Dramatizing Oppenheimer and Reagan: Theatricality and American Historical Memory

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Theatricality and American Historical Memory

by

Sarah J. Rogers

Fordham University

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Profs. Julie Kim and Oneka LaBennett

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Abstract

Building on Anthony Kubiak’s analysis of the lack of a theatrical tradition in America, this thesis engages the question of what it means to see figures from American history represented theatrically onstage. Kubiak argues that the lack of a uniquely American theatrical tradition sets the precedent for modern Americans’ inability to identify the theatrical events of our lives and our histories. Can this inability to identify the theatrical be affect by representing historical figures on the modern American stage? Analyzing the text and production of The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer by Carson Kreitzer will prove that representing historical figures on stage can shed light on the inherent theatricality in the way Americans conceive of historical actors and events. Recognizing theatricality in our past can help a modern American audience identify the theatricality imbedded in its own current culture.
Introduction

The idea of the “city on the hill” informing Americans’ self-perception and identity is not new. Scholars and intellectuals have pointed to remnants of John Winthrop’s famous sermon in almost every facet of the American experience: from war, to presidential administrations, to popular music. Yes, the idea that everything we as Americans do is with a sense of performance has been heard before.

But how often do we recognize this “performance,” recognize the illusion, the theatrical nature embedded in the foundation of our very selves? Indeed, how can we be expected to see the theatrical in a cultural tradition that shuns reflectivity and intellectualism?

As Americans, we all perform – and then we deny the performance. Theatre is not a part of our cultural experience we wish to talk about; and even if it were, we lack the vocabulary to do so.

Denying the theatrical in this way creates in our culture a unique relationship with what I call our “historical memory.” (Just the word “history” alone does not encompass the personalized and individual aspect of the subject; after all, once a moment passes, it exists only in our minds.) A name or a phrase – Hiroshima, Adolf Hitler, the Great Depression – enacts in each individual a framework of associations that forms a historical narrative. Our memory of history, the way we engage with history, is built upon these narratives in which we often carry a great stake.

The problem, I believe, is not that we write these narratives for ourselves and the world around us – it is that we are unable to recognize what we are doing. When unidentifiable as such, the narratives become history, they become truth. Consequently, anyone who dares to counter that truth becomes a threat to the very core of our identity. When we lack a theatre, we
lack a place for our narratives to come up against another person’s truth. It is much easier to dismiss another’s ideas than it is to dismiss a live event containing the DNA of those ideas.

This paper will build on Kubiak’s thesis that Americans, from their earliest Puritan roots, have shunned theatre on the surface, while at the same time living a deeply theatrical life out of a “need to produce self and identity” (55). First, I will outline Kubiak’s thesis and what he feels are the consequences of living in a society that is both seeped in and in denial of the theatrical. Then I will propose an amendment to Kubiak’s ideas about the way in which our lack of theatre plays out in society: specifically, that the gap in our understanding of the theatrical causes Americans unconsciously to construct “narratives” about historical figures and events. I will argue that these narratives can be destructive and dangerous, and will propose the representation of historical figures onstage as one way to combat their effects.

In defense of this idea, I will look at a new American play: The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer, published in 2006, by dramatist Carson Kreitzer. I will describe what we know of the historical facts of Oppenheimer’s life, and discuss how they are realized in the text. Then, I will examine what happens to the historical figures and facts when they are actualized in production. This analysis will show the value of representing historical figures onstage, as the theatre becomes the literal site for the preconceived narratives of the audience to meet and contend with counter-narratives. The purpose of the clash of these stories is not to change the audience’s mind; rather, it is to expose to the audience member that his or her own historical memory is a construct rather than a definite and literal truth. Finally, my own experiences as I prepare for production a play about the life of Ronald Reagan and his family will further define and support my thesis. Analysis of the text and production of these two plays will prove that representing historical figures on stage can shed light on the inherent theatricality of Americans’
conceptions of historical actors and events. Recognizing theatricality in our past can help a modern American audience identify the theatricality imbedded in its own culture.

“Theatre (and not mere performance)”: 
Anthony Kubiak, Berthold Brecht, and American Historical Memory

The theatre that Anthony Kubiak concerns himself with in his book Agitated States is the theatre that presents, questions, critiques, and reveals both “the hidden and blatant theatricalities of a culture” (13). For, as he writes, examples of theatricalities in American culture are numerous:

From the Puritan concerns with self-surveillance, through the Franklinesque focus on the mere appearance of propriety and prosperity, from the culture of the con man, the spectacles of religious revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, and the Barnumesque sideshows of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, right up to the inevitable discovery of television and the appearance of Ronald Reagan, American actor as president, or Bill Clinton, president as actor, American culture has been unknowingly immersed in and formulated through theater, through the ontologies and strategies of seeing and being seen, of revelation and concealment. (30)

Since the days of the Puritans, and as startlingly revealed in that culture, Americans have both shunned the theatrical and made it a central part of their everyday experience. Kubiak describes the “theatre of morals” the Puritans had established – one where constructing a moral shell or “character” is almost more important than true character itself. Puritan “actors” in this way constantly assessed and reassessed how they acted, in order to determine if they had “acted well” (33). In addition to a systemic self-assessment and creation of a satisfactory character, one
was expected to present themselves so the larger community could tell “who is worshipful and who is not” (Barish 167). Puritan men and women were thus expected to dress in a manner indicative of their rank in society, with “inner meanings plainly inscribed on outer castings” – whether those “inner meanings” were true or not (Barish 166-167).

