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Re-visionary bodies: Feminist/Brechtian theory in the plays of Paula Vogel

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RE-VISIONARY BODIES: FEMINIST/BRECHTIAN THEORY
IN THE PLAYS OF PAULA VOGEL

by

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ABSTRACT

Re-visionary Bodies: Feminist/Brechtian Theory in the Plays of Paula Vogel

by

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Paula Vogel adapts Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, social *gestus*, historicization and episodic structure in the plays *The Baltimore Waltz*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*, and *Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief* to re-vision constructions of gender, sexuality and feminine desire, to re-define the American theatrical canon, and to create her own gestic, feminist theater. In *The Baltimore Waltz*, Vogel re-visions the AIDS virus in order to expose and critique stereotypes surrounding AIDS. In *And Baby Makes Seven*, Vogel engages in a re-visionary dialogue with Edward Albee’s classic *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in order to question and re-invent the American nuclear family. In *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*, Vogel re-visions the feminist pornography debate in order to examine the destructive effects of domestic violence and pornography on men, women and children. In *Desdemona*, Vogel re-visions *Othello* in order to give voice to the silenced, feminine voices in Shakespeare’s classic.
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"When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up."

-- Bertolt Brecht, "Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction"

"For me being a feminist means looking at things that disturb me, looking at things that hurt me as a woman. We live in a misogynist world and I want to know why."

-- Paula Vogel, Interview with David Holmberg

In his 1936 essay "Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction," German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) articulates the true function of his now infamous epic theater by contrasting the experience of the epic theater audience member with that of the realistic or "dramatic theater" audience member. The dramatic theater spectator, Brecht proposes, views the events unfolding onstage and experiences a frisson of Aristotelian identification with the characters and the dramatic world presented, "laugh[ing]" when they "laugh," "weep[ing]" when they "weep" (71). He (for all theatrical spectators in Brecht’s essays are masculine) comments:

Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world . . . (71)
With this first person interior monologue, Brecht implies that in a typically realistic or “dramatic” theatrical event spectators come away comfortably cleansed, with a sense all is indeed right with society and its rigid, hierarchical structures. These spectators are content to view “obvious” theatrical representations of “sufferings” rather than facing the ugliness and degradation of these sufferings themselves. The epic theater’s spectator, on the other hand, “laughs” when characters “weep” and “weeps” when they “laugh,” observing of the onstage events in his own first person, interior (again masculine) monologue:

I’d never have thought it — That’s not the way — That’s extraordinary, hardly believable — It’s got to stop — The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary — that’s great art; nothing obvious in it. . .

(71, emphasis mine)

The masculine epic theater spectator, moved by the “extraordinary” action onstage to a key statement of activity — “It’s got to stop” — does not experience the smug, self-satisfied and self-affirming catharsis of the dramatic spectator. Instead he is made uncomfortable, made to think about the play’s world in new ways, to re-consider the “sufferings” experienced by the play’s characters (again, all masculine) and to see them as ultimately “unnecessary.” Thus Brecht’s epic theater serves a very different, much more overtly political function than dramatic or realistic theater, working to surprise, shock and/or disturb audience members into active involvement with the political and social problems it presents. The active epic theater spectator is therefore the more radical spectator since he (or she) is empowered — Brecht hopes — to political rebellion and revolution.1
Nearly seventy years after Brecht first outlined for himself and for the world the difference between “pleasurable” or realistic theater and “instructional” or epic theater, Paula Vogel (1951- ), a contemporary American feminist playwright, outlines a similar approach to her own dramaturgy, to a theater that “instructs” rather than “pleases.” Commenting on the “flattened out,” Hollywood-ized state of American theater in a 1997 interview with David Savran in his book The Playwright’s Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture, Vogel articulates how she attempts to “expose” provocative issues that are “hurting us right now” in her own work:

[Russian formalist] Shklovsky says you can use any contemporary subject, the subject is unimportant. The importance is that it’s out there in the public view, and therefore, it’s ripe for forgetting. So the interesting thing is to remember to expose that which is in the public view. What is in the public view? AIDS, pedophilia, child molestation, domestic violence, homosexuality. All of these subjects people may say are sensationalized – ‘sensationalism’ is another way of avoidance and denial. (274)

Like Brecht’s masculine epic theater spectator, Vogel’s audience member – who, unlike Brecht’s spectator, may be any shade within a rainbow of gender orientations – is confronted with uncomfortable, “appalling” issues, and is not allowed to sink into the escapist illusions of realistic theater, or the comfortable catharsis of “dramatic,” Aristotelian theater. Instead, like Brecht’s spectator, Vogel’s audience member becomes less a spectator and more a participant in the theatrical events “exposed” before them, forced to confront their avoidance of painful or taboo social issues, and, by extension, work to effect positive change in a society which would deny the existence of “AIDS,
pedophilia, child molestation, domestic violence [and] homosexuality.” Like many American feminist theatrical artists and theorists who continue to embrace Brecht’s essential definition of the epic spectator as well as the inherently political and ideological goals of Brechtian theater, Vogel consistently resists the “real” in her plays, and consistently confronts controversial subjects such as the AIDS crisis, pedophilia, pornography and prostitution. Whereas Brecht wrote politically charged, epic theater to incite his audiences to a (primarily masculine, primarily patriarchal) class rebellion, Vogel, like her feminist contemporaries, writes to incite her audience to a different kind of rebellion, to engage fully their intellect in a careful re-consideration of gender constructions, sexual politics and the roles of women. Drawing upon various elements of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (the distancing effect), social *gestus*, historicization, and episodic structure, Vogel both bends and stretches in her twenty-two play canon the intersections between reality and fantasy, politics and theater, and feminist and Brechtian theory in order to re-examine, re-define, and re-vision canonical — and patriarchal — American authors, playwrights and traditions. In doing so, Vogel establishes in such plays as *The Baltimore Waltz*, *And Baby Makes Seven*, *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* and *Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief* a shocking, uncompromising, often uproarious and distinctly non-static theatrical world which balances play with theory, circular narratives with linear journeys, and public, political agendas with private, personal ones. In doing so, Vogel creates Brecht’s “great art,” in which, as he proposed, absolutely nothing is obvious.

In her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich describes her attempts to awaken her own “sleeping consciousness” as a female poet
writing during the early “second-wave” feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as her attempts to rouse her awareness of her social conditioning as a previously "sleepwalking" woman. Rich does not merely direct this essay to other feminist authors but also invokes feminist literary critics and theorists, issuing a rallying cry in which she defines the need for women writers to explore a new “psychic geography” through a conscious “re-visioning” of the Western literary canon (“Dead” 35). Rich defines “re-vision” as the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” as well as an “act of survival” for female writers and critics (“Dead” 35). Rich also declares this fresh “seeing” of previous canonical works critical to the political survival of the then nascent feminist movement:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name — and therefore live — afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (“Dead” 35, emphasis mine)

Thus, Rich calls not only for fresh insight into the human condition, gender and sexual identity, but also a radical re-seeing of previously un-questioned canonical works. This idea of “re-vision,” of a literal re-seeing and “breaking the hold” of a decidedly
patriarchal, canonical tradition speaks to the very heart of the American feminist theater movement of the last thirty years. Although the radical feminism of Rich and her contemporaries has since diverged and split into such diverse offshoots as materialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, black or African-American feminism, lesbian feminism (or “queer theory”) and *l'écriture féminine* (an application of French feminist theory), feminist theatrical artists and theorists continue to share Rich's goal of re-visioning the analysis and production of American theater. As Sue-Ellen Case points out, despite their ideological or political differences, feminists in the American theater all converge in the key points of “privileg[ing] the experience of women, illustrat[ing] their oppression or show[ing] opportunities for liberation” (qtd. in Laughlin 147).

In addition to sharing Rich's goal of re-vision, American feminist theatrical artists and theorists like Paula Vogel also share a fascination with and debt to Bertolt Brecht. Herein lies one of the great ironies of American theater since, by all accounts, Bertolt Brecht was no feminist. Indeed, although he revolutionized Western theater with his plays and theories, he has been accused by critics of sexism, egoism, plagiarism and various other crimes against the women who loved and worked with him. John Fuegi, author of the 1994 study *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics and the Making of Modern Drama*, accuses Brecht of making “women and gay men disappear” in his plays, and asserts that Elisabeth Hauptmann — Brecht's “sometimes mistress and long-time collaborator” — wrote “at least 80 percent of *The Threepenny Opera*,” created “many of Brecht's ‘feminist’ heroines” and has since been denied credit for her work, both by Brecht and by Brechtian scholars (Fuegi qtd. in Shteir 38). Other critics portray Brecht as an “intellectual coward” who “traded sex for text” and who kept a veritable “harem”
without whom, Fuegi argues, Brecht could not have conceived “his” most famous female characters in such plays as *Mother Courage, St. Joan of the Stockyards, The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *The Mother* (Shteir 39). However, perhaps of more importance than Brecht’s personal misogyny in a feminist analysis of his theories and practices is his theoretical platform – Marxism – which, in its original form, does not account much for gender issues. As Janelle Reinelt observes, the role of women in the working class’s rebellion against the tyranny of capitalism was, according to Engels, firmly in the home, caring for husbands and rearing the next generation of revolutionaries (152). Surprisingly, despite its disregard for gender issues and despite Brecht’s supposed “heartlessness,” Brechtian theater and theory, inherently Marxist, has attracted feminist critics and playwrights for whom the personal is political with its ideas about alienation, historicization, epic theater and gestic acting, all of which, like Rich’s “re-visioning,” work to expose and re-see political and social issues dominant American society would rather ignore than confront.

However, American feminist theatrical artists and theorists are not merely content to absorb Brechtian theater and theory passively, and instead have, like Vogel, taken Brecht’s theories and theatrical devices further than he himself probably ever expected or imagined. As Karen Laughlin has observed, American feminist theory extends Brecht’s ideas several theoretical steps beyond his original Marxist intentions, using his techniques to branch out from his concern with the plight of the working class men into the “neighboring space of sexual politics” in which both men and women participate (160). Radical feminism, with its basis in the “belief that the patriarchy is the primary cause of the oppression of women” and its emphasis on a “woman’s culture, different and separate
from the patriarchal culture of men” (Case 63-64), frequently employs Brechtian theoretical techniques to examine patriarchal oppression. Early examples of radical feminist theater — such as the It’s All Right to be Women Theater, the guerrilla theater of Women’s Street Theater Group, and such plays as Wendy Wasserstein’s *Uncommon Women and Others* (1970) and Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1970) — employ Brechtian techniques to analyze “male-gender oppression” and/or “female-gender strengths,” as well as to examine the female body as a site of power and of frequent objectification (Case 64). Although Brecht’s personal habits and Marxist philosophies may make his ideas seem antithetical to the beliefs of radical feminists, his work is strangely compelling to them; as feminist playwright Roberta Sklar has commented, “Like anyone I have ever known who became seriously involved with a Brecht play, I was changed by it” (Laughlin 148). Like Sklar, for many American women the structuring techniques and devices of Brechtian dramaturgy have played a key role in the development of a dramatic form suitable to women’s experiences (Laughlin 158), and Brecht’s aesthetics offer a compelling and particularly useful theoretical basis for radical feminist playwrights to investigate gender issues as well as the often painful socialization process of becoming a woman. Radical feminists have also employed Brecht’s theories on acting and the actor/audience relationship to reveal the oppressiveness of gender distinctions, have adapted his arguments on the necessity to historicize theater in order to re-order and re-examine history from a new (for feminists, female) perspective, and have frequently adopted Brechtian structuring and narrative devices to create their own epic theater (Laughlin 147-148).
Some radical feminist theater groups have adapted Brecht’s plays themselves, answering Rich’s call to “radically critique” the ways women “live” and “have been living.” One notable example is the At the Foot of the Mountain’s 1976 production Raped, a direct adaptation of Brecht’s The Exception and the Rule (Case 66). Written in 1930 and not performed until 1947, Brecht’s The Exception and the Rule is a short didactic play about a merchant who beats his servant to death for offering him a drink of water. The merchant is later brought to trial, but is then acquitted of the murder because — as the court reasons — the merchant had abused the servant so regularly he could not possibly have expected such an act of kindness. Brechtian scholar Martin Esslin observes that The Exception and the Rule is a parable about modern life, offering the grim lesson that “in our world an act of such kindness is an exception, [and] hatred and violence the rule, by which we alone can regulate our conduct” (Brecht 305). In a sharp contrast to Brecht’s parable, Raped examines the phenomenon of rape — the ultimate patriarchal oppression — and, at the same time, retains Brecht’s original text, interspersing his dialogue with statistics and monologues based on actual experiences of women who have been raped. This radical feminist play presents a compelling critique of gender oppression in conjunction with Brecht’s critique of class and economic oppression by literally re-visioning and interrupting his text to make theatrical space for a discussion of such socially taboo subjects as rape and sexual aggression (Case 67). Raped also serves as an excellent example of how American feminist theatrical artists have appropriated Brechtian techniques for their own political and ideological goals by re-examining and re-visioning Brecht’s ideas about master/servant relationships, justice and self defense, and by re-seeing this “parable of modern life” by focusing on crimes against women.
Like radical feminists, material feminist theatrical artists and theorists appropriate Brechtian theory and theatrical devices for their own purposes. However, unlike radical feminist criticism, materialist or socialist feminist criticism opposes radical feminism's tendency towards essentialism, and its propensity to lump all women into one oppressed category. Drawing from its roots in Marxist and socialist theory, materialist feminism focuses on the "role of class and history in creating the oppression of women" (Case 82). Material feminists posit that not all women experience oppression in the same ways, and thus feminist theorists must look closely at social and economic status in analyzing women’s struggles and the position of women in a hierarchical, capitalist, and patriarchal society. With its emphasis on the struggles of the working class and the economically oppressed, materialist feminism condemns radical feminism as the privileged and elitist work of middle class women who have the leisure to theorize and discuss rather than work to correct the plight of the lower class who do not have the same access to economic and intellectual resources.

Because of its basis in socialism, materialist feminism is more popular in England and Europe than in the United States and can be seen in such work as Caryl Churchill’s plays Vinegar Tom (1976), Cloud Nine (1979) and Top Girls (1982). Also due to this basis in socialism, material feminist theater is closer in spirit to Brechtian theater than radical feminist theater. Instead of focusing on the evils of the patriarchy, material feminists shift the emphasis from production (which, in the classic Marxist sense, is in the factory) to the "material change which occurs between men and women at a point of conflict" (Case 92). Janelle Reinelt offers the following definition of the ideal intersection of materialist feminism and Brechtian theory:
Political theater requires the ability to isolate and manifest certain ideas and relationships that make ideology visible, in contrast with the style of realism and naturalism, wherein ideology is hidden or covert. Brecht’s theorization of the social gest, epic structure and alienation effect provides the means to reveal material relations as the basis of social reality, to foreground and examine ideologically-determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions, and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body which distinguish social behavior in relation to class, gender and history.

(150, emphasis mine)

Thus, by proposing that the personal is political (and vice versa), material feminist theater uses Brechtian techniques to re-examine the “material conditions of gender behavior (how they are internalized, opposed and challenged)” and their “interaction with other socio-political factors such as class” (Reinelt 151). Like Brecht, material feminist playwrights write for and about the struggles of the working classes, and, unlike radical feminists, encourage heterogeneous audiences and companies, often playing in pubs, churches and local meeting places in an effort to reach a working-class population that would not normally attend a theatrical performance (Reinelt 155).

