a company, yet he can't afford it, and they can't afford him. So, what do we do about that?

If you're doing as much new work as I am, is it fair to say to the playwright, "You have to use this company"? When, in fact, none of the people are quite right for what the playwright has envisioned? There are pros and cons to all of it. There are people in this world who have had companies and done astonishing work, and it makes me sad I don't have that. On the other hand, if a playwright comes in who needs to do that work, we will scour the country to get the right actor for that writer.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question is of a more personal nature. I was wondering how your illness, and your personal relationship between life and death, has changed the way you deal with being a theatre artist?

MANN: At the risk of sounding Pollyannaish, my illness is one of the best things that ever happened to me. The woman I deal with is a healer—I do all alternative work. I went to her in a wheelchair, and she looked at me and said, "You will walk out of here. And I want you to know that people who see illness as an opportunity rather than a catastrophe, in my experience, can get well." And I really wanted to punch her. [Laughter] This was not an "opportunity" that I very much wanted to have. Now, however, that statement makes utter sense to me. After five years of daily work, of changing my priorities, of making clear to myself what was essential and what was not, and getting rid of everything that was not, I not only began to get well, but my work soared.

I think the reason I need the break is complex but related to the question of illness. My guess is that I will find a new kind of remission if I change my life. I'm also feeling as though I've lost a lot of people I love, and they've passed, and I've hit the twenty-five-year mark since I graduated from college, and my sister turned fifty, my mother is seventy-eight, and I'm looking at all sorts of markers. I've been able to sit down with Sam Shepard for the first time. He's gone through this huge life change, and he said to me, "You're facing a big life change, aren't you?" And I said, "Yeah." I just feel I need a change of pace to find out what those changes are, and I'm excited about finding new questions even more than new answers.

One of the things that Anne and I were talking about last night was how to tell a story. I think I don't know how to tell a story right now. I think I thought I knew, or had some ideas twenty years ago. I think right now I want to examine that question in light of illness as an opportunity.

Obie-award winning playwright *Emily Mann* currently serves as Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. Her *Testimonies: Four Plays* was published in 1997 by Theatre Communications Group.

Notes

1. In the interest of brevity, portions of the forum have been cut or condensed. The transcript has also undergone a variety of minor editorial changes.