Despite an act which we might consider equivalent to putting on a costume day after day, the Puritans had no theatre; in fact, one may recall how, across the ocean, some of the “longest, most brutal, and most effective attacks on theatre came from... Puritans” (Morgan 340). (One notable writer believed that spectators at the theatre included “Adulterers,...Whores, Bawdes, Roarers,...Drunkards,...Cheaters, idele, infamous, base, prophane, and godlesse persons, who hate all grace, all goodnesse...”! (Barish 86-87)) Even the “costuming” was denied:

On one hand [the Puritans] believed, or professed to believe, that a man’s clothing provided no information about the state of his soul. Thus [English Puritan social reformer Philip] Stubbes: ‘It cannot stand with the rule of god his justice, ... to not accept... any man for his apparell.’ But the most obvious conclusion to which this axiom might be thought to lead – that apparel is a thing indifferent...is elbowed aside in favor of a coercive rule prohibiting men from wearing clothes unsuitable to their rank. (Barish 166)

This is not just a lack of theatre; it is a deliberate ignorance of it. Opposite views – that dress is unimportant in the kingdom of God and that men should dress according to social rank – are held to be true at the same time. The processes by which one would, thinking rationally, realize this contradiction are covered up. In the search for “total sincerity” in the place of mimicry (Barish 95), the place of mimicry in the sincere is ignored. The theatre of it all is erased. Kubiak argues this mentality has persisted in the generations since Plymouth Rock, and its ultimate effect has
been a modern American culture that has no space in which to reflect upon the theatricalities that have created and shaped it (13). American culture becomes a performance that cannot recognize itself as such. We cannot recognize the act of putting on our costumes.

Kubiak sees the effects of this in the violent episodes that rock the American psyche, specifically acts of violence that seem otherwise random or incoherent, like the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999. The media led the charge in an insistence on a rational “problem.” The problem most frequently decided upon was that “a generation of kids could no longer separate the virtual violence of video and computer games...from...the terror of death” (Kubiak 6). This neat little explanation persists even as recently as 2007, when an Oregon psychiatrist claimed that students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold committed this massacre because they had been denied access to their computer games (Human). Kubiak sees in the media’s response a frightening unwillingness to confront the real (6) and offers a counter-proposal: that the recent proliferation of virtual violence is not the cause of actual violence, but rather a symptom of living in a nation where violence is enacted as spectacle and then repressed (7). Everything becomes theatrical and nothing is real; indeed, even the processes by which the real is made theatrical are covered up.

The solution Kubiak posits is a theatrical tradition in the style of “Brecht, Beckett, or Pirandello” (13), which places the “alienation effect” at its core (Brecht 42). Brecht believed in a style of acting, direction, and production that allowed the audience to recognize the subjects onstage, but distanced an audience member from feeling true empathy or identification with those subjects. This sort of alienation is “designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today” (Brecht 43). According to Kubiak, then, the American is too familiar with the theatricality that consumes his culture and
lifestyle – so familiar, in fact, that he thinks he understands it and therefore cannot see it. The theatricality is “too obvious” for him to “bother to understand” (Brecht 44). In order to reveal that theatricality, a Brechtian distancing must be employed so that the audience member can recognize from afar something true about himself.

I disagree with Brecht (and Kubiak’s) assertion that the only way to “alienate the familiar” (Brecht 44) is to present theatrical representations that do not inspire an audience member to empathy. The theatricality in American society can be revealed to a modern American audience member not just by forcing him to look at it from a distance, but by forcing him to confront the constructed, theatrical nature of his histories. The theatre becomes the literal site of this confrontation. Empathy becomes either irrelevant or useful, as the audience is forced to find empathy with an unexpected source. Historical figures are a perfect subject for this confrontation because of the way our brains are hardwired. As psychologists such as Drew Westen have described, our emotional brains make judgments based on numerous networks of associations a subject may have.

Westen’s *The Political Brain* describes how American voters make emotional decisions, often made based on which campaign can tell the best story about its candidate; the political brain “is not a dispassionate calculating machine, objectively searching for the right facts, figures, and policies to make a reasoned decision” (xv). Westen dissects an early Clinton campaign ad from 1992 to show how it tells a story about its subject by conveying “where [Clinton] was coming from, literally and metaphorically – from a place of Hope” (5). Writes Westen:
Clinton told his own life story, but he told it as a parable of what anyone can accomplish.... He...[presented] himself not as a man of privilege descending...to help those less fortunate but as someone no different from anyone else....  (5)

Of course, this is not the story most of us now recall about Clinton, but Westen’s example shows the tenuous way in which meaning and history can be created in our minds and memories.

Westen’s findings about the human brain and politics apply not just to the American public, but interpreting Kubiak through the lens of Westen leads one to conclude that what is uniquely American is not only our inability to recognize the creation of these narratives, but our assumption – dearly held – that they are not created.

Westen’s book illustrates why historical figures make excellent subjects for revealing the hidden theatricality in American culture: a well-known historical figure, such as Bill Clinton, has a space he occupies in the mind along with positive and negative associations. In the theatre, one has the unique experience of having their personal story meet up against another story in three-dimensional space and time.

Furthermore, I believe that America’s lack of theatrical awareness has effects far broader than Kubiak suggests. American culture’s crafted identity has shaped the idea of the “city on the hill”; we believe everyone pays attention to ourselves as we do. This idea of American exceptionalism has global consequences. As Trevor B. McCrisken writes, the “underlying assumptions Americans hold about themselves” affects profoundly the way in which our foreign policy is conducted (1). I do not mean to imply that representing theatrical characters onstage is the cure-all for American foreign policy, but only that it is extremely important in an increasingly globalized world to increase our country’s theatrical consciousness.
“A Faustian bargain if there ever was one...”

*The Life of J. Robert Oppenheimer*

The plays of Carson Kreitzer are not “history plays,” they are not a by-the-book account of a person’s life – yet there is a deep and powerful truth to them. Kreitzer describes her own work in the theatre as investigating the “intersection of human beings and history.” This interest began with a desire to represent the women she thought were largely absent from the theatre onstage, and to show “the performative nature of woman, the way we are all asked to play this role” (“Dialogue 4.3”). Because real people had always fascinated her – “the way we live our lives is astounding” – Kreitzer centered many of her plays around the lives of well-known figures. Her plays have featured (or been inspired by) a number of diverse subjects, including Aileen Wuornos, a Florida prostitute executed for seven murders, who inspired Kreitzer’s *SELF DEFENSE or the death of some salesmen*; Lee Miller, the muse of Man Ray whose life is the subject of a new play, *Behind the Eye*; and J. Robert Oppenheimer, the quiet and cultured theoretical physicist who led the laboratory at Los Alamos as they toiled to create the first atomic bomb. Kreitzer’s *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer* not only dramatizes Oppenheimer’s place in the creation of that horrific new weapon, but also in the political fallout afterwards that led to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an ever-growing arms race with the Soviet Union, and the eventual revocation of Oppenheimer’s security clearance by the U.S. government.