The most compelling intersections of feminist theory with Brechtian theory, however, lie not just in the theoretical realm but in the practical realm, in which both radical and materialist feminist theatrical artists appropriate and re-vision the structuring principles of Brecht’s own dramaturgy. These structuring principles include, among others, Verfremdungseffekt (translated as the “distancing” or “alienation” effect), social gestus and episodic structure (which are themselves elements of Verfremdungseffekt).
Brecht, who re-visioned his own strategies and ideas about the purpose of epic theater throughout the course of his long career, frequently made use of these structuring principles, updating and adapting them to each playtext as the occasion demanded. The most common and yet perhaps the most complicated of these structuring principles is *Verfremdungseffekt*, which Brecht defines in his 1951 essay "A Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" as consisting of:

> turning the object of which one is to be made aware . . . from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, *into something peculiar, striking and unexpected*. What is obvious is in a sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness . . . (143-144, emphasis mine)

Thus by approaching some "object" or social construct that has become so "ordinary" and "familiar" that it is no longer noticeable as something "peculiar" or extraordinary or even antithetical to commonly held cultural codes, a playwright employing this "distancing effect" is able to re-direct and refresh an audience's attention to that thing or concept, and, at the same time, highlight and expose the often corrupt social and cultural codes which cause the audience to remain blind to its construction in the first place. Because *Verfremdungseffekt* (and Brechtian theater in general) is based upon the stripping away of audience assumptions to lay bare the often destructive ideologies underlying these assumptions, the distancing effect lends itself well to feminist — and thus inherently ideological — dramaturgy. By employing the Brechtian distancing
effect a feminist playwright like Vogel divests the commonplace of its normality and forces her audience to re-consider constructions such as that of a "normal" family, "normal" sexuality or "normal" gender roles. Myrna Lamb's 1969 pro-choice play But What Have You Done for Me Lately, an intriguing, futuristic drama in which a pregnant man begs a female doctor for an abortion, demonstrates a superb example of feminist appropriation of Verfremdungseffekt. Lamb makes full use of Verfremdungseffekt for her own feminist, pro-choice purposes, disturbing and distancing audience members from the action unfolding onstage by de-familiarizing the female body and reversing sex and gender roles to make a vivid point about the extent of control women and men possess over their own bodies (Laughlin 150). Karen Laughlin observes that this startling stage relationship both "strips away the idea of motherhood as 'natural' and inevitable" and highlights "the hardships brought upon women by what Lamb describes as 'a society dominated by righteous male chauvinists . . .',' both decidedly Brechtian and feminist agendas (150).

Brecht also endorses episodic structure in his own non-realistic epic playwriting because he believes theatrical artists "cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither" (Brecht 201). Instead, Brecht proposes, each scene or episode must act as a "play within a play," "must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment" and should be "knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed" (201). Thus, each episode should exist as an independent unit, able to stand on its own by containing its own lesson or mini-playtext; the epic playwright should also eschew smooth transitions for amateurish, bumpy or "knotty" transitions, foregrounding
the illusionary process of theater and of time passing. This type of Brechtian episodic structure can be achieved through labeling scenes with placards describing the scene's title or lesson, through abrupt blackouts, through repeated action, and through the use of harsh or jarring music (201). Feminist theorists share Brecht's concern with using episodic structure as a means to further audience intellectual involvement, but, as with their appropriation of Verfremdungseffekt, take his ideas in a different direction. Radical feminist Roberta Sklar's use of non-linear, episodic structure in her play for the Women's Experimental Theater, Electra Speaks, builds upon Brecht's premise of the need for a "knotty" play text. She comments:

What interests me about episodic structure has to do with expressing the inner life . . . At any given moment things are happening sequentially as well as simultaneously . . . feelings don’t happen in logical sequence . . . Episodic structure fits that understanding of reality: that, as every woman knows, life is a constant three-ring circus rather than some linear tale of adventure. (Sklar qtd. in Laughlin 158)

For feminists, Brechtian episodic structure works to subvert and deconstruct the hierarchy of patriarchal society and theatrical tradition in which the "well-made" play consists of unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. Feminist dramaturgy disrupts the linear journey of the logical cause and effect structure of much traditional theater, in which "cause" leads to "effect" in escalating importance. Instead, in feminist theater, "causes" often lead to other "causes," looping back onto themselves in a circular structure that ultimately reveals a richer, much more complicated "effect." Feminist theatrical artists use of episodic structure is often consistent with their concern with re-
visioning reality and canonical tradition, as well as their pursuit of circularity over linearity.

Brecht also endorses *gestus* (or gest) in his epic theater to urge his audiences to revolutionary action. Brechtian *gestus* is difficult to define, and can include "physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression" (Brecht 198), can encompass a gesture, a word or an action (Diamond 89), and can be so "highly complicated and contradictory ... [it] cannot be rendered by any single word" (Brecht 198). Brecht further complicates *gestus* by asserting that *gestus* becomes "social" when it is used to comment upon, critique and draw conclusions about the "social circumstances" surrounding the action, word or gesture (105). A famous example of social *gest* in Brecht’s *Mother Courage* is Mother Courage’s action of emphatically snapping shut her purse each time she completes a transaction with the soldiers, a gesture that allows “conclusions” to be drawn both about the character’s excessive greed and the deplorable social commerce of the Thirty Years War during which the play takes place. This social *gest* also underscores the reality of the unholy alliance of commerce and war in the spectator’s own lives, and should, like episodic structure and *Verfremdungseffekt* in general, cause the audience to reflect upon these untenable social conditions of war and be moved to change them.

Feminist theatrical artists and theorists also seize social *gestus*, a key Brechtian technique, for their own purposes. Feminist critic Elin Diamond defines a “gest” or “gestic moment” as some gesture or movement that “explains the play, but also exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production” (90), hypothesizing that the social *gest* is the revolutionary result of the "explosive (and elusive) synthesis of alienation [and] historicization," of the "Not ... But" of the
Alienation-Effect (an acting technique accompanying the distancing effect), the detached scientific attitude of historicization, and, ultimately, is the fullest expression of *Verfremdungseffekt* (89). Feminist playwrights and theatrical artists who embrace Brechtian theater and theory thus also whole-heartedly embrace social *gestus*, using it to allow audiences to comment upon, critique and draw conclusions about the personal and political issues feminist artists choose to include.

Claire Luckham's use of wrestling in her play Trafford Taxi is an excellent example of a materialist feminist adaptation of the Brechtian social *gestus*. The protagonist of Trafford Taxi is a female wrestler who must struggle for equality and independence both in and outside the ring. Janelle Reinelt comments on Luckham's choice of this "perfect" social *gestus* which illustrates the "struggle of women to free themselves from male oppression both economic and sexual":

This struggle must be conducted in the open, in the public arena, where the audience can participate in it and identify its political as well as its personal character. The transformation of traditionally private experiences into public spectacle helps transform conceptions of individual problems into social ones. As [Roland] Barthes points out, both wrestling and theater give 'intelligible representations of moral situations which are usually private.' (156)

Thus, by her use of wrestling as a physical and social metaphor for the conditions faced by her female protagonist, Luckham is able to create a feminist, social gesture that both "explains and exceeds" her play, throwing the discourse of oppression into the wrestling – and theatrical – ring.
Feminist playwrights' concern with both the personal and the political has re-oriented Brecht's definition of political theater; in addition, as Karen Laughlin argues, radical and materialist feminist theater's "intimate" and often "domestic" settings help to "reflect the tight links between women's public and private lives, [and] the intensely personal terms in which they may see what Brecht calls 'social relationships'" (160). In response to Brecht's (and other canonized male playwrights) downplaying of the inner life in favor of an "idea of a man as a function of the [external] environment and the environment as the function of the man," feminist playwrights have instead "emphasized the links between inner and social realities" (Laughlin 160). This resulting focus on the "inner" social world results in a political and a personal theater that is concerned with paying attention to the "family, marriage and traditional work of women" (Laughlin 160). From this tradition, from this combination of the personal and the political, the public and the private, the intimate and the explicit, springs Paula Vogel, who has made a career of finding comedy in the most outrageous and unlikely subjects.

A recipient of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for her play How I Learned to Drive, a dark comedy about pedophilia, driving lessons, and coming-of-age, Vogel has been writing for the theater since the late 1970s. From 1985 to the late 1990s, she directed the M.F.A. playwriting program at Brown University, as well as working with a theater group for female prison inmates at the maximum security Adult Corrections Institute in Providence, Rhode Island (Coen 26). In the past decade, Vogel has achieved significant milestones in her career, due at least in part to her Pulitzer Prize and to the popularity of such plays as How I Learned to Drive and The Baltimore Waltz. Her plays have been produced across the United States, in Canada, England and as far as Brazil, and her awards include the
1895-97 Pew/TCG senior residency award, the 1995 Guggenheim award, and the 1995 Fund for New American Plays Award. In addition, she has been awarded a Bunting Fellowship, a McKnight Fellowship at the Playwright's Center, two NEA fellowships and a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center. Her plays include (among others) *The Oldest Profession* (1981), a satirical and sassy re-vision of Mamet's *The Duck Variations* in which a group of women choose prostitution as a profitable outlet for their twilight years during the Reagan administration; *And Baby Makes Seven* (1984), a comedic study of a lesbian couple, their homosexual room-mate and sperm donor, and three irrepressible imaginary children; *Desdemona, a play about a handkerchief* (1993), an examination of the feminine perspectives in Shakespeare’s *Othello*; *Hot ‘n’ Throbbing* (1993), a dark investigation of the unholy alliance of pornography and the vicious cycle of domestic violence; and *The Minneola Twins* (1996), a black comedy about Long Island sisters pitted against each other during various decades in their lives.

Like Brecht, who often wrote in response to or in refutation of other authors and playwrights, Vogel often writes in dialogue with other playwrights and authors; however, typical of her feminist agenda, these authors and playwrights tend to be masculine, canonized and seemingly sacred. For example, *Desdemona, a play about a handkerchief* is a biting satiric response to the misogyny inherent in *Othello* and, moreover, a decided sassing of the patriarchal bard and the traditional Shakespearean criticism which paints Desdemona as an object and as the innocent victim of Othello’s murderous rage. Vogel’s Desdemona is no hapless victim to the Moor; instead, she is a lusty, disillusioned woman who constructs her own reality and who rents out her body to Bianca’s brothel in order to experience “the world” (Vogel 194). *And Baby Makes
Seven is also a direct response to and a direct dialogue with Edward Albee, one of the “big five” of Twentieth century American playwrights. In And Baby Vogel playfully and subversively re-visions Albee’s “classic” Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as a comedic gay fantasia, picking up where Albee’s play leaves off with the death of illusion and of George and Martha’s imaginary son “sunny-Jim.” And Baby’s lesbian couple, Anna and Ruth, have not just one but three imaginary children, whom, like George and Martha, they dispatch when the demands of reality and the imminent birth of their “real” son Nathan looms. However, in typical twisted Vogelian fashion, the children do not stay dead, and the “family” learns to coexist happily in the weird nether realms between fantasy and reality.

Although Vogel frequently notes her antagonistic relationship with Brecht and his theories – indeed, she accuses him of “basically robbing” the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky (Savran "Paula Vogel" 275) from whose phrase “Pr/izm Ostrannenija” Brecht coined the term “Verfremdungseffekt,” or “device for making strange” (Willet 99) – her plays and her dramaturgy reveal a Brechtian concern for exposing the corrupt and destructive American ideologies which form our shared, social reality. Like Brecht and like her feminist predecessors and contemporaries, Vogel consistently revolts against the idea of linearity in all of her plays. One reason for this revolt against Aristotelian structure is her desire to place a “strict limitation on empathy” for her characters, and instead to inspire the audience to “recognize and deal with the necessarily problematic position of each protagonist” (Savran "Loose Screws" xiii-xiv). In The Baltimore Waltz she uses her own tragic experience with the AIDS virus to poke fun at and critique a highly homophobic dominant American culture, and a government which, in the 1980s
and well into the 1990s, sought to deny responsibility for public education to check the spread of AIDS. In And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel exposes the destructive and insidiously rotten underbelly of the great American moral compass – the nuclear family – by offering alternatives to the “Father Knows Best” model of mother, father and two point five children in the form of Ruth’s, Anna’s and Peter’s unusual, homosexual, gender-bending family unit. In Hot 'N' Throbbing, perhaps Vogel's most "ideological" play, she uses multiple voices, narratives and action to unmask the highly deleterious effects of pornography on men, women and children, and its links to domestic violence. And, by focusing on the feminine (and feminist) perspectives of the female characters of Shakespeare’s "Moorish play," in Desdemona, a play about a handkerchief, Vogel reveals how a destructive class system works against female solidarity and how feminine desire can become deadly. In all of these plays, Vogel's dark humor, absurdist situations and wild comedy – combined with her appropriation of Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, episodic structure and social gestus – distances, de-familiarizes and estranges her audience into a distinctly feminist acknowledgment of the true extent of the oppression of women, a consistent re-visioning of the gender roles which her female (and male) characters have been assigned, and a re-visionary understanding of the powerful and uncontainable female body.
Notes

1 Ironically, Brecht formulated this radical, revolutionary approach to theater at the height of Nazi power during which German society turned a blind eye to the appalling sufferings of Jews and other persecuted social groups; unsurprisingly, this particular essay remained unpublished during his lifetime (Willet 76).

2 Vogel acknowledges that Caryl Churchill’s work has had a considerable influence on her own playwriting, and notes that in a period when the NEA has turned its back on theaters and artists by “thinking theater should be a moneymaking proposition,” Churchill, like Maria Irene Fornes, has “transformed the possibilities, the vocabularies” of theater (Savran "Paula Vogel" 287).

3 For more information on Brecht’s theories on how to create effective, episodic structure, see his 1935 essay, “On the Use of Music in an Epic Theater,” as well as his discussion of episodic techniques in opera in “The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater” (1930).

4 In his biography, Brecht: The Man and His Work, Martin Esslin observes that Brecht “characteristically” wrote because of or in response to other writers. Brecht’s first play Baal was written in response to Der Einsame, by Hanns Johnst, who, as Esslin observes, later became a leading poet of Nazi Germany. Brecht disliked the “false idealism” and “sentimentality” in Johnst’s play about the German poet Grabbe, who was himself an “outsider and drunkard but a genius” (Esslin Brecht 10). Thus began Brecht’s career in smashing idols and rebelling against the false idealism and sentimentality of realistic or romantic theater.
CHAPTER 2

LEARNING THE GRAMMARS OF GRIEF: AIDS COMEDY

IN THE BALTIMORE WALTZ

"Tell all the Truth, but tell it Slant –
Success in Circuit lies . . .”
-- Emily Dickinson, #1129

ANNA: The human body is a wonderful thing. Like yours. Like mine. The beauty of the body heals all the sickness, all the bad things that happen to it. And I really want you to feel this. Because if you feel it, you’ll remember it. And then maybe you’ll remember me.
-- Paula Vogel, The Baltimore Waltz

Written in 1989 and recipient of the Obie Award in 1992, The Baltimore Waltz is easily Paula Vogel’s most produced and most well-known play, second only in popularity and recognition to her 1998 Pulitzer Prize winning play How I Learned to Drive. A fast-moving, sometimes absurdist, frequently postmodern comedy about the unlikely subject of AIDS, The Baltimore Waltz is also startling in its seriousness and in its grappling with the themes of homophobia, feminine desire, sibling relationships, and the ravages, prejudices and misconceptions surrounding the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. Vogel begins The Baltimore Waltz with a playwright’s note, stating in stark, unembellished prose that her brother Carl died of complications from the AIDS virus at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland on January 9,
1988; two years earlier he had suggested they take a trip to Europe, a suggestion which Vogel remarks she did not take seriously (4). Vogel then notes that The Baltimore Waltz is the “journey with Carl to a Europe that exists only in the imagination,” a journey which the AIDS virus robbed her of taking with him (4).

In addition to her playwright’s note, Vogel also includes a copy of a letter from Carl regarding the “production values” of his burial (4). Carl’s letter is both hilarious and heart breaking, asserting that he wants “a good show, even though [his] role has been reduced involuntarily from player to prop” (4). Sounding much like one of Vogel’s irrepressible characters (or, perhaps more appropriately, her characters sounding much like him), Carl’s letter demonstrates in miniature the balance of tragedy and comedy of The Baltimore Waltz, listing the options of how his body is to be displayed at his funeral:

1. Open casket, full drag.

2. Open casket, bum up. (You’ll know where to place the calla lilies, won’t you?)

3. Closed casket, internment with grandparents.

4. Cremation and burial of my ashes.

5. Cremation and dispersion of my ashes in some sylvan spot... (5)

With this juxtaposition of her brother’s text and her own brief, and uncharacteristically explicit and formal introductory text, Vogel sets up the uneasy balance of fantasy and reality and of the comic and tragic themes of The Baltimore Waltz, of a world in which female, heterosexual first-grade teachers are “cut down in the prime of youth” by toilet seats, in which stuffed rabbits are both contraband and bargaining chips, in which The...
Little Dutch Boy at Age 50 works as a male prostitute, and in which comic, garbled language lessons and verb tenses are used to learn the conjugations of loss. As with her feminist appropriation of Brechtian theatrical conventions in And Baby Makes Seven, Hot 'N' Throbbing and Desdemona, Vogel uses comedy to attack the tragedy of AIDS, to expose and critique homophobia, and to celebrate feminine desire with the Brechtian devices of Verfremdungseffekt and social gestus. A profoundly feminist, profoundly personal and profoundly political play, The Baltimore Waltz urges its audiences to personal and political rebellion against the destructive ideologies of the dominant American society by — to paraphrase Emily Dickinson — telling its “Truth” “slant,” by re- visioning Vogel’s brother’s disease, and by embarking on an impossible, fantastic journey.

