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Survey of World Theatre Text

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If Walls Could Talk: *Hir*, Pages 68-70

Word Count: 1512

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “A house is made of bricks and beams. A home is made of hopes and dreams.” But in a house where even the construction was not built to last, how can a family survive and make it a home? *Hir*, by Taylor Mac, is a play in which the physical world of the play reflects and has a large impact on the plot and characters in it. The four people in the space are constantly testing personal and spatial boundaries in an attempt to take control over the house. The physical and verbal actions on pages 68 through 70 highlight emotional struggles seen throughout the play and seem to test the crumbling foundations on which this family and house were built.

In Mac’s description of the setting prior to starting the play, Judy writes some key descriptors of the space: “It is an absolute disaster in terms of its disorder . . . The house was built by a first-time builder, in the early 70s, not with the intent to last as long as it has. It is a starter home that never really got started and can’t seem to end” (Mac ii). All the action of the play takes place within one single room which lacks enough space to walk in due to all the filth Paige has let accumulate. The characters, excluding Max, try to use their relationship to space to exert dominance over the way life in the household is led. Arnold bought a house of cheap plywood so

that he could control the home. Paige uses filth and mess to exert her power over the house. Isaac attempts to manage the situation by creating order of the disorder to which he comes back. They all manipulate their environment in order to establish who is in charge, something vividly evident in the stage directions.

Looking at the stage directions specifically on pages 68 through 70, it feels like an explosion of accrued physical conflict. The scene's most climactic moment is told through action rather than words. This is evident in the stage directions on the bottom of page 69 all the way through the top of 70 with the use of phrases like "Arnold flicks Paige," "Arnold...throws [shake] on Paige," "Paige grabs Arnold and starts dragging him outside," "Isaac grabs part of Arnold to pull him the other way," "Isaac pushes [Paige] off..." There is so much push and pull between the characters that has been built up throughout the entire play. The actions' effect on the characters is similar to how when a rubber band is stretched in many directions, it becomes too weak to hold. Arnold, in whatever limited way he can, tries to agitate Paige as a form of retaliation for what she has done and said to him. For Paige, this gets on her nerves and she resorts to dragging him outside to humiliate him in front of all the neighbors. There is something about the word choice of "drag" that evokes an unnecessary elongation and continuance of the conflict. This sense of tug-of-war resembles each character pushing each other's spatial and personal boundaries to the point of bursting.

The verbal and spatial conflict 'web' that Paige and Isaac create in these pages seem to trap Max more than ever to a point of apathetic confusion. Paige and Isaac are both trying to win Max over to their side with what they believe ze should be doing instead of listening to hir own thoughts. The words that come out of ze's mouth are distorted to fit another person's argument.

Paige says that Max previously stated that “...nothing good came from things. Nothing good ever came from the Middle Class...” to which Max replies that ze didn’t say that (Mac 68). Ze brings up a point that seems to reflect hir relationship with the space, one that is far less combative than the others. Max says, “I don’t know. I don’t care about houses. How are we supposed to care about things that have become burdens?” (Mac 68). This statement may represent hir relationship with most of the things and people in the house, specifically Arnold and Paige. They have become a burden to Max, just like the words and actions in this scene have become a literal and figurative trap in the space for hir.

The rebuttal from Max breaks Paige’s optimistic and energetic tone, and her words and actions on page 69 bring about a new meaning of the space and the emotional torture it holds for her. She says, “He married me and bought this because he thought we were things he could control...This is the kind of house you can make a hole in from punching. That’s not a house. It’s him wanting to be more powerful than the house...” (Mac 69) This text is synchronous with the stage directions indicating Paige taking down paintings and quilts that uncover marks of domestic violence, from the marks of punches to the body indentation in the wall. The reader finally sees the house as a body of proof for the abuse Paige suffered from Arnold. The very walls of the house, the foundations on which it is built, both physically and ideologically, are made of the intent to suppress. As the phrase goes, these walls **can** talk and to Paige, they are constantly reminding her of her tortured past.

Paige proceeds to make a statement that can be seen as her manifesto for everything she has done: “WE ARE THE NEW. BEYOND GENDER. BEYOND POSSESSIONS. BEYOND THE PAST” (Mac 69). To her, Max’s ideology of breaking free from the norm is liberating in

every sense of the word. In this radical thinking, she is inspired to find the freedom to escape and reshape what has been crushing her for the majority of her life in this house. If something holds the proof and memories of her abuse, her solution is to flip it on its head, creating the “new.” In this way, she goes “beyond gender” and flips the power of masculinity in the house by subjugating the previously dominant Arnold. She goes “beyond possessions” by destroying the order of the house and leaving nothing but chaos in her wake. This idea in itself is contradictory because she wants to gain control by destroying control. She wants to get “beyond a past” that haunts her and surrounds her in the form of the house. However, instead of leaving and starting fresh, she decides to stay within this cage of a house. She is trapped in the past, manipulating the present, and dreaming of a future beyond this. This little paragraph serves as an explanation, though debatably not a justification, for her entire character arc.

Just as Max break Paige, Paige’s speech and actions break Isaac, pushing him to physical violence when he smashes the air conditioner with a bat. The ending lines of the stage directions on page 70 read, “[The smashing] takes a long violent time. He finishes. He is exhausted. He begins to sob.” The air conditioner has been a source of contention throughout the entire play, like a toggle between who is in power. In this cathartic act, Isaac finally destroys it, which could be read as a statement to end this everlasting power struggle on his behalf. It is ironic that after all his effort to clean up the mess of the house and all his speeches about caring for broken pieces, he is the first to physically destroy a piece of property in the span of the play. This destruction could be symbolic of the final destruction of any hope of keeping things together, like the aforementioned rubber band has finally snapped.

These few pages highlight the confines of the space within which the characters are trapped, or arguably have trapped themselves. There are many questions that this tight, cluttered set-up and the actions taken within it raised for me. In ruining the house to flip the power-dynamic, isn't Paige creating a cage for herself that constantly reminds her of the past? How can any of them escape the past if they don't leave the place that reminds them of it? Why does Paige not leave? Why does Max not leave? Was this house ever home and will it remain even a house much longer?

It is evident that the play has a significant connection to space and structure. It is therefore important to note that the structure and form of the play categorize it as a comedy, but there is so much in the content that is more than meets the eye. Similarly, even though the space is set up in such a haphazard and senseless way, there are many more layers of meaning within the depths of the chaos and filth. *Hir*, especially in this climactic section of the last scene, demonstrates directly how the environment shapes those in it and how the people also shape their environment, thus showing how the space we are in holds the experiences we have been through forever.

Works Cited

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