I joined a production of *Love Song* produced by the Fordham Directing Program in its fall 2011 studio season as the dramaturg. I considered my job for the production to be making sure the actors knew who they were and what they were saying; how could the play be clear to an audience if it was not clear to the presenters? To accomplish this, I broke the play down to find the historical events or scientific information presented in each individual scene. My resources were primarily Richard Rhodes’s definitive *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, as well as Gregg
Herken’s *Brotherhood of the Bomb*, which traces the loyalties and friendships of Oppenheimer and two other scientists through the development and aftermath of the weapon. I also used some biographies of Oppenheimer, especially David C. Cassidy’s *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*, and Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin’s *American Prometheus*.

J. Robert Oppenheimer was born in Manhattan’s Upper West Side to Julius S. Oppenheimer, a wealthy textile importer who had emigrated from Germany yet strove to be American (Bird 275). Though Jewish, the family belonged to no synagogue. Oppenheimer would have “a lifelong ambivalence” about his Jewish identity (Bird 275) – including an insistence that the “J.” in his name stood for nothing, instead of the distinctively Jewish “Julius” his birth certificate claims (Cassidy 20). Like most adolescents, the young Robert struggled with his identity in relation to his parents. One of Robert’s favorite schoolteachers, Herbert Smith, who would accompany a colitis-inflicted sixteen-year-old Oppenheimer on a restful trip to New Mexico, later recalled that while he “never heard a murmur of criticism on Robert’s part of [his] mother, he was certainly critical enough of [his] father” (qtd. in Bird 637). Bird writes that the young Robert was no doubt sensitive about his father’s work in the garment industry, a traditionally Jewish trade (637). One incident from Robert’s trip west with Smith would point to such sensitivity:

Smith had turned to Robert as they were packing up and asked him to fold a jacket for his suitcase. “He looked at me sharply,” Smith recalled, “and said, ‘Oh yes. The tailor’s son would know how to do that, wouldn’t he?’” (Bird 637)

Despite these occasional outbursts, Robert was an incredibly gifted child: he presented his first paper to the New York Mineralogical Society at twelve, and graduated from the Ethical Culture school when he was just sixteen. Oppenheimer was intrinsically invested in his diverse set of
academic pursuits; as an adult and professor of theoretical physics at Berkeley, Robert would pursue Sanskrit in his spare time. One Berkeley colleague said of him that Robert “liked things that were difficult. And since almost everything was easy for him, the things that really would attract his attention were essentially...difficult” (qtd. in Bird 2104).

Oppenheimer’s passion for academia and privileged childhood would combine to shape a young adult who was almost absurdly indifferent to politics. Oppenheimer himself would encourage this narrative, telling repeatedly the amusing anecdote of how he didn’t hear of the stock market crash of October 29, 1929 until a friend told him several months later (Cassidy 137-138). Robert’s interest in politics would take a sharp upswing, however, upon meeting Jean Tatlock, the daughter of a Berkeley English professor. Jean was a beautiful but emotionally distraught young woman with a passion for social justice that led her to join and leave the Communist Party on several occasions (Cassidy 182). Cassidy notes how their relationship helped Oppenheimer grow beyond some of his own vanity and increased his presence significantly in liberal, anti-Fascist causes and “progressive” organizations (182).

Nuclear fission, or the breaking apart of the nucleus of an atom to release a tremendous amount of energy, was discovered in Germany in 1939. Oppenheimer and other physicists around the country recognized the very real potential for an atomic weapon as soon as the knowledge was made public (Bird 3672). In January 1942, Oppenheimer was put in charge of fast-neutron research at Berkeley, a promotion which would land him on the White House S-1 Committee, which was busy recruiting top scientists in the country to work on the bomb project (Bird 3700). Throughout the summer of 1942, Oppenheimer held seminars of eminent physicians at Berkeley to work on the problem of the atomic bomb. It was around this time that Robert began to believe that “only an atomic bomb could dislodge Hitler from Europe” (qtd. in
By September, the military was brought into the project, led by General Leslie R. Groves. Oppenheimer’s previous leadership in atomic research made him one of the obvious choices for the leader of the “Manhattan Project”; however, some worried about his young age, lack of administrative experience, and – especially – his involvement in progressive politics (Bird 3813). Nevertheless, Groves offered Oppenheimer the leadership of the central laboratory that would be built to develop the atomic weapon.

For the location of the top-secret laboratory, Oppenheimer suggested Los Alamos, New Mexico – a beautiful and remote location near the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the family ranch he had loved to visit as a child. There, some of the greatest scientific minds of their generation would gather to work on the atomic bomb, including the pessimistic and “moody” Hungarian émigré Ernest Teller (Herken 24). The primary concern of Los Alamos was using nuclear fission to power an atomic weapon; however, Teller thought larger. Since 1941, Teller had entertained the idea of using an atomic bomb to ignite a thermonuclear reaction in hydrogen (Rhodes 375). Bored with the idea of the atomic bomb and becoming something of a nuisance to the other scientists at Los Alamos, Teller was granted Oppenheimer’s permission to work on the “Super” hydrogen bomb on his own (Herken 118).

The rest of the scientists in the desert concerned themselves with the fission reaction necessary for the atomic bomb – and with making such a device work before the Germans could. Two potential designs would eventually make it off the drawing board: the uranium “gun method” bomb (eventually actualized as “Little Boy”) and the plutonium “implosion method” bomb (“Fat Man”). The calculations and construction of the implosion-method bomb would provide much of the drama at Los Alamos, especially in the laboratory’s final months. This bomb was constructed with a “hollow sphere of fissionable material” (fissionable being any
substance that can be used to create a fission reaction, in this case an isotope of plutonium) that would implode and collapse in on itself. As just a hollow sphere, not enough plutonium would be in contact with itself to cause a reaction. However, once the plutonium collapsed into a dense, small sphere, it would create the critical mass needed for a chain reaction explosion (Herken 74). But, the plutonium needed to collapse evenly in order to reach the critical mass. An uneven collapse would cause the bomb to fizzle out one side instead of exploding evenly. A precise series of “implosion lenses” needed to be constructed to spread out the detonation charge so the plutonium core would collapse evenly. A large source of tension during the weeks leading up to the planned July 1945 test was the fact that many of the molds created to make these lenses arrived at Los Alamos damaged, with air cavities that could not be repaired (Rhodes 655).