The Baltimore Waltz opens with the character Anna’s (rather unsuccessful) attempts at language lessons à la Baedeker while attempting to figure out the correct pronunciation of “Wo sind die Toiletten?” (Vogel 7). In this opening monologue, Anna reveals she is planning a trip to Europe with her older brother, Carl (whose name is another autobiographical nod or “valentine” to Vogel’s beloved brother Carl), who, she informs the audience, is the “head librarian of literature and languages at the San Francisco Public,” an obviously “very important position” (7). With the quick, semi-absurdist logic of a dream, the action, time and setting of Scene One then shift abruptly to her brother’s “Reading Hour with Uncle Carl” at the North Branch of the San Francisco Library. Carl’s monologue reveals that Anna’s previous report of his job as “head librarian of literature and languages” is greatly inflated, and, instead, Carl is a somewhat beleaguered, openly homosexual child librarian who instructs his “boys and girls” to cut
out their own “pink triangles” — loaded symbols of both gay pride and gay persecution during the Holocaust — in celebration of his “pink slip,” leading them in a raucous, obscene round of “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” in which they collectively “flip off” Carl’s unseen boss (8). Vogel’s comedy at this early point in The Baltimore Waltz is particularly pointed and political in its implication that Carl has received his “pink slip” for wearing his own “pink triangle,” and for his HIV positive status, highlighting the rampant homophobia and irrational fear of employers of infection from their gay, HIV positive employees. Indeed, the underlying, unspoken specter of Carl’s AIDS is quite visible in his hilarious leave-taking for an “immediate vacation to the East Coast” with his sister, Anna (9), and Vogel leaves multiple clues throughout the scene that this vacation is not the fantasy voyage Anna describes, but is in fact a one-way ticket to the AIDS research unit at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland.

Although our introduction to Carl and Anna dangerously teeters on the maudlin edge of melodrama, Vogel quickly deflates any possible pathos or empathy we as an audience might feel for these siblings in The Baltimore Waltz’s opening scenes by wielding the sharp Brechtian tool of Verfremdungseffekt, or the distancing effect. Vogel achieves this distancing effect first and foremost by subverting our audience expectations of a tear-jerking, heart-felt drama and by transferring Carl’s AIDS virus to Anna’s character and re-visioning it as “ATD” or “Acquired Toilet Disease,” a virulent, hushed-up affliction that strikes down single schoolteachers who share the “johnny” with their young students (11). In doing so, she transforms a potential AIDS tragedy into an ATD comedy. Vogel’s distanced transformation of AIDS to ATD is crucial to encouraging an active and socially responsible audience, since, as in both Brechtian dramaturgy and
critical writing, familiarity does tend to breed contempt in modern audiences, or, at the very least, a stupor from which they will not awake. By extension, what becomes familiar, such as unquestioned acceptance of the HIV virus as an inescapable part of daily life, becomes easy to ignore, or, worse yet, easy to distort by politicians and church leaders who make blanket statements defining the AIDS virus as divine retribution for homosexuals.

Vogel’s appropriation of Verfremdungseffekt works well in this context, and by removing the AIDS virus and its attached, often homophobic stigmas and replacing it with the comic, somewhat silly “syndrome” of ATD, Vogel restores visibility to a subject to which American culture has become increasingly inured and forces her audience to re-examine their own uneasy acceptance of a disease that continues to baffle modern science, and, ten years after The Baltimore Waltz’s original production, is rapidly gaining global, plague-like proportions. By transferring Carl’s very real condition to Anna’s fantastic condition, Vogel also refocuses the usual locus of AIDS theater from gay males to heterosexual females, a population not usually thought of as “at risk” for HIV infection. This transfer from Carl to Anna of the comedic, fantastic ATD syndrome is both surprising and distancing (and thus Brechtian) and highly feminist in its conscious re-focus of the play’s investigation of death and disease from a homosexual, male point-of-view to a heterosexual, female point-of-view, using female insight and experience to investigate what is normally assumed to be a predominately homosexual, male disease.¹

In addition, by specifying Anna’s role as a first-grade schoolteacher, Vogel also focuses on the primarily feminine realm of elementary school teachers and the often silent, undervalued work of such women. Anna’s hilarious and touching mini-journey through
the “six stages of grief,” particularly the “Second Stage: Anger” reveals a distinctly feminine and feminist outrage at her predicament, as she angrily inquires how ATD “could happen” to her, a dedicated teacher who “did [her] lesson plans faithfully for the past ten years,” “taught in classrooms without walls,” took the thankless job of the yearly “talent show,” “read Summerhill” and, even further, “believed it!” (27).

Vogel fine-tunes her feminist application of the Brechtian distancing effect in the comic disparity between the actual sexually transmitted syndrome of AIDS and her fictional creation ATD with an examination of the incomprehensible medical jargon which accompanies The Baltimore Waltz’s dread disease. Anna and Carl’s reaction to news of the disease in the first three scenes of the play is given comedic spin by the nonsensical, straight-faced description provided by the “Doctor” (one of the plethora of roles portrayed by the play’s third character the Third Man, whose name is a sly reference to 1950 classic cold-war movie of the same title\(^2\)) of her condition:

Also known as Loffler’s Syndrome, i.e., eosinophilia, resulting in fibroblastic thickening, persistent tachycardia, hepatomegaly, splenomegaly, serious effusions into the pleural cavity with edema. It may be *Brugia malayi* or *Wuchereria bancrofti* – also known as Weingarten’s Syndrome. Often seen with effusions, either exudate or transudate. (9)

Vogel here seems to be poking pointed fun at the propensity of the medical profession to distance itself from the horrific news it must give patients by lapsing into unintelligible, almost nonsensical jargon. In addition, the multiple symptoms and the multiple results of these symptoms (i.e. “Loffler’s syndrome” and “Weingarten’s
Syndrome”) offered by the “Doctor” imply that, like AIDS, ATD is inscrutable to modern science. Vogel, however, immediately explodes this seemingly poignant moment of suffering with Anna’s comic resolution: “in whatever time this schoolteacher has left . . . to fuck [her] brains out” (12). Scene Two, entitled “Medical Straight Talk: Part One” continues in this vein of comedic distancing. When confronted by Carl as to why the public has not been alerted to the dangers of Acquired Toilet-Seat Disease Syndrome, the “Doctor” hides behind sanctimonious bureaucracy, claiming that the responsibility for educating the public to the dangers of this disease is that of the “NEA,” and that, “if word of this pestilence gets out inappropriately, the PTA is going to be all over the school system demanding mandatory testing of every toilet seat in every lavatory” (11).

By parodying AIDS and re-inventing it as a hushed-up killer of elementary school teachers, Vogel sheds new light on the AIDS crisis and highlights the absurdity of the initial impulses by science and government to cover up the AIDS epidemic in the name of averting “political disaster” (11). Additionally, with this comic re-direction of blame from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Vogel pointedly reveals the stereotypes which accompany AIDS by the “Doctor’s” claim it is the NEA’s responsibility to educate the public of the deadliness of AIDS. The implied stereotype of the Doctor’s speech is that many of American AIDS sufferers are homosexual men. Further, and more importantly, the Doctor’s stereotype posits that these gay, AIDS-infected men must be “artistic” and are therefore assumed to be patrons of the arts, and, by extension, the NEA. In this biting, comic scene, Vogel exposes and critiques the stereotype that all gay men are artistic and that all sufferers of AIDS are gay men. Additionally, she savagely ridicules the unpardonable delay in early
public education on how to check the spread of AIDS, and the hypocrisy of government agencies and science in dealing with this medical crisis.³

Another example of Vogel’s feminist application of the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt lies in Anna’s and Carl’s subsequent journey to “Europe.” After contacting his rather sinister, elusive “Johns Hopkins chum” “Harry Lime” (again, played by The Third Man, and, again, a reference to the cold-war classic movie The Third Man) in Vienna to investigate the possibilities of a shady, black-market cure, Carl whisks the reluctant, language-impaired and gastronomically-timid Anna off to Europe. This is no realistic Europe, however, and in Vogel’s fantastical logic, Anna and Carl sight-see the entirety of Paris – from the scenic West Bank to the Eiffel Tower (which, Anna archly observes, “looks so . . . phallic” [19]) to the Boulevard St. Michel – in a one-page scene. Vogel’s Europe is a semi-magical, liminal space in which anything can and will happen, from trench-coated men flashing stuffed rabbits at each other, to the Little Dutch Boy at 50 making a living as a prostitute since all “women toeristen want to sleep with the little Dutch boy who put his thumb in the dyke” (33). This non-realistic re-visioning of a “familiar” European tour is both startling and distancing, particularly in the “travelogue” midway through The Baltimore Waltz in which Anna and Carl interrupt the forward action of the play and show the audience “slides” of their trip through a decidedly fanciful Germany. However, rather than show the sights which Carl rhapsodically narrates, such as a “rather dear inn near the Drachenfels Mountains, where Lord Byron had sported,” Vogel’s stage directions dictate that the slide projector should actually show “a close-up of the balcony railing looking into the Ramada Inn hotel room” in Baltimore, Maryland (36).
This juxtaposition of the linguistic, fantasy trip with images of the “realistic” setting of the Johns Hopkins hospital is, like Vogel’s substitution of ATD for AIDS, both amusing and unsettling. Vogel consciously distances her audience during this travelogue, smashing the illusion of Carl’s idealistic and rather pompous literary description of the “regal pines of the Black Forest” by literally projecting images of an “impoverished” American city and a “sterile” hospital over and above his narration (37). In his essay on the “Indirect Impact of the Epic Theater,” Bertolt Brecht notes the power of such visual labeling, discussing his use of video projections in his own 1932 production of Die Mutter, in which projections of “texts and pictorial documents” remained on screen while the action of the play unfolded on stage. Brecht asserts that this juxtaposition of theatrical action and two-dimensional images and text is integral to the effectiveness of his epic theater:

The projections are in no way pure mechanical aids in the sense of being extras, they are no pons asinorum; they do not set out to help the spectator but to block him; they prevent his complete empathy, interrupt his being automatically carried away. (58)

Brecht argues that projections such as the ones used in Die Mutter and other plays both open up a theatrical production by destroying the fourth wall of realistic theater and distance it, reminding audiences that they are in fact watching the heightened reality of theater and not observing immutable facts or “real life.” By interrupting an audience member’s “empathy,” projection and visual labeling then works in harmony – or, perhaps it is better to say, dissonance – with Verfremdungseffekt. Audiences of Brechtian epic theater are then more able to evaluate the social and political themes explored on stage.
and act accordingly. Similarly, Vogel’s bleak labeling of the visual projection of images from economically-depressed Baltimore neighborhoods in conjunction with Carl’s verbal fantasy of “walk[ing] through Bavaria” (40) effectively undercuts the dangerously alluring illusion of The Baltimore Waltz’s idealized travel, shocking and reminding audiences that they are indeed watching a theatrical production, and that the play’s characters, Anna and Carl, have not traveled anywhere further than the AIDS research ward of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Towards the end of this travelogue scene, Vogel’s feminist harnessing of the power of Brechtian projection becomes even more playful, and, at the same time, serious, in the substitution of a slide that uses the icon of North American patriarchal fantasy, Disneyland’s Sleeping Beauty’s Castle, for the “Neuschwanstein” castle, the Bavarian architectural model upon which Disney’s Sleeping Beauty’s Castle was conceived. This hilarious, distinctly distancing moment in the playtext is made suddenly serious and complex by Carl’s dialogue immediately preceding the literal projection, in which he begs Anna for one more slide, declaring that the audience must see “Neuschwanstein, built by Mad King Ludwig II. It’s so rococo it’s Las Vegas,” supplementing this observation with the comic aside that he believes Ludwig “was reincarnated in the twentieth century as Liberace” (39). The slide containing the post-card image of Disneyland’s Sleeping Beauty Castle is then projected on to the stage, and Carl, seeing this substitution of the American amusement park icon for the actual castle (along with subsequent slides of “Mickey Mouse” and “Donald Duck”), becomes visibly upset, rushing off stage after accusing Anna of traveling through Germany “on her back” (40).
Vogel's multi-layered visual and verbal projected pun of castles and family entertainment and Carl's reaction to it serves several purposes: first, the substitution of a Disneyland icon for an actual historical monument acts as a distinct distancing effect, working along with the comedy of the scene to jar audiences away from any kind of uncritical acceptance of the fantasy of Anna and Carl's journey, and of the play itself. The juxtaposition of the symbol of "the Happiest Place on Earth" with the underlying serious AIDS plot is at once hilarious and shocking, associating childlike fantasy with death and disease. This gap between apparently identical image and image, symbol and symbol is decidedly Brechtian, and, as Brecht notes in his essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," use of visual projection is often most effective when using materials on the projection screen that "contradict" what characters say (70). In showing Disney's castle, Vogel displays to the audience a literal "false front," a signifier whose ties to its originator have become blurred and confused with fairy tales, amusement parks and American consumerism. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this projected image acts as Vogel's self-conscious and self-referential feminist acknowledgment and critique of the postmodern power of the romantic fantasy imbued both in the image of the Neuschwanstein castle — the perfect "fairy tale" castle — and the perfect simulacrum of this romantic fantasy (and powerful purveyor of negative, gender-biased and patriarchal fairy tales) in the false image of Disney's Sleeping Beauty Castle. There is no "happily-ever-after" in this fairy tale, and Anna is far from a Sleeping Beauty who, as Helene Cixous notes in her article, "Castration or Decapitation," never truly awakens, trading slumber in her father's bed to slumber in her husband's bed (164); likewise, Carl is no fairy tale prince. With her feminist application of the distancing Brechtian effect of
projection, Vogel collapses symbol upon symbol in this short scene in a dizzying display of theoretical and theatrical fireworks, continually reminding her audience of the dangers of uncritically accepting the romantic fantasy of “realistic” theater and of fairy tales, even if the alternative reality – such as the stark, sterile corridors of the AIDS ward of Johns Hopkins Hospital – is almost too much to bear.

Anna observes, after receiving the initial news of her disease, that “It’s the language that terrifies me” (10). Vogel’s use of unsettling language throughout Baltimore Waltz is yet another adaptation of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt, a way of “making strange” the action on stage and reminding audiences of the seriousness of the play’s underlying themes. Characters frequently step out of the action and address the audience, breaking the fourth wall of realistic theater, and move unpredictably from first, second and third person, jarring the audience from the lulling, narcotic effects of realistic dialogue. A typical example of this distancing switch from the use of the first person “I” to use of the second person “you” occurs in Scene Eighteen, in which Carl speaks from the side of the stage:

You were not permitted to play with dolls; dolls are for girls. You played with your sister’s dolls until your parents found out. They gave you a stuffed animal – a thin line was drawn. Rabbits were an acceptable surrogate for little boys. You named him Jo-Jo . . . (24)

In this surprisingly moving monologue, Vogel plays with Brecht’s theories on actor/character relationships, or the “A-effect”. The practical application of Verfremdungseffekt, the A-effect is a method of “jerking” a character out of ordinary experience and relationships, a “Not . . But” statement in which a character chooses “not”
one action, "but" another (Brecht 144). Thus, in the process of the Alienation-effect, Brecht theorizes that there exists a kind of chain reaction in which not "just one possibility but two" are introduced, and "then the second one is alienated, then the first one as well" (144). Brecht offers the experience of driving a Model T Ford after driving a modern car as an example of the Alienation-effect: "We start feeling amazed that such a vehicle . . . can move; in short, we understand cars, by looking at them as something strange, new, as a triumph of engineering and to that extent something unnatural" (144-145). Thus, Carl by not directly acting out his childhood trauma, but instead narrating it from the second person reveals the "unnaturalness" of gender stereotyping, of forcing little boys away from the "flaxen hair of [their] sister's Betsey Wetsey doll" (34) towards more masculine, more (supposedly) gender-appropriate toys. Feminist theorist Elin Diamond also notes in her article "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism" that the A-effect occurs "in performance [when] the actor 'alienates' rather than impersonates [their] character" (84). By requiring the performer to remain outside the character, as Vogel does by placing Carl's side-stage speech in the second person "you," Diamond, via Brecht, theorizes that the actor/performer, along with the audience, is therefore "free to analyze and form opinions about the plays 'fable'" or lesson (84). With this startlingly tender monologue, Vogel both alienates the realistic action of the scene, and underscores its 'fable,' the unfairness of gender stereotyping and a society which forbids little boys the physical and emotional comforts of dolls, and frowns upon the possession of stuffed animals.6

The implicit gender stereotyping of this short speech, a seemingly inconsequential interruption to the real action of the play by the play's non-apologetic homosexual
character, also embodies a perfect example of Vogel’s success in coupling Brechtian and feminist theory. As Elin Diamond observes, feminist theorists define “gender” as a collection of “cultural signs” (84). Diamond offers this definition of gender and its importance to feminist/ Brechtian theorists:

Gender refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators ‘see’ gender they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture. Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ behavior usually appears to be a ‘natural’ – and thus fixed and unalterable – extension of biological sex. Feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender usually use some version of the Brechtian A-effect . . . [and] by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator. (84)

Carl’s observation of himself, his stepping out of character to narrate the gender conditioning of his youth, indeed “foregrounds” the “ideology of gender,” and, at the same time, critiques it. In this scene, and throughout the play, Vogel both urges audiences to re-consider their own gender preconceptions, and the implicit homophobia in mainstream culture that finds cross-gender behavior, such as a little boy’s desire to play with their sister’s “Betsey Wetsey doll” (23), unacceptable or un-natural. As Diamond points out, “understanding gender as an ideology – as a system of beliefs and
behaviors mapped across the bodies of females and males which reinforces a social status quo – is to appreciate the continued timeliness of Verfremdungseffekt . . .” (85).

Typical of feminist subversiveness, Vogel also consistently resists the gendered, masculine gaze of much realistic theater by placing Anna, the narrator of The Baltimore Waltz, firmly in charge of the audience’s gaze. Anna’s point of view, for the most part, dominates the play, and her needs drive the action of the play. Indeed, Vogel completely reverses gender stereotypes with Anna’s bald declaration to “fuck her brains out,” and it is Anna who fetishizes the various male characters of the play performed by the “Third Man” in her relentless seduction of Europe. When questioned as to why she endowed Anna with behavior typically stereotyped as masculine, Vogel replies:

In my plays, I want to present women as desiring subjects, which means that men sometimes become the object of the female gaze . . . [In Baltimore Waltz] I wanted to pay homage to my brother’s desire for men. In order to do that I used a woman subject desiring the male body. I wanted the audience to appreciate how beautiful the male body is. Some women automatically do that, so I used a woman, and through a female subject, straight men who are homophobic would go, yeah, I can see how she finds him beautiful. And if I’ve got them there, I’ve got the entire audience understanding that the male body can be a desired object. And then I am halfway there in terms of overcoming our homophobia towards men on stage . . . (Holmberg)

Vogel’s choices of protagonist and her depiction of feminine desire in The Baltimore Waltz are even more intriguing when juxtaposed with Elin Diamond’s theories
of the masculine and feminine gaze in the context of Brechtian historicization. Brecht declares in "A Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" that "actors must play the incidents [of a play] as historical ones," drawing upon the detachment of a historian and further alienating themselves from the play text and from the audience (140). Thus, the behavior and "conduct" of characters in the "historical" (i.e. not immediately present) moments of a play should not be "fixed and 'universally human'" in order to best allow audience members to interact critically with the thematic and ideological concerns of the events unfolding on stage. Diamond takes Brecht's ideas of praxis one step further, commenting that the "if feminist theory sees the body as culturally mapped and gendered, Brechtian historicization insists that this body is not a fixed essence, but a site of struggle and change" (89). Thus, Diamond posits that Brechtian staging can place a woman's "historicity," or the "complex signs of a woman's life: her color, her age, her desires, her politics" — that which is normally hidden — in plain view on stage and reverse the traditional masculine gaze of the theater (89).

Anna's naked appreciation of her European encounters with the Garçon, the Little Dutch Boy at 50, the Munich Virgin and the Radical Student Activist, all, of course, played by The Third Man, are funny, distancing and an intriguing realization of Diamond's "historicized" feminine protagonist. As with the disturbing, unsettling switch between the first and second person in Carl's Jo-Jo monologue, Anna moves from the active, first person "I" to the narrative, second person "you" after a particularly torrid encounter with the Radical Student Activist near the end of the play:

In lovemaking, he's all fury and heat. His North Sea, pounding against your Dreamer. And when you look up and see his face, red and huffing,
it’s hard to imagine him ever having been a newborn, tiny, wrinkled and seven pounds.

That is, until afterwards. When he rises from sleep and he walks into the bathroom. And there he exposes his soft little derriere, and you can still see the soft baby flesh. (45)

By moving outside of herself and narrating her own experience to the audience, Anna distances, historicizes and estranges the sexual encounter with the Radical Student Activist – who is the epitome of the angry young man – as well as the idea of sexual intercourse itself, marveling with the detached tone of a historian or an uninvolved observer at the transition of the powerful lover into a defenseless infant. This grammatical distancing which includes the audience with the use of the second person inclusive “you,” also reveals the feminist subversiveness with which Vogel consistently resists the gendered, traditionally masculine gaze of the theater. In this scene Vogel makes it plain that it is Anna, not the Radical Student, who is doing the gazing and desiring. By placing Anna’s historicity in plain sight, and by hilariously investigating her overwhelming “desires” for meaningless, abandoned sexual encounters, Vogel empowers her female protagonist, subverts the possible subconscious homophobia of the audience, reveals the undercurrent of very serious gender politics underlying the action of the play, and further melds feminist and Brechtian theory.

Vogel also employs social *gestus,* another feminist application of Brechtian theory, in *The Baltimore Waltz* as a method of encouraging her audience to notice and thus critique the gender politics and homophobia of the dominant American society she continually castigates. One example of social *gestus* which has already received critical

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attention is tied, like Brecht’s Mother Courage and her ubiquitous purse, to the costuming of The Third Man, who wears “latex gloves” throughout the play as stipulated by Vogel’s production notes. In an interview with David Savran, Vogel discusses her reply when questioned by Anne Bogart (director of the 1992 Circle Repertory production of The Baltimore Waltz) why she makes such a seemingly arbitrary production requirement:

[Bogart] said, ‘Isn’t that awkward?’ And I said, ‘If he’s constantly in latex gloves we will forget that he’s wearing them, and people will gasp at the end of the play when he pulls them off.’ As cultural animals, we do not forget because something is hidden, we forget because something is in our face and we don’t want to see it anymore . . . Forgetting is a way of not looking. (“Paula Vogel” 271)

Thus, the gesture, or the distinctly Brechtian gestus of the Third Man removing his gloves is social because it comments upon and critiques a society which “forgets” about AIDS, much as the audience of The Baltimore Waltz might “forget” that, for all its hilarity, the play is in fact about a very serious, deadly disease. This social gestus is also powerful because of its context: the Third Man (who plays primarily heterosexual characters throughout the course of the play) removes his gloves only after Carl is dead in the final scene of the play, signaling, perhaps, the unwillingness of the heterosexual community to expose themselves to the contagion of AIDS and to the metaphorical “contagion” of homosexuality. The latex gloves work much like a latex condom – the only current solution to avoiding HIV infection, barring complete sexual abstinence – and provides the clinical illusion of sexual and moral “safety.” In his final “role” of the Doctor, the Third Man’s theatrical act of stripping off this latex protection also contributes a muted,
cynical coda to the AIDS tragedy contained within the ATD comedy of The Baltimore Waltz, signaling that the medical community — and American heterosexual society — is prepared to remove their literal and figurative “hands off” attitude towards the AIDS virus only when it is too late.

Another multi-layered social gest in The Baltimore Waltz is that of the waltz of the title, a dance all three characters perform near the end of the play. Vogel tweaks both the Brechtian and feminist definition of social gest and the traditional notions of the waltz to fit her own comic, non-realistic purposes. Waltzing, or dancing, is a common metaphor for public, communal activity. Following pre-determined steps, dancers renew social order in a complex ceremony, and dancing — or waltzing — takes place during public gatherings. Secondly, dancing can also be seen as an elaborate and private mating ritual in which a heterosexual couple move in unison and in close proximity, often with the “man” leading the “woman” in dance. On a third level, the waltz, like Claire Luckham’s wrestling matches in her play Trafford Taxi, has economic and class implications since it is the dance of the wealthy and the leisured. Thus, the waltz acts as an ideal social gest, displaying and distancing for our criticism both public and private action.

Although the most touching waltz occurs in the final moments of the play in which Anna and Carl, now dead and dressed in full “Austrian military regalia” (57), dance off into the wings to the tune of a Strauss waltz, the most powerfully gestic waltz is the first waltz. The first time the audience actually sees characters in The Baltimore Waltz dance is near the end of the play in Scene Twenty-eight, “On the Ferris Wheel in the Prater,” during which Carl and “Harry Lime” (played by the Third Man) dance a
choreographed skirmish for an object they both wish to possess. Vogel describes the
dance as both “seductive” and as a “struggle,” and, as always, comedy is inherent in this
send-up of cold war spy thrillers in which the ‘spy’ is a caricature of Orson Welles’s
character from the movie *The Third Man*, and the contraband is a stuffed rabbit (51).
Vogel’s blending of popular culture, gestic action and a seemingly inconsequential
children’s toy all work together to distance the spectator from the action unfolding on
stage, forcing them into a passionate re-evaluation of the construction of gender roles and
sexuality.

Context is also crucial in deconstructing the multiple layers of this social gest
because however silly the premise of this scene may seem, the public/private dance
occurs directly after a confrontation in which Carl and Harry Lime/The Third Man
discuss the corrupt cooperation of legitimate medicine and the black market. At this
point in the play, Carl is seeking a black market cure for Anna’s ATD by contacting his
old school chum from “Johns Hopkins.” Harry Lime cynically informs Carl that Anna is
better off sticking with the quack, transvestite doctor “Todesrocheln,” than with the drugs
he is selling which he has made in his “kitchen” (50). Incensed, Carl asks Harry Lime
why he is preying on the ill and receives the following explanation:

Why not? People will pay for these things. When they’re desperate
people will eat peach pits or aloe or egg protein – they’ll even drink their
own piss. It gives them hope . . . Listen, old man, if you want to be a
millionaire, you sell real estate. If you want to be a billionaire, you sell
hope. (50)
Vogel's Harry Lime is much like Orson Welles's Harry Lime in the movie *The Third Man.* A suave, fast-talking, sinister black-market raconteur who cares more for the money he can earn from capitalizing on the desperation of terminally-ill patients than on working to find cures for terminal diseases. His solution to death is both mimetic and chilling, holding a mirror up to Vogel's spectators to reveal a similar complicity in a capitalist system whose main product is "hope" and not science. The ensuing waltz, "performed" by two men, highlights the subversive gender-bending, homosexual undertones that run throughout the play, and the social and ideological conditions Vogel critiques. Unlike the usual metaphorical associations with dancing/waltzing, this social gest is not an activity of community renewal or heterosexual seduction. Instead it is a homoerotic struggle for power, in which both Carl and Harry Lime struggle for possession of Jo-Jo the stuffed rabbit, already demonstrated as a powerful signifier of gender stereotyping.

As a Brechtian/feminist social gest, this struggle first and foremost underscores the unfair opposition between corrupt medicine and the struggling AIDS patient who will pay any amount of money for "hope" in the form of a black-market drug manufactured in Harry Lime's kitchen. The two men's waltz also deconstructs the communal, heterosexual expectations that accompany waltzing by portraying it as a seductive, desperate struggle between two old school chums. This waltz perfectly encapsulates Brecht's "not/but" identification of social *gestus*: it is not the culturally-coded gestures of a wealthy man and woman dancing to renew community and sexual union, but a parody of a spy movie character and a deathly ill AIDS patient move in choreographed, tortured union. Thus, this particular social gest is at once funny and sad, much like...
Vogel’s brother’s letter preceding the playtext and the entire tone and structure of The Baltimore Waltz. Carl’s and Harry Lime’s gestic action both explains and exceeds the play, containing in it multiple thematic messages — reversal of gender stereotypes, AIDS and health care reform, etc. — through which Vogel urges her audience to political and personal rebellion against the status quo of American culture.

Although structurally The Baltimore Waltz begins and ends in the same physical space, Vogel moves her characters and her audience into a completely new emotional and intellectual space at the conclusion of the play in which everything (Carl’s death) and nothing (American political and social reaction to the AIDS crisis, homophobia and gender stereotyping) has changed. In the final scene, the Doctor, played once again by The Third Man, hands Anna a bunch of “European brochures” found by housekeeping by her brother’s bedside, to which she replies:

Ah yes, the brochures for Europe. I’ve never been abroad. We’re going to go when he gets — (Stops herself) I must learn to use the past tense. We would have gone had he gotten better. (57)

The language lessons which Vogel leaves throughout the play as clues to the “reality” of Anna and Carl’s imminent separation are completed as Anna learns to move from the present and future tense — “we’re going to go” — to the past tense — “we would have gone.”

Anna also seems to have learned, via her fantasy voyage with Carl and her language lessons, to work through her grief and to reject the patriarchal fantasy of a heterosexual “happily-ever-after,” and Vogel subverts any traditional ending to Anna’s cultural script as seen in her firm rejection of the Doctor’s shy offer to go have “coffee.”
"You're very sweet. But no, I don't think so. I feel it's simply not safe for me right now to see anyone. Thanks again and goodbye" (57). After seducing multiple versions of The Third Man, Anna ultimately rejects him, and instead waltzes off stage with a revived, beautifully outfitted Carl, paradoxically rejecting and accepting fantasy with this remarkably moving final image. Ultimately, The Baltimore Waltz is a waltz with words as much as it is a with physical actions, revealing via Vogel's revolutionary, feminist appropriation of the Brechtian techniques of Verfremdungseffekt and social gestus the political and very personal issues of AIDS, homophobia, and the truly powerful and liberating nature of feminine desire. With her poignant final image, Vogel seems to imply that by telling our own "Truths" and by telling them "slant," we can move from the past tense into the present, work to change a society which "forgets" deadly plagues or demonizes the sufferers of these plagues, waltz with our own pick of partners (who might, more often than not, turn out to be our gay maiden librarian brothers), and re- vision our own versions of fantasy and reality.
Notes

1 This transfer of infection from Carl to Anna and Vogel’s light-hearted, often slapstick tone in The Baltimore Waltz has attracted vehement criticism by both theatrical critics and homosexual and lesbian audiences, who accuse her of irresponsibility for not directly portraying the dark tragedies of AIDS and/or its most affected populations. Typical of this type of response, Robert King poses the following questions in his review of the 1993 Yale production of The Baltimore Waltz: “Is it proper to so reduce an epidemic disease? To transfer to oneself the role of a dead brother? Is humor so therapeutic that any laughter helps us cope?” (48). I disagree with these critics and believe that in their earnestness to be socially correct, they are entirely missing the point. Like Jill Dolan, I believe that these critics miss the “power and poignancy of Vogel’s writing” and her unerring ability to write “solid, wry, biting satire of the ideologies that deny full sexual, emotional, and political expression for women, lesbians and gay men” (Dolan “Paula Vogel’s Desdemona” 438). The Baltimore Waltz is on many levels a deadly serious play, and Vogel is not merely transferring diseases in the name of hilarity or flippancy, but is instead using comedy to expose the ugly under-belly of American prejudice and society. Ironically, Vogel is herself a lesbian, one of the “at risk” populations of AIDS, although she abhors being pigeonholed as a “lesbian playwright.” When confronted with the question of whether or not she writes lesbian drama, she is quick to point out — tartly — that she does not write lesbian plays and that she “will not speak for all women” or “for all lesbians” (Coen 27). The influence and resonances of lesbian or queer critical theory on/in Vogel’s plays are, I think, other subjects worthy of future investigation.

2 The many subtle — and not so subtle — connections between Vogel’s AIDS comedy and The Third Man, starring Joseph Cotton and Orson Welles and directed by Robert Krasker is yet further fertile ground for critical inquiry, particularly in explicating the dialogue between The Baltimore Waltz’s intrigue and “mystery,” and the layers of deception and intrigue that envelop the post-World War II cold-war drama of The Third Man.

3 Later, in Scene Four, “Medical Straight Talk: Part Two,” Vogel looses one more poisoned arrow at governmental health agencies. In this scene, a “Public Health Official,” played, of course, by the Third Man, announces that the Department of Health and Human Services has recognized the “urgency of this dread disease” as the “82nd national health priority,” and has taken appropriate measures by organizing “Operation Squat” (Vogel 18). In the fantasy world of her play, Vogel implies that the reaction to ATD, like the real world’s reaction to AIDS, is far too little, too late.