Oppenheimer planned the test of the implosion bomb at a site he named “Trinity” in a secret tribute to Jean Tatlock, who adored the poetry of John Donne: “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” (Bird 2297). Jean committed suicide in January 1944. While preparing to leave for Los Alamos in 1942, Jean had attempted to contact Oppenheimer; in the commotion, her phone calls had been ignored. Jean was subsequently hospitalized for depression, and sent word to Oppenheimer at Los Alamos that she wanted to see him. Oppenheimer went to Berkeley in June of 1943 and spent the night at Jean’s apartment, despite his stated plans to return to Los Alamos that night. Throughout all these activities, Oppenheimer was followed and watched by Army agents under the directive of the Los Alamos security director, who believed Oppenheimer was a communist. This secret rendezvous with Tatlock only added fuel to the fire of his suspicions (Herken 101-102).

The plutonium bomb was successfully detonated at Trinity on July 16, 1945, despite the fears of some scientists that the explosion would “set fire to the atmosphere” (Rhodes 673).
However, there was the still question of what to do with the new weapon. The Secretary of War created the “Interim Committee” to discuss how the bomb should be used in combat and what its postwar role might be (Herken 131). Oppenheimer was one of four scientists appointed to a Scientific Panel designed to advise the committee. Another scientist on the panel, Ernest Lawrence, proposed a demonstration of the weapon to the Japanese, but “numerous practical objections” were raised by Oppenheimer, Groves, and others (Herken 132).

After the successful detonation of the bombs and Japan’s surrender in August of 1945, Oppenheimer stepped down as director of the laboratory at Los Alamos. However, his involvement in the shaping of U.S. atomic policy was far from over. In early 1946, Oppenheimer was appointed chief scientist of a “Board of Consultants” which would draft a potential plan for President Truman that would allow for international control of the bomb. Unfortunately for Oppenheimer, the plan he proposed would be completely rewritten so as to be made virtually ineffective, and was quickly rejected by the Soviets (Herken 165). In 1947, the Army transferred control of the atomic bomb to a civilian commission called the Atomic Energy Commission, or AEC. A panel of scientists, of which Oppenheimer was elected president, was selected to serve as a “General Advisory Committee” (GAC) to the AEC. Oppenheimer used his position on the GAC to delay further production of Teller’s Super bomb, believing that “mankind would be far better off not to have a demonstration of the feasibility of such a weapon....” (qtd. in Bird 8530). In response, Teller and other supporters of the bomb, including AEC member Lewis Strauss, launched a “counteroffensive,” spreading a Soviet paranoia around Washington (Bird 8544). Truman eventually gave in to the “domestic political factors” favoring a crash program researching what was referred to as “the Super” (Bird 8643).
Truman’s decision did not mean the end of tension over the issue of Teller’s Super. In 1952, Teller petitioned the AEC for funds to build a second laboratory for work on the Super, but was delayed by Oppenheimer’s GAC. This caused Strauss to believe that Oppenheimer was sabotaging the second laboratory (Herken 248). A campaign was begun to oust Oppenheimer from the GAC, spearheaded by Teller, who directly accused Oppenheimer of “poor advice and policies” and actively “delaying...the development of the H-bomb” (qtd. in Herken 249-250). Warned that he had become the target of an attack, Oppenheimer resigned from the GAC in June of 1952.

Despite no longer serving on the GAC, Oppenheimer continued to advise the army and the navy on “military matters” (Herken 252). When President Eisenhower appointed Strauss as head of the AEC, Strauss took the opportunity to “sow suspicion...about Oppenheimer” (Bird 9395). Strauss’s obsession with Oppenheimer would become almost “paranoid,” and Strauss and J. Edgar Hoover would begin a secret investigation into Oppenheimer’s activities in an attempt to get his security clearance revoked. Strauss and Hoover used decades old evidence, obtained through illegal FBI wiretaps and surveillance, to convince Eisenhower that a “blank wall” should be placed between Oppenheimer and classified material, pending further review (Bird 9693). Oppenheimer’s hearings, which would determine whether or not his security clearance would be officially renewed, began in April and continued for three weeks. Teller, Oppenheimer’s former colleague at Los Alamos, would testify against him in the hearings’ final days, saying “if it is a question of wisdom and judgment, as demonstrated by actions since 1945, then I would say one would be wiser not to grant clearance” (qtd. in Herken 293). On June 29, 1954, the AEC made its decision: to strip Oppenheimer of his security clearance. Oppenheimer would have no further role in U.S. atomic policy. In February of 1967, the physicist died of throat cancer.
And how should I presume? And how should I begin?

Dramatizing Oppenheimer

How are historical facts translated into dramatic action? Kreitzer said, with regards to her own writing that “a life does not fit itself well into an hour and a half.” Any theatrical representation of a life is going to be just that – a representation. What the audience will see is not a life but a story, one carefully constructed by a playwright. Kreitzer had a very specific intent when carving out the story she wanted to tell about J. Robert Oppenheimer:

I knew I wanted to tell a different story than the one I had been told in high school about this man. I wanted to tell what had been left out – that these guys out in the desert were Jews. This bomb came out of a furious, furious anger [that history has] deracinated because [the U.S. used the bombs] on Japan.

Kreitzer observed Oppenheimer’s “furious, furious anger” as a part of the story uprooted from our historical memory because of the ultimate purpose of the weapon. The fury is certainly evidenced, at least, in the written record of Oppenheimer’s life. During his 1954 hearings, Oppenheimer recalled:

“Beginning in late 1936, my interests began to change. ...I had had a continuing, smoldering fury about the treatment of Jews in Germany. I had relatives there [an aunt and several cousins, notes Bird], and was later to help in extricating them and bringing them to this country. ...And through them, I began to understand how deeply political...events could affect men’s lives.” (qtd. in Bird 2358).

This special attention to the treatment of Jews could be projected backward to other events in Oppenheimer’s life: his refusal to use the particularly Jewish sounding “Julius,” perhaps, or his quickness to jump to anger when his schoolteacher asked him to fold a jacket.
In the text of *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, Kreitzer inserts a different kind of character to force Oppenheimer to talk about his Jewishness. All the characters featured in the play are either real characters (Oppenheimer, Teller, etc.), or vague approximations of real characters (Young Scientist, British Envoy, etc.) – except for one: Lilith. Lilith is a character lifted from Hebrew mythology, so her connections to Judaism are clear. In that legend, Lilith was created before Eve in the same manner as Adam, from the earth. But:

Adam and Lilith never found peace together; for when he wished to lie with her, she took offence at the recumbent posture he demanded. ‘Why must I lie beneath you?’ she asked. ‘I also was made from dust, and am therefore your equal.’

Because Adam tried to compel her obedience by force, Lilith, in a rage, uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air and left him.  (Graves 66)

God sent angels to try to convince Lilith to come back, but she refused and so was punished with giving birth to hundreds upon hundreds of demons and being forced to eat human babies. God then went on to create Eve from Adam’s rib, ensuring her subservience to him.

Lilith knows what it means to have fury, and throughout the text of the play, she needles Oppenheimer into admitting that the acclaimed physicist is more like the pre-Biblical demon that he would probably care to admit. The connections between the two are made clear in the opening pages of the play, when Lilith says that she “dared disturb the Universe. God revoked my ssecurity¹ clearance” (13). Lilith forces Oppenheimer to ask why, why, why:

LILITH. What leads a kind man. A gentle man. A scholar. To make the biggest explosion the world as ever seen?

¹ Kreitzer frequently uses poetic sounds and structures in the text of the play. All capitalization, spelling, and punctuation are as they appear in the original text. Intentional line breaks are indicated with a slash. Brackets [...] indicate parts of the text are excluded; ellipses are as they appear in the original.
OPPIE. I had a... continuing, smoldering fury about the treatment of Jews in Germany.

LILITH. Ssmoldering. (13)

Lilith’s poking and prodding of Oppenheimer so close to the start of the play sends a clear message to the audience or reader: that this is an Oppenheimer whose identity is not set in stone. If Lilith is able to question him, so are we; the fact that we can’t is inconsequential. The point is merely that one of Lilith’s dramatic functions is to show the reader that we are not dealing with a legendary, mythical Oppenheimer. That Oppenheimer, as indicated by the ellipsis, slightly hesitates in his response only further proves this. Oppenheimer himself is unsure of his identity, unsure of how he should respond to Lilith’s questions. The audience is witness to a moment of uncertainty. Who Oppenheimer is is not pre-determined (a word I will return to later); we witness his choosing of the words he will use to shape an identity in only the first ten minutes of the play. We also are privileged to watch Oppenheimer defend his identity from Lilith’s prodding. When Oppenheimer talks about creating the world of Los Alamos, Lilith asks him:

  LILITH. Creating a new star system?

  OPPIE. No. Just...a world.

  LILITH. A world powered by fury.

  OPPIE. Our own world.

  LILITH. The fury of the small.

  OPPIE. A world of pure discovery.

  LILITH. The fury of the cast-out. (15)

Oppenheimer willfully defends his identity by choosing to ignore Lilith, by continually asserting what he believes the world at Los Alamos was – good, “pure,” scientific – despite Lilith’s
constant insisting that it was something much darker. The text thus provides us with the opportunity to see how Oppenheimer sees or wants to see the world. Witnessing the acts of identity forming and identity defending, whether on the stage or on the page, humanizes Oppenheimer in a unique way.

As in the above quoted section, Kreitzer does – and with a fair amount of frequency – draw from a written, quotable, researchable historical record. Clearly, though, a world in which men can be questioned by pre-Biblical Hebrew demons is not the natural, historic world. This is highlighted through the play’s structure. The play does not tell the completely linear story of Oppenheimer’s life; rather, memory operates within a linear frame. The play begins with Oppenheimer at the hearing that will determine if he can get his first security clearance, in order to take the position as the head of the Los Alamos laboratory “currently being built” (10). This scene is interrupted as we skip directly to the Trinity test and the successful detonation of the bomb. The rest of the first act will circle back to show how Oppenheimer goes from point A to point B. Throughout the play, scenes are not distinct but rather flow one into the other – echoing the way our minds and our memories work. Memories can be conjured up by specific words:

OPPIE. Batter my heart, three-person’d God

VOICEOVER. What?

OPPIE. It’s Donne.

YOUNG SCIENTIST. Oppie?

OPPIE. What?

YOUNG SCIENTIST. It’s done.

VOICEOVER. 14 July. Gadget complete. (10-11)
Oppenheimer’s line “It’s Donne” in response to the question about the poetry he quotes almost conjures up the presence or the memory of the Young Scientist, who is not onstage before his line, saying the homophonous “it’s done.” Oppenheimer willfully conjures up other memories in moments that do not break from the linearity of the play. In one scene that is still clearly defined as being in Los Alamos (Oppenheimer questions whether or not they will be able to make the bomb in time), Oppenheimer remembers his mother, who then “appears. Takes off a large, broad-brimmed picture hat. Takes off one glove. Is about to take off the other. OPPIE turns to see her. She disappears” (17). The continued appearance of these memories and ghost-characters humanizes Oppenheimer by reminding the audience of the way we perceive our own lives. We don’t experience the world in our day-to-day lives as the sort of one-track narrative one would find in a biography. Memory profoundly affects the decisions we make, and we often, as Oppenheimer does, escape into the past. Narrative history does not have a place for Oppenheimer to reflect on his memories, as narrative history is all about the doing. Kreitzer’s structure, incorporating memory into a linear frame, further emphasizes that this is not the Oppenheimer of our historical imagination.