4 Brecht’s use of the Latin term “pons asinorum” is quite humorous. Roughly translated it means “bridge of asses,” or, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it: “a humorous name for the fifth proposition of the first book of Euclid, from the difficulty with which beginners or dull-witted persons find in ‘getting over’ or mastering it.” Thus, if one is unable to comprehend Euclid’s proposition one is an “ass.” Brecht, however,
says that his theories of projection and \textit{Verfremdungseffekt} are not meant to limit understanding or to keep audience members from “crossing” the bridge of a difficult idea; instead they are meant to expand a viewer’s appreciation of and intellectual involvement with the play by, at the same time, blocking it.

5 As John Willett notes, Brecht hoped that his epic theater, via such devices as \textit{Verfremdungseffekt} and projection of images onto a blank screen during the dramatic action, would secure a communist revolution by raising the social consciousness of the average theater-goer. However, as Willett also observes, in 1933, the year after Die Mutter’s original, groundbreaking production, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and the hope of a Communist revolution were squashed; indeed, when the Reichstag building burned down on February 27, 1933, Brecht “left Germany the next day, and remained in exile until after the Second World War” (Willett note in Brecht 62).

Carl’s monologue is also quite important to the action of \textit{The Baltimore Waltz} since it reveals, in part, why “Jo-Jo” is such an important item to Carl and to the mysterious, sinister Third Man who follows Anna and Carl throughout their European quest for a cure. During the course of Carl’s monologue, the stuffed rabbit moves from a silly sight-gag and children’s toy to a signifier of Carl’s self-identification, and of Vogel’s Brechtian and feminist agenda in \textit{The Baltimore Waltz}.

Vogel here is making elliptical reference to the silent presence of the Johns Hopkins Memorial Hospital, looming under the dialogue.
CHAPTER 3

WHO'S NOT AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: FEMINISM AND FAMILIES IN AND BABY MAKES SEVEN

“Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of the night... Then the curtain rose. They spoke.”

-- Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts

MARTHA: I have tried, oh God I have tried; the one thing... I’ve tried to carry pure and unscathed through the sewer of this marriage; through the sick nights, and the pathetic, stupid days, through the derision and the laughter... God, the laughter, through one failure after another, one failure compounding another failure, each attempt more sickening, more numbing than the one before; the one thing the one person I have tried to protect, to raise above the mire of this vile, crushing marriage; the one light in all this hopeless... darkness... our SON.

-- Edward Albee, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

ANNA: We’re going to stop?
RUTH: Well... not just like that.
PETER: I don’t understand.
RUTH: Look, I want to get my last inch of fantasy out of them. I can’t just stop doing them, just like that. I’ll always be wondering: Will Cecil become a geophysicist? Will Henri go back to Paris? Will Orphan become fully socialized?

ANNA: So what are you proposing?
RUTH: We’re going to tidy up the plots. No loose ends dangling. Starting tomorrow. We’re going to kill them. One by one. First Orphan. Then Henri. Cecil will be the last to go.

-- Paula Vogel, And Baby Makes Seven
In her article, “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” Elin Diamond outlines the ideal intersections of Brechtian and feminist dramaturgy and aesthetics, calling for feminist playwrights, actors, directors and theater-goers to pioneer a truly revolutionary blend of feminist and Brechtian theater and theory. Diamond suggests that to build a feminist and feminine theater we, as critics, must first attempt to “recover” the theatrical medium through a “gestic feminist criticism,” a theoretical stance that would:

‘alienate’ or foreground those moments in a playtext in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible. It would highlight sex-gender configurations as they conceal or disrupt a coercive or patriarchal ideology. It would refuse to appropriate and naturalize male or female dramatists, but rather focus on historical material constraints in the production of images. It would attempt to engage dialectically, rather than master, the playtext. And in generating meanings, it would recover (specifically gestic) moments in which the historical actor, the character, the spectator and the author enter representation, however provisionally.

(90-91, emphasis mine)

Diamond’s vision of a new theatrical space that both refuses to participate in gender wars, and, at the same time, engages both Brechtian and feminist concerns in a real conversation with playtext, author, actor and spectator is realized in Paula Vogel’s ground-breaking playwriting. In her 1984 comedy, And Baby Makes Seven, Paula Vogel anticipates Diamond’s call for a new “gestic” feminist criticism, and, by extension, a gestic feminist theater, by creating a playtext that “recovers” and “engages dialectically”
rather than “masters” an earlier text, Edward Albee’s classic, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In *And Baby Makes Seven*, Vogel both resists and pays homage to Albee’s bleak vision of the nuclear American family by re-visioning the core structure of the American family itself, updating George and Martha’s stifling, sado-masochistic marriage to the hammy, hilarious, and gender- and sexual-orientation bending *ménage à trois* of Anna, Ruth and Peter, a lesbian couple and their gay roommate and sperm donor. Vogel resists, recovers and re-visions Albee’s classic most notably through her use of elements of *Verfremdungseffekt*, particularly social *gestus*, and episodic structure. Perhaps even more significantly, in *And Baby Makes Seven* Vogel lays the playful absurdist, Brechtian and feminist framework for her later plays, exploring and experimenting with these techniques to create a unique theatrical vision.

Written in 1962, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stands as one of the pre-eminent plays of twentieth-century American theater, alongside such canonical “classics” as Tennessee William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Albee’s absurdist drama focuses on a single night in the middle-aged marriage of George and Martha (whose names, Albee has noted, are an ironic homage to George and Martha Washington, the founding “couple” of the United States of America), and their impromptu “entertainment” of a younger couple, Honey and Nick.¹ Albee sets his play in a unspecified, small New England college, where George unsuccessfully teaches History, and Martha, the daughter of the college’s president, unsuccessfully plays the role of gracious hostess and academic’s wife. The action of the play unfolds entirely in George and Martha’s increasingly claustrophobic living room. During the course of the alcohol-sodden, abusive evening, Albee reveals much about George and Martha and their
marriage, as well as that of their guests, the seemingly innocent and naïve Honey and Nick.

Albee’s four characters embody a fascinating study of the poisonous powers of academia and the corruption of the American nuclear family: Martha is dissatisfied with George’s apparent inability to stand up to her bullying and the bullying of her father, as well as his lackluster professional advancement, while George is disgusted with Martha’s continual emotional abuse, her alcoholism and her adulterous habits. Honey and Nick appear at first to be the antithesis of George and Martha: successful, young and happy in their marriage. By the end of the play, Honey is revealed as bloodthirsty and manipulative and Nick as a cold-blooded social climber. Throughout the play, George and Martha refer to a “son,” a beautiful boy whom George sarcastically refers to as "sunny-Jim" (228). They use this emblematic child to abuse each other further, hurling the son’s existence around like a particularly deadly weapon. Eventually, we understand that this child is imaginary, a construct George and Martha have created and embellished in happier times, due partially to their inability to have children of their own. This “son” has gradually becomes the ultimate pawn for these two adept game players, and George finally “kills him off” in a fictional car wreck in the final act, both as retaliation for Martha’s mention of their imaginary child to their guests, and as a more generous attempt to end a mutual reliance on their fantasy life. To Martha’s heart-broken queries at the end of the play – “It was . . . ? You had to?” –George answers: “It was . . . time” (240). Albee’s play ends with daybreak and a tenuously reunited George and Martha who, now liberated from their fantasy life, face a life of “just us” (240).
The title of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? refers to a clever joke told at a faculty party which has dispersed just before the play begins. Albee’s characters sing this lyric question – “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” – to the catchy tune of Disney’s familiar jingle “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”. By juxtaposing one of the founding mothers of British feminism with a children’s story and song, and placing the song in the bitter, drunken mouths of Martha and George, Albee makes a complex and problematic statement about feminism and fear, two important thematic concerns of the play. Virginia Woolf, the early twentieth-century critic and author of the novels To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Dalloway and The Waves as well as the landmark feminist essay, A Room of One’s Own, is known for her unflinching gaze at reality, death and the minutiae of everyday routine, as well as for her focus on gender issues and early feminist politics in her novels and non-fiction. By posing the question – “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” – in the title as well as in the play itself, Albee engages both his characters and his audience in a dialogue about their fears of facing reality and the inevitable, absurd fact of one’s own death. In addition, Albee’s title question poses another dilemma, asking who in the play (as well as in the audience) is afraid of Virginia Woolf herself, author and feminist icon, whose prolific fiction and nonfiction writing career reveals an unshrinking and often terrifying insight into patriarchal structures and the human condition. Finally, Albee’s question interrogates who, among the audience and the cast of characters, is “afraid” of feminist writers (or feminists in general), and, more importantly, who is afraid of women. Such implications of this evocative title leads us to Albee’s often problematic characterization of the women in Who’s Afraid of Virginia
Woolf? and their fate in his tightly controlled microcosm of booze, sex, disillusionment, academic politics and dysfunctional nuclear families.

At first glance, Albee's characterization of Honey and Martha borders on misogynistic. Honey, Nick's young, "delicate" wife, is more child than woman, secretly taking high doses of estrogen to avoid pregnancy, and whose coy and demur demeanor melts during her hosts' more physical battles as she gleefully eggs them on, crying "VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE!" (137). She appears as more of a particularly misogynist caricature - the vacant-headed lush who "traps" men into marriage and whose viciousness is barely concealed by a thin veneer of civilization - than a full-blooded, three-dimensional character. Albee does not provide Honey with much dialogue with which to defend herself; often she acts as a chorus to Nick's, Martha's and George's dialogue, drunkenly (or perhaps deliberately) distancing herself from the emotional brutality unfolding on stage. When confronted with Martha's and Nick's possible infidelity as well as with George's scheme to destroy his and Martha's illusionary child (and with him, their dependence on illusion), Honey retreats into icy, drunken denial, declaring, "I've decided I don't remember anything" (211).

Martha, on the other hand, is a complex character: vocal, sensual, strong and extremely smart. She appears much like a tornado, a natural, unstoppable, destructive force, frustrated in the constricting cultural roles assigned to her. Martha is continually disgusted by the weaknesses of the other characters in the play, as well as by her own faults, as revealed in her speech to Nick in Act Three: "You're all flops. I am the Earth Mother and you're all flops. (More or less to herself) I disgust me. I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities . . . (Laughs ruefully) would-be infidelities" (189).
In this pivotal scene with Nick, Martha also discloses why she has remained with George throughout their long, tumultuous relationship:

George, who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off; who can make me laugh, and I choke it back in my throat; who can hold me, at night, so that it’s warm, and whom I will bite so there’s blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. . . whom I will not forgive for having come to rest; for having seen me and having said: yes, this will do; who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it . . . who tolerates, which is intolerable; who is kind, which is cruel; who understands, which is beyond comprehension . . .

(Albee 190-191).

This surprisingly lyrical and moving speech, which conflates positive and negative elements, reveals Martha’s profound psychological ambivalence about her marriage, her spouse and herself. Like a magnet with opposite impulses, Martha is continually attracted to and repulsed by George, an emotional state which she expresses in complex oxymorons: an “intolerable” tolerance, a “cruel” kindness, and an incomprehensible comprehension. The consequential, magnetic tension from this pull of opposites results in Martha’s emotional and physical stasis. This speech also reveals Martha’s profound self-hatred, a self-revulsion which she cannot resolve with George’s dogged and determined “love” and commitment to her. She thus punishes herself by
punishing him, holding at arm’s length that which she most desires: happiness, peace and harmonious companionship.

Why does Albee make Martha such a destructively contradictory character? On one level, he appears to be making a pseudo-feminist statement in his characterization of Martha, commenting, through her crass verbal abuse of all the play’s characters, on the insidiously destructive results of confining vibrant, complex women such as Martha to the tragically restrictive roles of dutiful wife, mother and cheerleader for her husband’s career. A feminist reader of Albee’s play, however, cannot help but wonder what Martha would be like if she were free to pursue her own choices instead of standing on the sidelines jeering at George in the supremely false, profoundly patriarchal academic world in which she is stuck. Indeed, the element of choice is removed from Martha’s world almost completely, creating a figurative cage that (barely) contains her restless energy and dissatisfaction with life, and it is George who possesses the climactic “choice” of the play by performing the exorcism of their “son” in the final act, a choice that propels both George and Martha out of their literal and figurative stasis. Albee endows George, not Martha, with the blessing of action, and it is he who destroys “their” child which they co-created in happier times, effectively removing Martha from a position of power in their imaginary life as well as in their “real” lives.

In And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel responds to Albee’s destruction of marital fantasy, as well as to the very serious question posed: “Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?” Vogel’s play is a zany, topsy-turvy comedy that, as Elin Diamond suggests, exists in a continual, feminist and Brechtian dialogue with Albee’s play, “highlight[ing] sex-gender configurations as they conceal or disrupt a coercive or patriarchal ideology”
Like The Baltimore Waltz, Hot N’ Throbbing, and Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief, And Baby Makes Seven displays Vogel’s distinctly feminist agenda and her adept use of Brechtian dramaturgy. Like Albee’s classic, And Baby Makes Seven has a distinctly absurdist bent, in which the imaginary and the real blend to suggest the corruption of an American ideal, the nuclear family. As Jill Dolan notes, although written relatively early in Vogel’s career, And Baby Makes Seven presages the absurdist style of The Baltimore Waltz and How I Learned to Drive, a style that “indicates profound distrust in truthfully representing the ‘real’” (“Paula Vogel’s Desdemona” 438). Instead of focusing on a realistic family, And Baby Makes Seven, like both Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief and The Baltimore Waltz, offers “an outrageous, imaginative situation, original or quoted from another source,” which, according to Dolan, “through its twisted perspective manages to make more sense of the workings of ideology than most more linear, expository, realist efforts” (438). And Baby Makes Seven does indeed lay bare the ideologies of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, exposing the patriarchal bias of Albee’s earlier play, and re-visioning his absurdist study of sour marriages and ruined lives in a non-realistic, non-expository, and non-linear style. Vogel plays fast and loose with Albee’s classic, both resisting Albee’s characterizations of Martha and Honey and playfully re-visioning George and Martha’s marriage as the unusual ménage à trois of Anna Epstein, Ruth Abrams and Peter Leven.

Like Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, And Baby Makes Seven takes place in a single space, in the New York loft apartment of lesbian partners Anna and Ruth, a living space which they share with their gay roommate Peter; Vogel specifies in her notes that the play takes place in an amorphously designated “present.” Prior to the play’s action,
Anna and Ruth have enlisted Peter’s assistance in impregnating Anna. In the prologue and opening scenes of And Baby, Vogel reveals that prior to Anna’s pregnancy, Anna and Ruth have created not one but three imaginary children, whose destruction Peter requests as the birth of their “real” child looms imminent. Reluctantly agreeing that they should forgo their fantasy “family” for a real one, Anna and Ruth set about providing appropriate “deaths” for their three imaginary sons: Orphan McDermott, age seven; Henri Dumont, age eight; and Cecil Bartholomew, age nine. The play’s action then follows the darkly comic destruction of the illusionary little boys. Each child is given his own personalized, hilarious send-off: Henri, the little boy from the French film The Red Balloon, hallucinates that he is whisked away by his beloved balloons and casts himself off a balcony; Orphan, who prior to his imaginary “adoption” was raised by wild dogs behind “Port Authority,” succumbs to rabies, spewing bad Shakespeare and spit in a grotesquely funny grand mal seizure; and Cecil, the ever-serious, well-read child genius commits suicide, falling on his imaginary “sword” à la Antony and Cleopatra. However, unlike George’s and Martha’s imaginary child, Anna’s and Ruth’s imaginary children do not stay dead. Following the birth of Anna, Ruth’s and Peter’s “real” son, Nathan, the three imaginary boys re-appear, and, as Vogel implies with the final scene, all seven characters – Anna, Ruth, Peter, Nathan, Henri, Orphan, and Cecil – live happily ever after, blissfully straddling the fence between reality and fantasy.

Vogel’s feminist use of Verfremdungseffekt in And Baby Makes Seven is best displayed in her invention of Anna and Ruth’s three imaginary children. Both central “couples” of Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and Vogel’s And Baby Makes Seven want children. Martha and George, we learn, have tried for years but with no
results, a situation that has driven them to create their imaginary child, "sunny-Jim." Anna and Ruth, however, cannot have children because they are a lesbian couple, making reproduction a biological impossibility as well as a societal improbability due to the huge, almost insurmountable prejudices created by the hostile political climate facing homosexual couples who wish to create a family of their own. Indeed, one of the unspoken serious undercurrents of Vogel’s giddy comedy is the reproductive bind in which Anna and Ruth, like other homosexual/lesbian couples, find themselves. Vogel brings Peter to Anna’s and Ruth’s reproductive rescue, and, unlike Albee, she invents not one but three imaginary children.

Unlike George and Martha’s “golden boy” who never receives a name much less an appearance on stage, Vogel’s Henri, Cecil and Bartholomew are fully developed characters with their own quirks and flaws who have as many scenes as their “real” counterparts. However, rather than portraying Cecil, Henri and Orphan as realistic small boys, Vogel dictates in her stage directions that Henri and Orphan are to be played by the same actor who plays Ruth, and Cecil is to be played by the same actor who plays Anna. Whereas George’s and Martha’s son ironically maintains an aura of reality by solely existing as an object of conversation, Vogel makes clear from the outset of And Baby Makes Seven that the three boys are never real, but instead an elaborate game Anna and Ruth have created and play with each other. During the action of the play Anna and Ruth continually transform or “morph” into Cecil, Henri and Orphan as required by the action and dialogue, slipping in and out of “character” easily and without much notice or comment except, of course, by Peter, who, new to their imaginary world, finds these transitions disturbing.
The often seamless transition between adult woman and imaginary child, a dizzying and distancing transformation, is also quite disturbing for audiences as demonstrated in the first few scenes of And Baby. In Act One, Scene One, Peter broaches the subject of discarding Anna’s and Ruth’s imaginary life. In the midst of this debate, Ruth, in the character of wild child, “Orphan,” attempts to settle the discussion by biting Peter “savagely” and without any warning:

PETER: You bit me!
RUTH: Not me. Orphan. He’s never going to break that habit.
PETER: I’m sitting here, bitten and nobody cares! I’m trying to have a talk! I’m trying to take my responsibility seriously, like a grown man, and you two are –

ANNA/CECIL: Listen, Uncle Peter, calm down. You have to understand that you’re hyperventilating from a very common syndrome.
PETER: Oh, Jesus. Now I get counseling from a nine-year-old doctoral candidate-

ANNA/CECIL: Okay buddy. But I’m here. I just want you to know that. When you’re having problems coping with those feelings of . . . of being extraneous in the face of –

ANNA AND RUTH: Woman Creating –
PETER: Oh shut the fuck up!!

In this scene, even the skeptic Peter is pulled into Anna and Ruth’s game, and treats the imaginary boys as real characters, acknowledging them by addressing them.
directly; additionally (and perhaps more significantly) the logic of the scene depends upon who is playing what character. Thus, while Anna might respond negatively to Ruth bullying Peter, she instead also slips into character, transforming herself into the solicitous nine-year-old Cecil, who — wisely — takes no one’s side. In the absurdist logic of the play, Ruth indeed is not responsible for “Orphan’s” actions, even though “he” is a make-believe character, a construct that “inhabits” her body; she bites Peter and yet she does not bite Peter. Although weirdly funny, this interchange has an earnest level, revealing that even though the imaginary children are a game for Anna and Ruth, they are also a viable way of communicating with each other and with their third “partner” Peter. Through Orphan, Ruth is able to express her dissatisfaction with Peter’s presence in their lives in an aggressive, physical manner, and, through Cecil, Anna is able to point out (gently) to Peter that one reason he might be so upset is that he is in the uncomfortable position of “odd man out” in their unusual relationship. However, it is Anna and Ruth (not Cecil and Orphan) who chime in on the pivotal line, “Woman Creating-”, signaling a return to the undeniable “reality” of the play: the child Anna is carrying is theirs, not just Peter’s by right of genetic paternity. With the use of Verfremdungseffekt and character/actor doubling, this seemingly small and inconsequential scene sets up the larger, sticky and problematic construction of sex and gender roles that Vogel explores in the remainder of And Baby Makes Seven.²

Vogel’s hilarious doubling of characters and actors, and the eliding of mother and child, youth and adult, man and woman, reality and illusion, radically distances the spectator, jarring audience members into re-evaluating how we as a society construct reality and gender roles, as well as how we define children and childhood. As is typical
of her dramaturgy, Vogel playfully tweaks audience expectations of children and childlike behavior in her characterization of Henri, Orphan and Cecil in *And Baby Makes Seven*. While George and Martha’s “sunny Jim” behaves somewhat normally in his “parents”’ (often conflicting, often disturbing) reports of him, Anna and Ruth’s Henri, Cecil and Orphan are distinctly (and comically) strange and off-center characters. By endowing the three “boys” with quirky characteristics, Vogel draws attention to the thematic “objects” of children and parents, as well as to the nature of families, by transforming Anna and Ruth’s family into a Brechtian, “peculiar, striking and unexpected” unit: a family which consists of an imaginary child genius, an imaginary character from a French art film, and an imaginary wild-child who stutters.

As if imaginary children were not strange enough, Vogel estranges the “familiar” further by combining the idea of the illusory children with a directorial dictate that the little boys be played, without comment, by adult women. By allowing Anna and Ruth to “play” their unusual “play” children, Vogel draws attention to the “familiar” mother/child relationship, to our cultural assumptions of what constitutes a healthy family environment, and to the unique interpersonal relationships between Anna and Peter, Ruth and Peter, and Anna and Ruth. Ironically, although Henri, Orphan and Cecil are fantastically fictional, they are more well-adjusted than George’s and Martha’s “sunny-Jim”; while Anna’s and Ruth’s three boys grow up in a loving environment and are hale, hearty and have healthy attitudes towards sexuality, Albee implies that “sunny-Jim” suffers sexual anxieties (George accuses Martha of inappropriately bathing their son long after an appropriate age) and fears his parents rather than loves them. Indeed, while Anna and Ruth use their shared fantasy for play, giving free reign to their childish,
imaginative creations, George and Martha use their shared fantasy as a weapon in their ongoing marital battle, each fluidly shaping and re-shaping the history of “sunny-Jim’s” anxieties as the opportunity and occasion suit them.

Some of the most innovative, strange and hilarious scenes of *And Baby Makes Seven* occur in this distanced, Brechtian character-doubling pretext, such as Ruth’s sandwich-making scene in Act One, Scene Four, in which Henri and Orphan (as played by Ruth) battle it out for possession of a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich. However, Vogel’s use of character-doubling is not merely for comedic effect, but instead divulges a distinct feminist agenda, one that transcends simple (albeit strange) slapstick comedy. As I have observed previously, Anna and Ruth use the “boys” to communicate with Peter uncomfortable or potentially harmful thoughts or ideas, much like adults use hand puppets to communicate with small children. They also communicate uncomfortable truths about their own relationship through play-acting, as seen in Act Two, Scene Ten, where “Henri” (played by Ruth) comes to Anna for comfort and confession. What begins as a comical scene between “mother” and wheedling “child” who is up past “his” bedtime quickly becomes uncomfortable, as Henri/Ruth confronts Anna with the “truth” of the parentage of Anna’s child:

HENRI: You will hear me out. I have learned a lot in your country. I know how to count up to nine. In English.

ANNA: What are you implying?

HENRI: That I am the father of your child.

ANNA: Whoa. Time out, Ruthie. We agreed never to - [ . . . ]
HENRI: I will always treasure that night. My ‘education sentimentale.’
And no one has to know. (102)

In this tenderly whimsical exchange, Ruth purposefully distances herself from Anna by coming to her in the character of Henri; she does not even “break character” when Anna addresses her directly and asks for a “time out,” instead continuing the dialogue in the guise of Henri. Because of this distance, she/he is able to express to Anna his/her discomfort both at Peter’s presence in their lives, as well as his/her desire to supplant Peter as the biological father of Anna’s child (which, in any realistic context, would border disturbingly on incest and pedophilia since Anna is nominally “Henri’s” mother). This exchange moves beyond twisted pop-psychology into the political realm by virtue of Verfremdungseffekt in which the actor portraying Ruth distances or alienates herself from the “Ruth” character and steps outside of Ruth to play “Henri,” much like putting on a mask. This use of Verfremdungseffekt allows the actor portraying both Ruth and Henri to step aside from each character – fully grown woman and eight-year-old boy – and both observe and comment upon both character’s actions and dialogue. By doing so, she/he reminds the audience that both Ruth and Henri are imaginary.

More importantly, by establishing a critical distance between the actor herself, Ruth, and “Henri,” and by performing a theatrical strip-tease exposing gender as a social construct, she/he urges the audience to think critically about the political “lesson” or ideological agenda being played out before them. Thus, by distancing or alienating the character of Ruth through her mask-like portrayal of Henri, Vogel details the insecurities of a displaced lover, calls into question the definition of sexual norms, and highlights the inherent fluidity of gender construction. As Ruth through Henri urges Anna to re-
examine and re-define their sexual roles, asking Anna to question the paternity of their child, Vogel, through Ruth/Henri, asks the audience to re-examine and re-define their own ideas of normative sexual relationships as well as question what should truly characterize masculinity and femininity. In addition, placed in the context of Albee’s classic, Vogel’s use of the Brechtian distancing effect (through Ruth/Henri) also juxtaposes Anna’s and Ruth’s definitions of normal, healthy sexual roles with George’s and Martha’s sado-masochistic definitions; overwhelmingly, Anna and Ruth’s playful, lesbian, and faintly incestuous relationship seems infinitely preferable to George and Martha’s heterosexual, emotionally as well as physically abusive, and genuinely malevolent game playing.

Vogel’s second feminist use of Brechtian technique adapted in And Baby Makes Seven’s re-visioning of Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf depends on the episodic and circular structure in which she constructs her play. Albee structures his absurdist play somewhat conventionally, dividing the action of the play into three acts, entitled “Fun and Games,” “Walpurgisnacht,” and “The Exorcism.” This three act structure reflects the play’s sharply linear dramatic arc, moving from the rising action of the sado-masochistic games Martha and George play with their guests and each other to the “witches’ night” of the chaos that results, and, finally, to the exorcism of George and Martha’s imaginary child and their fantasy life, leading, Albee implies, to a healthier union. Vogel’s play, on the other hand, is a much more loosely structured than Albee’s, taking place during the last weeks of Anna’s pregnancy. As in The Baltimore Waltz, Vogel employs her trademark feminist circular structure, beginning and concluding the action in the darkened “boy’s” room, and with dialogue between Cecil, Orphan and
Henri. In both scenes, Henri, Orphan and Cecil discuss the rudiments of anatomy and sexual intercourse; in the prologue, the “boys,” as played by Anna and Ruth are specifically concerned with where babies come from, playfully setting up Vogel’s ensuing dramatic preoccupation with reproduction and exploding the myths of “compulsory heterosexuality.”

The boy’s different and hilarious theories on sexual intercourse also give the audience a taste of their individual personalities: Cecil remarks that sexual intercourse and reproduction is “kind of like a microcosm of Wall Street,” Orphan “votes for th-the eggplant” hypothesis, while the skeptical Henri refuses to believe that babies “come out of the lady’s wee-wee hole” (Vogel 63-64). In the epilogue, the recently re-born boys are also discussing anatomy, specifically Peter’s “tushy;” the discussion shortly turns into a “tickle” free-for-all, which, in turn, wakes up the play’s sole “real” child, Nathan. However, unlike the prologue, in the epilogue Peter is included in Anna’s and Ruth’s fantasy, taking over the role of “Orphan” from Ruth, a move which makes perfect sense in the absuridst logic of the play since he is “infected” by Orphan’s rabies from Ruth’s/Orphan’s earlier “bite” in Act One, Scene One.

The epilogue also differs from the prologue in that the three adults and imaginary children are finally joined by a “real” child, making their “family” complete. Thus, in the prologue and epilogue of And Baby Makes Seven, nothing and everything has changed. Conversely, Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is inexorably and masculine-ly linear, each increasingly ugly confrontation between George and Martha and their guests leading inevitably in a straight-narrative line to the play’s climactic exorcism and resolution. By structuring her response to Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as circular,
Vogel introduces a distinctly feminist element to her play’s world and a feminine understanding of the circuitous nature of life, a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth. In the case of *And Baby Makes Seven*, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth is not only figurative, but also literal, as the action of the play chronologically details the death of the three imaginary boys, the birth of the “real” child Nathan, and the subsequent rebirth of Cecil, Henri and Orphan. By comparison, in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the action of the play linearly leads to the climactic “death” of “sunny-Jim” and a hint of the subsequent re-birth of George and Martha’s marriage.

In addition to introducing a feminist, circular structure to her re-visioning of Albee’s classic, Vogel also playfully employs a distinctly Brechtian episodic structure in *And Baby Makes Seven*, using short, independent scenes separated by black-outs. As noted previously, playwrights can achieve Brechtian episodic structuring through labeling scenes with placards describing the scene’s title or lesson, or separating each episode with a musical interlude, etc. Albee’s three long acts in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are divided into short scenes which blend smoothly and naturally into each other, and he does not consciously follow Brecht’s prescription for audience intellectual involvement. Although not as clearly delineated as the physically and verbally-labeled scenes in *The Baltimore Waltz* and the cinematic “takes” of *Desdemona*, *And Baby Makes Seven* does have seven short episodes in each act, dividing the play into sixteen black-outs. *And Baby’s* episodes vary in length and seriousness; as mentioned previously, some scenes consist mostly of pantomime (such as the Ruth/Henri/Orphan sandwich scene), while others consist almost entirely of dialogue. Each imaginary child has his own “death” episode, separated by several other episodes so that Vogel’s audience may have time to
examine the scene’s Brechtian “knots,” and process the serio-comic fable or mini-lesson of each imaginary “murder.”

Although at first seemingly simplistic and sketch-like, too short to investigate the knotty and complicated problems of gender and sexuality with which Vogel presents her audience, these episodes actually succeed in giving a coherent, intellectually distanced shape to Vogel’s complicated, problematic update and response to Albee’s play. Additionally, Vogel’s use of episodic structure is, in some aspects, feminist; although the short scenes do succeed in providing the necessary critical distance for the audience to think carefully about the subversion of the dominant political and ideological assumptions about gender and sex being criticized, they also allow for some “pleasure” of identification. Far from asking audiences to remove completely their emotions from the (albeit comic and make-believe) murder and mayhem on stage, Vogel establishes a fine line between empathy and distance upon which audiences must balance, forcing spectators to both question and sympathize with Cecil’s, Henri’s and Orphan’s “plight,” as well as with the knotty emotional entanglements that face Ruth, Anna and Peter.

Indeed, one of the most moving scenes of the entire play is one of the shortest and most episodic, in which Ruth (sans Henri or Orphan), in a short narrative monologue, describes to Peter why she wants children. She explains that she most wanted to see “Anna’s face at birth” but realizes that she hasn’t thought her desire all the way through (116). To Peter’s question — “Is my face such an awful face?” — Ruth replies: “No. It’s a very sweet face. (She strokes his face) I’m going to have to learn a new alphabet all over again” (117). It is clear that in this quiet, poignant moment, the calm in the middle of the emotional and comic storm of the play, Vogel means to provide audiences both with the
critical distance of episodic structure (the brevity of the scene), as well as a more feminine, pleasurable identification with the notion of inclusion that accompanies Ruth’s realization that Peter is now part of the “family.”

The third and final feminist/Brechtian technique Vogel uses in And Baby Makes Seven, her dialogue with Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, is social gestus. A particularly potent example of social gest in Vogel’s And Baby Makes Seven occurs in the short scene in Act Two when Anna greets Peter after he has returned from a late night out with “the boys.” This scene directly follows the previously cited scene in which Ruth as “Henri” has bitten Peter; Peter has subsequently stormed out, with both punctured skin and pride. Conversation in Anna and Peter’s scene turns to their earlier assignation and conception of baby Nathan, and Peter shyly admits that he “really miss[es] breasts” (73). A heavily pregnant Anna then offers her own:

(Peter hesitantly puts out his hand to stroke Anna’s breast. Ruth, still half-asleep enters in her pajamas.)

RUTH: Petey? Are you home? You okay?

PETER: Yes

(He starts to remove his hand, but Anna holds it to her breast.)

RUTH: What are two up to?

PETER: I’m, um, stroking Anna’s breast.

RUTH: (Totally unconcerned): Oh. That’s nice.

ANNA: There’s room enough for one more here.

RUTH: (Enthused): Okay
(Ruth goes to Anna's other side and gently puts her hand on Anna's breast. Peter and Ruth look at each other. Ruth smiles. Anna smiles, and sighs.)