In addition to Oppenheimer’s “fury,” Kreitzer had one other story about the building of the bomb she wished to deconstruct. She observed another narrative people told about Los Alamos: the “Can we make the bomb? We made the bomb!” plot. Kreitzer wanted to show Act II: “What do we do now?” How did the physicists make the pieces make sense and move forward?

‘Love Song’ and Deterministic History

I sat in on an early rehearsal of the production of the play. The cast and director were working on an in-depth table read of the play, going back and forth from the script to the show
bible I had prepared to explain the historical and scientific references in each scene. The actors had done some research on their own and had read the play before, but this was the first time the words on the page were expanded on as they were read. That particular day, the cast read a scene following the successful detonation of the bomb at Trinity (the second time we encounter it). Then, an actor read out loud the brief paragraph I had written detailing the Interim Committee’s debates weighing the pros and cons of dropping the bomb, having some kind of demonstration, or warning the Japanese in advance that the bomb would be dropped. Eventually, of course, the Interim Committee ruled a test impractical and that the bombs should be dropped with no advance warning. However, the cast was particularly surprised to learn that not all the physicists wanted to drop the bomb after it was complete. The consensus among the group seemed to be that because the U.S. had dropped the bombs, that everyone wanted to drop the bombs. This revealed an interesting sort of conglomeration of the reason an act happened and the act itself. Mary Forrester deconstructs what we mean when we say we want an act explained:

...we want to hear of a purpose other than the original description of the act. If we want to know why Alcibiades broke the herms, we are hardly content with the answer, ‘In order to break the herms.’ Rather, we are looking for something like ‘In order to create ill-feeling against the Spartans.’ But from this last it scarcely follows that Alcibiades would have the herms broken. There were any number of ways in which his purpose might have been attained. (134)

Just because we dropped the bombs to end the war does not mean that we needed to drop the bombs to end the war. Even given a particular set of conditions, such as ‘a demonstration might be ineffective because the bomb used might be a dud,’ or ‘we cannot warn the Japanese in advance in case they move American POWs into potential targets,’ Forrester points out there
may still “be many courses of action which will enable a given purpose to be achieved” (134). Combining cause and act in this way assumes that our actor was rational (and anyone in the theatre would know that actors never are!) when he chose which of these “courses of action” to embark on. We assume that he made his decision using a practical calculation pitting the outcome of each act with the consequences. However, as we learn from Westen, our brains make emotional decisions.

Kreitzer scratches away at what I believe to be a “deterministic” view of history: that everything we did was the rational thing to do, and that is why we did it. (It has to be “we.” “Others” are allowed to be crazy and irrational, but “we” always keep a clear head.) In the text of the play, Kreitzer has Lilith reiterating Westen’s argument:

   YOUNG SCIENTIST. There could be a test […] in an unpopulated area of a neutral country, perhaps. And Japanese heads of state could be invited…

   OPPIE. And what if it doesn’t go off?

   What if that one’s a dud?

   We’ve invited the Japanese heads of state to witness our embarrassment.

   YOUNG SCIENTIST. *(bright, joking)* Then we’ll just kill them all!

   OPPIE. I’ll bring it up at the committee meeting.

   LILITH. And the committee said:

   OPPIE. We can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war... We find no acceptable alternative to direct military use.

   LILITH. mmmmmm.

   and whose words are those?

   OPPIE. mine.
LILITH. words out of your head
like the beautiful explosion
out of your head

Here, Lilith functions as a way to question Oppenheimer’s assumptions about himself. She breaks down Oppenheimer’s personal narrative of the events: the committee, in cold, bureaucratic, rational language made a rational decision. Lilith forces him, reluctantly, to admit whose words those were: “mine.” She asserts that there was a fury, a “beautiful explosion,” in Oppenheimer’s mind. By dramatizing the fragmentation in the community at Los Alamos through the character of the Young Scientist, Kreitzer also undermines the point of view that naturally comes with the deterministic view of history: that everybody, in this case every physicist, felt the same about the act which would eventually occur.

Through the character of Lilith, Oppenheimer comes to accept, in the final moments of the play, that science is not what he thought it was.

OPPIE. I thought we were cracking open the secrets of the universe.

LILITH. You were.

OPPIE. I thought it would be a geode.

Shining in the first light of discovery.

LILITH. It is a geode filled with blood.

OPPIE. For only two billion dollars of the Army’s money. I will give him to you.

[...]

I must go back.

LILITH. There is no back.
Little man. But you know that.

[...

OPPIE. Science was my passion. my path. my breath. my truest love.

LILITH. and because your love will not behave, does not balance statue-still on that pedestal but blows it to pieces, you turn your back on her?

(Beat.)

OPPIE. No.

LILITH. No. Theory turns to practice. (95)

Oppenheimer accepts that there is something bloody and dark in what he once thought was only good and pure. The narrative that he has told himself about why the physicists came to Los Alamos, why they worked so hard to build the bomb, why they decided to drop it, falls away as he admits to the deep-buried fury, as he cracks open the “blood” inside the geode. Oppenheimer does not abandon science because it is not the fairy-tale he believed it to be, but instead finally accepts what it is. He embraces reality, instead of the narratives he has clung to with ferocity for the first two hours of the text. As Oppenheimer’s assumptions about science and himself break down, so do the audience’s.

**Theory into Practice**

*Oppenheimer in Production*

None of this happens, of course, without an audience to experience it. As Kreitzer took history and turned it into a play, the production on which I worked had to take both Kreitzer’s work and history and turn them into an interesting presentation that worked in three-dimensional space and time. In this section, I will discuss the ways the production used history and ignored history and the overall effect theatricality gave to the production.
Edward Teller had an accent. He was, after all, born in Hungary. Early in production, the director and actor decided to try to use this accent as a way to tell the story that Teller, not being from this country, had knowledge of communism that the other characters, particularly Oppenheimer, could not. However, much of Teller’s text in the play is forceful arguments in favor of building the Super bomb, and the director felt that the accent would make the audience see Teller as a foreign, raving lunatic rather than understanding his point of view. The accent was cut. I think this decision was overall a good one for the production. That Teller was from Hungary was a key part to understanding his identity; had there not been any lines to this effect in the text, I would have argued in favor of keeping the accent. Given that Teller says explicitly things like “You did not see the Communists in Budapest” (38), it was not necessary to the understanding of his character and would have probably been detrimental to have the actor use an accent.