This particular gest or set of actions is social because it both reveals and highlights Vogel's subversive play with sexual identification. Like the physical waltzes in The Baltimore Waltz and the hair-brushing final scene in Desdemona, this particularly comic, peculiarly poignant social gest of both Peter and Ruth "feeling up" Anna embodies Vogel's efforts to separate and defamiliarize audiences from their previously held sexual prejudices by confronting them with the potentially shocking image of a homosexual man and a lesbian stroking a pregnant lesbian's breasts. Additionally, in this social gest, Anna's pregnant body plays a distinctly feminist role, becoming both a symbol and the literal space of interrogation in the audience's confrontation with their "familiar" constructions of sexual identity. However, because Anna is a woman, and a self-identified lesbian, she thus becomes what Teresa de Lauretis defines as "the elsewhere of discourse, the here and now, the blind spots or the spaces-off, of its representations" (Dolan, Feminist, 143), a space that is both there and is not there. This uniqueness of a subject position that is both there and is not gives Anna and her body the uniquely qualified position to distance the action of Ruth and Peter holding her breasts, and, as articulated by Jill Dolan, "denaturalize dominant codes by signifying an existence that belies the entire structure of heterosexual culture and its representations" (Feminist 143).
Additionally, by using Anna’s self-identified lesbian, heavily-pregnant body, Vogel demonstrates the slippery nature of gender identification in this moment of domestic bliss and mutually inclusive sexuality:

In the lesbian context, where the heterosexual assumption becomes discarded, gender as representation gets detached from ‘the real’ and becomes as plastic and kitsch as the little man and woman balanced on a wedding cake. Gender becomes a social *gestus*, a gesture that represents ideology circulating in social relations. (Dolan, *Feminist*, 143)

Thus, in the omni-sexual, communal “feeling up” Anna’s breasts, Ruth, Peter and Anna reveal gender representation as ultimately artificial and disposable or “plastic.” In this moment it does not truly matter which of the characters is biologically male or female, or how they identify their sexuality, but that they connect over the birth of their child and the pleasure of the female body. Instead of being concealed, or disavowed as unfeminine, Anna’s pregnant body is a site of communion for the three parents, lovers and friends. Together Anna, Ruth and Peter expose gender and sexual-orientation, rendering each as a social construct rather than biological destiny or truth, a sentiment of which Virginia Woolf, I think, would have whole-heartedly approved and greatly appreciated.⁹

Whereas Albee’s Honey and Martha are disempowered and disenfranchised women, trapped in a social structure and in gender roles that demand they perform the roles of mother, wife and hostess perfectly and without complaint, Vogel’s Anna and Ruth do not suffer from the same suffocation that has slowly poisoned Martha and is beginning to work its deadly charms on Honey. Neither Anna nor Ruth express the stifling despair and inability to move that Martha so eloquently voices to Nick and to
George. Instead, Anna and Ruth are free to live their own lives—real and fantastical—in the confines of their own space, free from a patriarchal structure that dictates they must conform to a “compulsory heterosexuality.” I do not want to imply here that Honey and Martha would be much better off if they divorced George and Nick and ran off together (although they very well might be). Vogel's *And Baby* is not a strict re-seeing of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in which a Honey and a Martha realize their “true” feelings for each other; indeed, there is no direct correlation between Martha and Anna, Honey and Ruth. Instead, however, I suggest that by shifting the focus of her play from George’s and Martha’s and Nick’s and Honey’s failed and failing marriages to Anna’s and Ruth’s (and later Peter’s) transcendent lesbian/gay partnership, Vogel sheds new light on gender relationships and the nature of marriage itself.

As Anna and Ruth are partners in creating their imaginary children and life, they are also partners in destroying it, dividing up the murders between them. In addition, Anna’s and Ruth’s partnership is eminently flexible as seen in their invitation to Peter to join their partnership, expanding their “marriage” to make room for him. Peter then joins the previously feminine reproductive process of *And Baby*, and it is Peter, not Anna or Ruth, who brings the three boys back to life, giving figurative birth to a newly re-invented Cecil, Orphan and Henri; in typical twisted Vogelian absurdist logic, Peter is the logical replacement for Orphan since he is early infected by Orphan’s “rabies.” Vogel concludes her comedy with stage directions concerning the realistic appearance of the walls of *And Baby'*s characters’ New York apartment, which:

> . . . slowly become more transparent, and we become aware of the sounds in the street below: New York at night. . . . We see Peter, Anna and Ruth

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cradling Nathan in their apartment – one apartment among hundreds of their neighbors. The light streams from adjacent windows where other families in privacy keep their own nightly vigils. (125)

This final dissolving of barriers between the interior and exterior of the play succeeds in creating a feeling of community and renewal in And Baby Makes Seven, a very different impression than that of the isolated, exhausted yet hopeful daybreak of Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Vogel has often expressed her dissatisfaction with playwriting that tries to “save the world,” commenting that “I’m not an academic who believes in a cure. I don’t believe in fixing plays. I believe we have to get out there and write flawed plays that disturb everyone and change the atmosphere” (Coen 26). Far from belying a sloppy or casual dramaturgy, Vogel’s lack of concern with the “well-made” play reveals her primary concern with the revolutionary possibilities of theater. In such plays as And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel continually strives for a gestic feminist theater and theatrical text that “disrupts” patriarchal ideology and which “refuses to appropriate” other dramatic texts and playwrights. In Paula Vogel’s re-visioning of Albee’s classic Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, she does not attempt to “fix” Albee, but instead both empowers her female characters and re-visions the family unit into a fantastical construction that embodies elements of both reality and fantasy. In And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel displays an astonishing comic power and breadth of style, creating a feminist/Brechtian world in which Martha is not trapped, in which “sunny-Jim” is killed off only to be reborn, in which the suffocating and destructive effects of the nuclear family are replaced by a creatively re-constructed, trans-gendered and expanded
“family,” in which gender and sexual-identifications are both transcendent and superfluous, and in which no one is afraid of reality, death, women or Virginia Woolf.
Notes

1 Although Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?‘s realistic style and dialogue is seemingly far removed from the drama of Beckett and Pinter, as well as from Albee’s absurdist work such as The Zoo Story and The American Dream, critics agree that it does fit neatly into the tradition of the Theater of the Absurd. As Martin Esslin points out, Albee’s work falls under the category of the Theater of the Absurd because “his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism” (“Albee” 63). More significantly, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is considered absurdist because of Albee’s inclusion of George and Martha’s illusory child, the pervasive “elements of dream and allegory (is the dream-child which cannot become real among people torn by ambition and lust something like the American ideal itself?),” as well as “Genet-like ritualistic elements in its structure as a sequence of three acts” (Esslin “Albee” 64).

2 As C. W. E. Bigsby observes, in one sense the destruction of “sunny-Jim” and the myth George and Martha have created is propitious because the illusionary child is on the eve of “his” twenty-first birthday. Thus, George and Martha are “trapped by their own logic” since, if they “sustain the myth, they must let the boy go” as he is now of legal-age, and has reached a state of independence (“Who’s Afraid” 141). Alternately, Bigsby points out, if George and Martha refuse to let their “child” go, they will “undermine a myth whose utility and conviction rests on the acceptance of a coincidence between real and fictional time” (“Who’s Afraid” 141).

3 One other, more subtle connection between Albee’s choice of title and Virginia Woolf herself is, of all things, the theater. Although known primarily for her work in narrative fiction, Virginia Woolf’s fascination with the theater forms a “continuous subtext in [her] art and in her life” (Putzel 252), and her books overflow with references, both implicit and explicit, to her captivation with the theatrical medium. Evidence of this preoccupation can be seen in her one and only play (written in 1923 and produced in 1935) Freshwater, a comedy produced for and by the amateur theatricals of the Bloomsbury group; in her insertion of a shadowy “poet” suspiciously reminiscent of William Shakespeare himself in Orlando; and in her final, posthumous novel Between the Acts, a study of a British village pageant which lampoons various theatrical subgenera, from Elizabethan tragedy to Restoration comedy to post-modernist drama suspiciously reminiscent of Brecht’s epic theater. For more information on Woolf’s love-affair with the theater, see David McWhirter’s “The Novel, the Play and the Book: Between the Acts and the Tragicomedy of History,” Steven Putzel’s “Frame Focus and Reflection: Virginia Woolf’s Legacy to Women Playwrights,” and Karin E. Westman’s “History as Drama: Towards a Feminist Materialist Historiography.”

4 Jill Dolan also makes this edifying observation about Vogel’s irreverence for canonical authority and/ or for her literary predecessors:

   . . . [Vogel] turns conventions upside down and on their heads to see what falls out of their pockets, pushing them aside, offstage, before she’ll ever allow them to resume what others have considered their ‘rightful’ place in
an ideological or literary hierarchy. There’s always something askew in a Vogel play, something deliciously not quite right, which requires a spectator or reader to change her perspective, to give up any assumption of comfortable viewing or reading ground, and to go along for a refreshing change of performance, pace and style. (“Paula Vogel’s Desdemona” 437)

This disrespect for authority is not solely reserved for Edward Albee and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Vogel’s play Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief is a particularly disturbing and “shaken-up” response to Shakespeare’s classic Othello in which Desdemona embodies each of Othello’s lurid suspicions. As will be discussed, Vogel’s Desdemona forces the spectator/reader to “change her perspective,” causing her to question previous critical assumptions of Desdemona and to re-examine the parameters of female desire.

Immediately following this exchange, Vogel no longer indicates the doubling of characters in her dialogue prompts. Instead of indicating “Anna” is playing “Cecil” by the dialogue prompt “Anna/Cecil,” Vogel merely ascribes the dialogue to Cecil or to Orphan or to Henri, further distancing the reader/audience from the action unfolding on stage as well as further blurring fantasy with reality.

Brecht himself used this distancing, character/actor doubling in such plays in The Good Woman of Setzuan, in which the protagonist, Shen Te – the prostitute with a “heart of gold” – is also her cruel “Uncle,” Shui Ta. In Brecht’s play, Shen Te splits herself literally in two along gender lines, cleaving her feminine “heart” from her masculine, unsentimental “business sense,” and it is Shui Ta, not Shen Te, who must do the dirty work of living. This character/actor doubling is further complicated by the fact that Shen Te discovers halfway through the play that she is pregnant, a fact which becomes increasingly hard to hide in her masculine guise. Unlike Vogel, however, Brecht’s purpose in splitting Shen Te/Shui Ta is more to comment upon and critique the economic and social systems that will not tolerate kindness, and less to explicate the destructiveness of a patriarchal society or to re-vision the construction of gender roles.

Indeed, Brecht’s use of Verfremdungseffekt often included the use of masks or the use of music to remind the audience of the un-reality of what they see before them. One of his favorite instances of effective implementation of the distancing effect, cited in an early essay, “A Dialogue About Acting,” was Helene Weigel’s use of white face paint in a production of Oedipus Rex which she donned, mask-like, to announce Jocasta’s death (27-29).

In this way, the distancing effect of character-doubling in And Baby Makes Seven is much like the linguistic-doubling of The Baltimore Waltz in which characters remove themselves from the action to narrate and comment upon events in the second person, such as Carl’s equally poignant, second-person speech about his favorite childhood toy, a stuffed animal. In both plays, Vogel’s achieves a foregrounding of “ideologies of gender” through Verfremdungseffekt, an effect which, as argued by Elin Diamond, forces her audience to understand gender as “a system of beliefs and behaviors mapped across the males and females [in a manner] which reinforces a status quo” (85). Jill Dolan elaborates on Diamond’s conception of Brechtian devices as exposing gender ideology in
feminist playwriting in her essay “Materialist Feminism: Apparatus Based Theory and Practice,” declaring that use of Brechtian distancing is ideal for feminist ideological purposes since “Brechtian technique in feminist hands can fragment the realist drama into component parts and expose its gender assumptions for critical inspection” (111). Dolan proposes that this critical inspection can then in turn also “demystify compulsory heterosexuality and the construction of gender as the founding principle of representation” (112).

8 In using the term “compulsory heterosexuality,” I am referring to Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience.” In this essay, Rich calls for the recovery of the suppressed “lesbian experience” and “lesbian continuum” which has been, until the 1980s and 1990s, effectively erased from mainstream patriarchal culture and unacknowledged in the more mainstream feminist criticisms and theories. Rich also invokes a “freeing up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence” (“Compulsory” 51) that surrounds the lesbian experience, and suggests that “woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power” which has been “curtailed and contained” by the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality which has pressured women into choosing heterosexual bonds over female, homo-social bond (“Compulsory” 63). In And Baby Makes Seven I think that Vogel not only “shatters the silence” of the lesbian experience, but also goes beyond Rich’s call for action by matter-of-factly re-visioning the rotten and rotting institution of heterosexual marriage in Albee’s play and re-constructing it into a modern, healthy lesbian partnership.

9 I am thinking here most specifically of Woolf’s own preoccupation with the transcendent, androgynous artist, as seen both in A Room of One’s Own and the “ideal” writer who incorporates both masculinity and femininity into their craft, and the transsexual Orlando, one of her most famous fictional characters, who awakes one morning halfway through the novel to discover “he” is a “she.”
CHAPTER 4

VOICING VIOLENCE IN HOT 'N' THROBBING

"In contemporary industrial society, pornography is an industry that mass produces sexual intrusion on, access to, possession and use of women by and for men for profit. It exploits women’s sexual and economic inequality for gain. It sells women to men as and for sex. It is a technologically sophisticated traffic in women.”

-- Catherine MacKinnon, “Pornography: On Morality and Politics”

“If sexuality is censored, if fantasies are legislated against, if the feminist movement is allowed to dictate or implicitly condones governmental legislation of the ‘proper’ expression and representation of sexuality, the free expression of self and sexuality will slip into a totalitarian framework.”

-- Jill Dolan, “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance”

“Hot ‘N’ Throbbing was written on a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship – because obscenity begins at home.”

-- Paula Vogel, dedication to Hot ‘N’ Throbbing

As with her autobiographical introduction to The Baltimore Waltz, Paula Vogel provides a candid, first-person explication de texte to her 1993 play Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, a controversial and perversely comic examination of pornography, domestic violence and death. In this introduction, Vogel explains the impetus for working on this particular play in earnest (which she began drafting in 1985), describing her own closer-than-comfort encounter with domestic violence in 1990:

Late at night, as I began reading about domestic violence, I thought I heard a woman’s cry – it was past midnight and the street outside my house was abandoned . . . Taking my house keys with me, I ventured out
on to the street. There I saw, half a block down, a car idling in the middle of the street. When I heard a man’s voice say ‘Shut up, bitch,’ and thought I saw a drawn knife inside the car, my worst fears were confirmed. I ran back to the house, started my own car and drove behind the car at a fast pace until I could flag down a police car to pursue the chase. Finally, the car was stopped by the police; a shaking woman emerged, bleeding from a cut to her face.

She declined to press charges. (Vogel 229)

Vogel’s unspoken point in recording this harrowing episode, particularly in her brief, unadorned comment on the “rescued” woman’s refusal to press charges, is that coming face-to-face with domestic violence had a profound effect on Vogel herself, pushing her to confront the possibilities of such brutality right outside her door; this encounter also pushed her to keep working on her evolving text, *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*. Indeed, the anonymous, frightened woman Vogel “rescued” that night is indelibly captured in *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* as the “Woman,” a Desdemona-like heroine who, ultimately, no one rescues. Vogel then describes her impetus to finish *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* as arising from Senator Jesse Helms’ and Congress’ requirement for all National Endowment of the Arts fellows to sign a pledge that would restrict them from “writ[ing] or creat[ing] art that caused offense to the community” (230). In typical subversive, Vogelian fashion, Vogel writes that she applied for an NEA grant for *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* solely to test the bounds of what would be perceived as pornographic by the National Endowment of the Arts, and, consequently, what would be censored (230). Vogel also notes that the word “pornography” comes from the ancient Greek for “offstage,” or, more
specifically, violence kept offstage, pointing out that theatrical artists have “abdicated our responsibility for showing the results of violence” to the film industry, with its box-office love of blood, explosions and explicit sex, and which delights in “fetishiz[ing] the act rather than its impact” (231). Finally, she records, without the least bit of her trademark irony, that two months prior to the premier of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing in 1993, Nicole Simpson was murdered – brutally stabbed to death outside her Brentwood home.