In order to determine the amount of uranium or plutonium needed to achieve critical mass for an atomic bomb, a series of dangerous criticality experiments were performed at Los Alamos. These involved taking large amounts of radioactive bricks and stacking them on top of each other around a plutonium core, adding a new brick and measuring the radioactivity of a system with a Geiger counter. This dangerous process was called “tickling the dragon’s tail” – because if one put too large a brick on the system, it could go supercritical and administer what would likely be a lethal dose of radiation poisoning. Two scientists did die from these criticality experiments, both after the end of the war. Kreitzer dramatizes one of these accidents with the death of the “Young Scientist” towards the end of Act I:

(Light on YOUNG SCIENTIST, placing plutonium cubes carefully atop a pile.)

YOUNG SCIENTIST. Before we go
just a few final  (Removes a large cube from the bottom, adds a small one on top.)
calculations  (Drops the large cube onto the pile. The room is instantly suffused
with a blue glow. The Geiger counters go crazy.)
ah! (He knocks this final cube off the pile. The blue glow stops, the clicking is
silenced.)
That was a close one!
Did...
did anyone get a reading on that?  (55-56)

(Blackout. Sound of decontamination showers.)

In production, this scene, and
an earlier scene in which
Oppenheimer and two other scientists
observe another criticality experiment,
was extremely difficult to stage. The
director worried that the audience
would not understand what was going
on. I maintained that, in the first
scene at least, it was not necessary for
the audience to understand everything
that was happening, only that they understood that it was very dangerous. This was easily
accomplished through the acting: Oppenheimer and the scientists observing the scene watched
with reverence and a little anxiety; the Young Scientist laughed with relief when the experiment
went off without a hitch. Staging a radioactive poisoning proved to be a little more difficult,
especially since there are no immediate symptoms the actor could play. (Lethal amounts of radiation cause vomiting in 5-10 minutes; the actor wanted to play his hand being burned when he dropped the fatal cube, which the director changed.) Light and sound could be manipulated to indicate radiation poisoning. Since the light did not emanate from the plutonium core and blocks prop and was instead a bright blue wash over the scene, it read as a dramatic light change rather than as a cause of what was happening onstage. The sound cues of the Geiger counter clicking had some difficulty synching up to the scene. In the end, the directorial decision was to have the Young Scientist mime vomiting noises during the blackout, which transitioned to him lying on his deathbed in the hospital. Translating this historical and textual event to the stage was a difficult element of the production, and I spoke to some audience members after the show who were confused as to what exactly happened in the scene – though, significantly, everyone was able to grasp that the Young Scientist had been badly injured by whatever had occurred. Though ultimately, as makers of theatre, I think all of us would have been happier to ensure that every single audience member knew exactly what was transpiring onstage – the fact that this was not the case did not diminish the audience’s understanding of the overall story. Merely reading the script, it is clear from the stage directions Kreitzer provides her reader that a radioactive accident has occurred. However, reading stage directions does not compare to hearing a person throw up in the darkness, having the lights rise to reveal that body shaking and shivering in a hospital bed. The audience for the live performance may not have had the benefit of knowing exactly what was going on, but they received a much more real experience.

The production had the opportunity to bring to life some of the themes in the text. Lilith’s role as the “cast out” was made clear in almost all elements of the production. The set was primarily two sections of chain link fence: Lilith remained on one side of the fence only,
while Oppenheimer and the stories occurring in the linear, real world happened on the other.

(Characters in Oppenheimer’s memory – Jean, his mother, also appeared on Lilith’s side of the fence.) The physical separation gave Lilith something to fight against as she needled Oppenheimer to accept his fury. It also raised the stakes for Oppenheimer, making visual what it means to be cast out. Lilith’s costume was dark and unnatural, with white and eerie face makeup, whereas the other characters were costumed in period realism and warm, sandy tones. In many scenes, Lilith’s costume was so dark only her face was visible, making her appear demon-like, a haunting figure who emerged from and back into the darkness. The light used for Lilith was bright, unnatural oranges and yellows as well as a combination of effects. The other characters were lit in colder, more natural light, again emphasizing the difference in worlds. Finally, acting and directing choices added to her otherworldliness, as Lilith often assumed unnatural poses and remained on her chain-link fence, never touching the ground.

Other theatrical choices made in production, drawing from Kreitzer’s text, involved staging the scientists working on calculations for the bomb as if it were a Marx Brothers routine. Subtle elements of physical comedy were added to these scenes (the director had to scale it back a notch so as not to completely distract the audience from what was happening in the scene – for example, when Teller kicked another character in the behind.) The humor provided a humanity
to the scientists, a thing easily lost when thinking of them as a single-minded conglomerate or even as geniuses who accomplished something we never could.

The most important aspect for historical understanding of putting the play into production was the literal space it provided. The character of Lilith provided the audience with a means to question Oppenheimer; mounting the show in production gave the audience a space in which to do so.

Theatrical representation also gives us the chance to experience a figure in a role that may be different from the one in which we have “cast” him in our memory. Kreitzer experienced this herself when writing the character of Teller. After the end of the war, Teller campaigned ceaselessly for more atomic research to build the powerful Hydrogen bomb, a proposal Oppenheimer opposed. Teller argued that the Soviets would not have Oppenheimer’s moral code, they would not stop at the creation of the fission bomb but would instead continue onward in the search for power. At first, Kreitzer hated Teller, casting him as the villain in her narrative of Oppenheimer’s life; the immoral opposite to Oppenheimer’s nobility. As she went deeper into the character, however, she realized Teller was right. She began to recognize that Teller, as a native of Budapest, knew about totalitarianism in a way that “Upper East Side liberals” like Oppenheimer and the rest of the Los Alamos physicists couldn’t. While Oppenheimer and other American intellectuals had an idealistic view of communism as a means of correcting the world’s injustices, Teller had lived communism and understood that the theory did not equal the practice. Kreitzer was able to experience and understand a man she didn’t necessarily agree with: “There is a world where Teller is right,” she insisted, “and it is the world we live in.”
“He played only one role, ever”
Dramatizing Reagan

I had an experience similar to Kreitzer’s when writing my play about Ronald Reagan. As a fierce and precocious liberal, I considered it my personal duty to despise not just Reagan’s policies and legacy but everything about the man. How did I go from that place to weeping loudly as I typed out the scene in which Reagan dies? I realized that my hatred was not of this man, but of a carefully constructed version of that man. My hatred itself was in fact a construction, a performance of what I thought it meant to be a liberal.

My decision to write about Reagan was solidified by his son’s 2011 memoir My Father at 100. I had already begun my research for this paper on Oppenheimer, and was looking at the way narrative functions in our American historical memory. The choice to dramatize Reagan seemed obvious given those parameters; watching Republican candidates trip over themselves to be associated in any way with Reagan proves he must represent something profound in our national historical mind. Then, I read Ron Reagan’s assessment of his father’s own narrative:

Critics have long accused him of falseness, of merely acting out assigned roles.

Such a superficial analysis ignores the central curiosity of my father’s character:

He played only one role, ever, and he did so unconsciously, totally absorbed in its performance. (12)

To emphasize being “totally absorbed” in the performance, I created in my play a Ronald who, looking back on his life while in the throes of Alzheimer’s, believes completely that he was not really the president, but instead played the president – with his wife and children playing the first family – on a television sitcom called “The Reagans.” Nancy hopes that Ronald doesn’t remember the stressful and often disappointing events of his life. Ron, on the other hand,
criticizes Nancy for attempting to gloss over the unpleasantness she simply does not wish to acknowledge. Ron urges his father to remember:

NANCY. I hope you don’t remember.

They put a tube down your throat and you thought you couldn’t breathe.

[...]

RON. I reassured you. I said it was okay.

“It’s like scuba diving. The tube breathes for you. You’re okay, you’re going to be...”

Do you remember?

Unlike Oppenheimer, who comes to accept what Lilith urges – that there is a furious side to his science that he should embrace – Ronald never remembers the way his son urges him to.

Instead, the arc of the play belongs to Ron, who comes to understand his father will never remember and never question himself the way Ron hopes he will. Instead, Ron meets his father inside Ronald’s fantasies, pretending for the sake of his father’s happiness that they are acting on “The Reagans” series finale as the family prepares to move out of the White House.

RON. I don’t think you didn’t know.

But I think maybe you didn’t understand.

Or you didn’t think anything bad would happen, because how could it?

It was a movie, it was all a... it all had to work out in the end.

(In Ronald’s mind, the season finale of the show – leaving the White House. Ron speaks to his dying father, aware of the older man's fantasies.)

RON. Are you gonna miss this place, Dad?
RONALD. You know, if you had asked me that a year ago, I would have said “get me out of here.”

But you know what? I think I will.

RON. Dad.

RONALD. We accomplished so much. And America was so great while we were here.

We protected the people. We ended the Cold War. There was no poverty or disease. Some things were out of control, but we didn’t know about those. We avoided war –

RON. Dad, you did all those things. Not “we.”

Instead of correcting his father’s narrative of history, Ron sacrifices historical truth for a chance to connect with Ronald. The history they acknowledge may not be “true,” but who is to say their connection isn’t?

**Conclusion**

When I proposed this project, I had hoped to do more investigation into what people’s historical memory of Oppenheimer, Los Alamos, and the building and detonation of the first atomic weapon actually is. I would have liked to investigate deeper audience members’ preconceptions of Oppenheimer and how the experience of witnessing the show in production changed those ideas. However, my research was conducted within the small community of the Fordham undergraduate theatre department. Most of the students who saw the play had already read the text or had some experience with it – many had discussed it in a class or read the play in preparation to audition for this production. Therefore, the central focus of this essay has been the ways in which the text and production combat the narratives Carson Kreitzer described as the
ones she had always been told about Oppenheimer and the bomb. However, I believe a focused inquiry in a larger field could bring some exciting insights and examples to the exact ways a production of this play interacts with an audience’s historical memory.

Kubiak wrote of our national need to perform the self and simultaneously cover up the performance. His *Agitated States* calls for a Brechtian theatrical tradition that can help a modern American audience see the gap in our understanding of the theatrical. However, I believe that what is truly important is not to analyze and over-analyze our historical memories in hopes of discovering some deeper, more accurate historical truth. I think it is more important that we merely acknowledge that these narratives are in place, and then decide on our own what to do with them. Oppenheimer, in Kreitzer’s text, is plagued by guilt that he cannot reconcile his cold view of science with the sheer destructive force he unleashed on the world. Lilith’s constant deconstruction of his own narratives helps him realize the fury in his passion and he is able to accept science for a thing that is both good and bad, much like himself. On the other hand, in my play, Ron Reagan realizes his father is creating a narrative reality – but decides to participate in that narrative to spare his father’s feelings.

Historical figures have a unique opportunity to reveal theatricality in American culture because our own historical memories are steeped in narrative. An audience carries their narratives and pre-conceptions about the figure they are about to see with them when they enter a theatre. In the space and time of the production, the audience’s narratives meet another narrative. Seeing another narrative in production makes it more difficult to dismiss: it is more difficult to claim, for example, that Teller is wrong when he is humanized, when we see the way he operates in the world. The revelation that another narrative even exists makes us question what we had previously considered to be an historic truth.
Questioning that historic truth is the key. Questioning our historical memories means admitting that they are just that: memories, shaped by associations and emotions, not always rational, cool, and clean. If we acknowledge that our history is informed by our memory, a different version of that history will no longer be a threat to our self-identity, but rather an invitation to personal reflection and a much-needed encouragement of intellectualism in modern American culture.
Works Cited


Quotes from section titles:

“Theatre (and not mere performance)” Kubiak 13

“A Faustian bargain if there ever was one...” Freeman Dyson, qtd in. Bird 248.


“He played only one role, ever” Reagan 12.

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