This matter-of-fact introduction provides us with a valuable, personal and historical context within which to work as critical readers and spectators of this complex play. In addition, in stating that “obscenity begins at home” in her dedication, Vogel throws down the gauntlet to audiences, readers and critics alike, challenging us to take up the work of untangling the text’s dense web of politics and ideology, comedy and tragedy, pornography and violence. Placing itself not only smack dab within the feminist pornography wars of the 1980s and 90s but also in the moral-majority obscenity wars of the early and mid 1990s, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is a decidedly thick text, employing numerous feminist and Brechtian strategies to construct and deconstruct the often overlapping battles of these particularly bloody social, political and ideological conflicts. Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is Vogel’s most overtly ideological play – and therefore the play most fruitfully viewed through theoretical lenses – in which she investigates the effects of domestic violence on a middle-class, suburban American family in the figurative and literal context of the production of pornography. As with The Baltimore Waltz and And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel employs Brechtian techniques for political and specifically feminist ends. By sensationalizing the sensationalized, Vogel forces her audience to take a closer look at the dynamics of domestic violence and the resulting ripple patterns of
physical, emotional and mental abuse as well as the deep-rooted connections between pornography and violence, the true obscenity of this playtext. Like all of Vogel's plays, Hot 'N' Throbbing's investigations of these dilemmas arrive at no clear or easy answers; instead it is the journey taken by the characters and the investigation itself that is significant.

A one-act, six character play, Hot 'N' Throbbing presents a lurid, comically disturbing and nightmarish Friday "night in the life" of one dysfunctional family, whose characters are generically named "The Woman," "The Man," "The Girl," and "The Boy." Throughout the play the characters refer to each other with more specific names: the "Woman" for example is called "Charlene" by the "Man," while she refers to him as "Clyde." On one level, Hot 'N' Throbbing is specifically Charlene Dwyer's tragedy, a beleaguered single mom attempting rather unsuccessfully to raise her teenage son Calvin and her teenage daughter Leslie Ann, or "Layla," as she prefers to be called, a name which evokes Eric Clapton's dominant seductress. On a second level, the doubling of specific and generic names results in a sense of facelessness, of an "every-man" context in which the Woman, Girl and Boy stand for every-Woman, every-Girl, every-Boy and every battered, dysfunctional family in similar situations.

Joining this paradoxically highly specific yet highly generic family unit are the "Voice Over," a female character who narrates the script on which the Woman works throughout the play and who serves as a kind "inner voice" to the Woman's dialogue, and the "Voice," a male character who serves as a masculine foil to Voice Over, the "voices" which the Woman "intercepts" while writing, and a kind of Greek chorus/DJ to the action unfolding on stage; Vogel specifies that he is more of a "presence" than an actual

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“person” (233). Like the Third Man in The Baltimore Waltz, and Anna’s and Ruth’s character/actor doubling in And Baby Makes Seven, both the Voice Over and the Voice play a multitude of characters throughout the action of the play, from a bored peep-show dancer/go-go girl to the bouncer/owner of the “Foxy Lady,” and continually interact with, interrupt, and echo the family’s dialogue and actions. Unlike the Third Man, however, who actively participates in Carl’s and Anna’s fantastical European voyage every step of the way in various roles, and unlike Henri, Orphan and Cecil, who regularly take control of the action of And Baby, the Voice Over and the Voice remain firmly relegated to the literal side-lines of the play, remaining in their “fantasy” playing areas outside the middle-class, suburban living-room world of the family. While the female Voice Over and the male Voice can arouse and entice the Girl and Boy into their worlds, they are unable to lure Woman and Man out of the living room, and are themselves unable to interfere with or prevent the ensuing violence.

Whereas And Baby Makes Seven presents the sexually blended and fantastically re-visioned American nuclear family as a positive and playfully elastic unit, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing’s vision of the dissolution of the American nuclear family is decidedly darker, more brittle and much more disturbing. As the action of the play unfolds, Vogel reveals that the Woman has recently separated from her husband and is supporting the teenage Boy and Girl with her job as a script writer and editor for Gyno productions, a “feminist” erotica production company which writes, produces and directs “adult entertainment” (238). This particular Friday night, the Woman is working feverishly to produce a script for next week’s “shoot,” while the Girl and Boy argue over the Girl’s evening activities; unbeknownst to the Woman, the “fifteenish” Girl has supposedly been sneaking out with
her girlfriends to strip at the Foxy Lady for extra cash to pay for mundane teenage pursuits as movies and the mall. The Woman, desperate to finish her script, briefly interferes with the Boy’s and Girl’s argument, but, in the end, allows the Girl to “sleep over” at a friend’s house.

The Boy — a smart, bookish and fiercely protective 14-year-old — at first remains at home, but flees the living room after a confrontation with the Woman about the paucity of his own social life. Shortly after, the Man arrives, drunk, and, in apparent violation of a restraining order, kicks in the living room door, determined to “reach out and touch” his estranged wife (250). The Woman, obviously prepared for such a contingency based on previous abusive experience, calmly shoots the Man in the buttocks while he is stripping off his clothes to a drunken burlesque rendition of “SEX – ON – WELFARE” (252). A strangely comic, complex and often moving exchange follows, in which the emotional and physical balance of power shifts between the Woman and Man several times while they reminisce, argue and begin a cautious, seemingly mutual seduction. Hot ‘N’ Throbbing’s action takes a sharp turn for the worse, however, and the play’s graphically violent climax, in which the enraged Man beats and strangles the Woman while lip-synching to the Woman’s pornographic “script” gone horribly awry. Spoken by the horrified Voice Over and Voice, the Woman’s – and Vogel’s – script serves as a complex commentary on the implicit and explicit connections between pornography and domestic violence.

As previously stated, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is perhaps Vogel’s most ideological play, employing numerous Brechtian and feminist dramaturgical devices to distance and critique the insidiously destructive ideologies of the world it dramatizes. However, the
complexity of Hot 'N' Throbbing, its interweaving of multiple thematic concerns – the dissolution of the American nuclear family, the effects of pornography on the perception of sexuality, cycles of domestic violence, single parent households, etc. – makes it difficult for the critical reader/audience member to extract Vogel's exact political and ideological purposes in writing this play. How do we as audience members and/or readers separate out the pornographic elements from the obscene elements in Hot 'N' Throbbing? Or pornography from "adult entertainment"? Is there such a thing as feminist-centered or woman-friendly pornography? Is there a connection between pornography and domestic violence? Where does sexuality fit into Hot 'N' Throbbing's steaming, seedy miasma of scripted erotica, single-parenting, restraining orders and violence? Before investigating Vogel's explicit feminist, Brechtian techniques in distancing these texts for audience members to read critically, however, I will explore the equally confusing, multi-layered and explosive political and historical context of the feminist pornography wars (themselves rather sensationally named) in which Vogel's text participates. Indeed, Hot 'N' Throbbing takes center-stage in this particularly heated theater of conflict.

Pornography has long been – and continues to be – a hot-button issue for feminist artists and critics. The opening shots of the feminist pornography wars (as they have been labeled in retrospect) can be traced to Andrea Dworkin's and Catherine MacKinnon's efforts in the early 1980s to write anti-pornography legislation. Both Dworkin and MacKinnon observed that exposure to pornography results in not only a negative portrayal of women as readily available sexual objects, but also manifests itself in a very real violence towards women.¹ Together they drafted an ordinance which
defined pornography as "a violation of women's civil rights for which they could sue" which was first adopted (and vetoed) in Minneapolis and then in Indianapolis, where it was dismissed, Deborah Cameron notes, on "First Amendment grounds" (785). This ordinance divided feminists, drawing a proverbial "line in the sand" between feminists who oppose pornography for the reasons listed above and feminists who oppose the idea of censorship and/or legislation of sexuality. These two camps coalesced during the 1980s under the acronyms W.A.P. (Women Against Pornography) and F.A.C.T. (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce).

The WAP position is perhaps best articulated by Catherine MacKinnon, one of its founding mothers. Observing that twentieth-century American pornographers have conveniently been allowed to hide behind the protection of the First Amendment, MacKinnon argues eloquently in her essay, "Pornography: On Morality and Politics," that the existence of pornography points to the existence of an essentially pornographic society from which feminists must be able to untangle the multiple disguises/feints of pornography and pornographers. She notes:

This understanding of the reality of pornography must contend not only with centuries of celebratory intellectual obfuscation. It must contend with a legal tradition of neutralization through abstraction from the realities of power, a tradition that has authoritatively defined pornography not as about women as such at all, but about sex, hence about morality; and as not about acts of practices, but about ideas. (195-196, emphasis mine)
MacKinnon asserts that although gender is a social construction, it is inherently and undeniably sexualized, and that pornography is a practice of “sexual politics” and thus an “institution of gender inequality” in which what is considered erotic and submissive is constructed as feminine and what is considered intellectual and dominant is constructed as masculine (197). By extension, the free and legalized consumption of pornography results in transforming women into commodities, into the buying and selling of representations of women; it is a short leap, then, to concluding that pornography is the legalized, sexualized traffic of women. MacKinnon also points out that previous legislation on pornography – referring to Justice Stewart’s infamous definition of pornography, ‘I know it when I see it’ – has focused on male definitions of obscenity (“prurience,” etc.) and thus on morality (whether or not pornography is good or evil) rather than a trafficking of women, and has confused the issue of power and powerlessness with a battle for “free speech” (197). Prior to the sexual revolution and the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, American legislation was written predominantly by men for men; consequently women have been largely left out of the loop in defining and/or regulating the consumption of pornography. In addition, as Deborah Cameron notes, obscenity law has been based primarily on “masculine discourse” and thus is “incompatible” with the goals of feminism (786). Women Against Pornography seeks to halt what it regards as legalized trafficking of women in the United States, to separate law governing the distribution of pornography from obscenity law, and to re-examine the balance of power relationships between the sexes.

Often accusing WAP supporters of being prudish liberal essentialists whose anti-pornography stance translates into an anti-sex stance in which they collude with the
Christian right and others who would censor pornography on moral grounds, Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce supporters champion freedom of expression and experimentation. Reasoning that the United States remains a patriarchal society, FACT feminists declare women must seize any chance to examine the boundaries of feminine desire and sexuality, including pornography. Jill Dolan notes in her essay "Desire Cloaked in a Trench Coat" that FACT supporters have increasingly looked to lesbian communities and texts as the new frontier of female sexuality, particularly the development of a lesbian pornography that is successful in "dissolving" the "subject/object relations that trap women performers and spectators as commodities in a heterosexual context" (63). Because both participant and observer in a lesbian context are female, there can be no trafficking of women as submissive, objectified sexual "goods." Echoing Luce Irigaray's observation that the market economy of women would be nullified if women refused to participate and/or joined in the bartering, Jill Dolan archly observes that in lesbian pornography the "goods have gotten together" ("Desire" 65-66). According to Deborah Cameron, pro-pornography or pro-sex feminists (as FACT supporters are often referred to) also are interested in critical interpretation of hard-core pornographic texts, in learning how to "read against the grain of their surface misogyny" in order to become subjects, rather than "festishized objects," in a free pursuit of pornographic "knowledge and pleasure" (790). From this active search to define and pursue "knowledge and pleasure" come such feminist/pornographic production companies as Femme Productions, a company "controlled by women, who are often its films' directors as well as its executives and who produce a more 'woman-oriented'
pornography, a possible source for Vogel's Woman's Gyno Production company in Hot 'N' Throbbing (792).

More recent feminist criticism has pointed out the frequent gaps and blind spots of both sides of these feminist pornography wars. WAP supporters often fail to acknowledge that not all men are aggressors (and, by association, that not all women are victims), and that not all masculine desire is inherently "violent and misogynistic," nor is all feminine desire inherently "benign" (Cameron 792). Likewise, FACT supporters often fail to acknowledge that pornography is problematic not just because of its causal links to rape and other forms of physical violence and degradation towards women, but also because as a "discourse . . . it eroticizes relations of domination and subordination" (Cameron 794). In addition, theory becomes practice once pornography, or pornographic representations, is placed on stage, as they are in Hot 'N' Throbbing, no longer hypothetical subjects for eloquent, voluminous word-wars. Pornography in print or on celluloid is one thing, but pornography on stage is something else entirely: a performance being performed, a representation being represented in a continually self-referential process. By placing pornographic dialogue and action in a pornographic setting, with her Woman creating or scripting pornography as it is "voiced" by a female Voice Over and performed by the Girl, Vogel complicates this self-referentiality three-fold; she also complicates her position as a feminist writing in the context of the feminist battles over pornography and obscenity. As with The Baltimore Waltz, And Baby Makes Seven and Desdemona, this complex self-reflexiveness of Vogel's play with pornographic representations is perhaps best understood when analyzed in conjunction with her use of formalist, Brechtian devices.
Perhaps the most glaringly obvious use of the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, or distancing effect, lies in Vogel’s pornographic subject matter itself. If Catherine MacKinnon is correct in making the correlation between the preponderance of pornographic material in contemporary American society and the determination that our society is, in itself, pornographic, then the pervasiveness of pornography and its accompanying violence as well as American society’s continual blindness to it is ripe for feminist interrogation through Brechtian distancing. Vogel’s matter-of-fact approach to pornography in the dialogue and action of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is then a way of unfetishizing violence and of re-exposing audiences to the dangers of “not looking” directly at pornography. Linked closely to Verfremdungseffekt, Brecht’s theory of historicization is an essential element of epic Brechtian, non-Aristotelian theater as it forces drama to be non-essentialist; it assists in debunking the assumption that an essentialist, universal human experience, unchanging through time and space, exists. Therefore all onstage action, including Verfremdungseffekt, must be “historical.” Brecht notes in a “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting” that this sense of history is crucial in achieving a critical distance between character and actor as well as in the tripartite relationship between character, actor and audience:

The actor must play the incidents as historical ones . . . [which] are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and ‘universally human’ . . . it is up to the actor to treat present-day events and modes of behavior with the same detachment as the historian adopts with regard to the past. (140)
An actor playing Lady Macbeth, for example, should not, according to Brecht, seek to reproduce Early Modern mannerisms and speech qualities in an effort to bridge the historical gap between Shakespeare's Elizabethan England and contemporary, early twenty-first century American society. Instead, she should speak and act naturally, forgoing the Method "trance" popular in realistic theater training and abhorred by Brecht as false and unnatural. Conversely, in a Brechtian context, the actor portraying the Woman in Vogel's near-contemporary *Hot 'N' Throbbing* should use the same detached, almost scientific methods of a "historian" to demonstrate the specificity of her place in history alongside Vogel's anonymous rescued woman and Nicole Simpson. Brecht's request for an implicitly masculine, historically alienated and ultimately scientific acting method, of course, sounds far removed from feminist theory or theatrical practice, and, indeed, feminists rarely use this theory as Brecht originally prescribed.

However, feminist critics such as Karen Laughlin and Elin Diamond have noted that this historicized approach to acting – and by extension, directing and playwriting – allows feminist theatrical artists not only to explore past and present power relationships between men and women with a critical historian's eye, but also, as Laughlin notes, to "dismantle the past and reconstruct it with [a] woman's consciousness" (155). In addition, Brechtian historicization precludes the traditionally masculine "presumed ideological neutrality of any historical reflection," requiring a continual self-consciousness of actor and audience, and, like the attendant *Verfremdungseffekt*, "puts on the table the issue of spectatorship and the performer's body" (Diamond 87). Perhaps most significantly, feminist theater "historicizes" not only events and characters, but the gendered bodies of all characters, masculine and feminine. Pornography, that most
gendered and voyeuristic (and, by extension, sexual) of media forms, is thus perfect fodder for Brechtian historicization.

This historicized, pornographic distancing occurs not only in the dialogue of Hot 'N' Throbbing, but also visually, particularly in the play's set. Hot 'N' Throbbing is unusually explicit in its cinematic, detailed stage directions and set description, setting it apart from the more minimalistically described And Baby Makes Seven and The Baltimore Waltz. Vogel specifies that the action of the play takes place in a dualistic set, signifying a divided world, in which a suburban living room is set smack dab in the center of the interior of a "nude dance hall," named "The Foxy Lady" (233). She stipulates that the changes of setting in the play should be indicated by a change in lighting effects: the "normal" stage lights represent "reality, constructed as we know it," or the nondescript suburban living room with "wall-to-wall shag," and blue lights represent the "erotic . . . as we fantasize about it," or the Foxy Lady (233). Shifts from fantasy to reality and back are thus accompanied by changes between blue and regular lighting. Emphasizing this disconcerting vision of a double-world is a long red ramp which "curves its way out into the audience in the shape of an engorged tongue" and which, Vogel notes, should be the area used for stripping (234).

Although the two playing areas of the ubiquitous, anonymous interior of a tract home and the seedy glamour of a strip joint could not seem more different, Vogel asserts that both environments have one thing in common: they are both "stages for performance, for the acting out of erotic fantasies, for viewing" (233). By paralleling the two worlds, Vogel suggests that the living room of a lower-middle-class tract home, the most inconspicuous, anonymous and mass-produced of areas, is a specific, historical

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(specifically late twentieth-century) sexualized space. Surrounding the bland safety and comfort zone of the living room with the seedy imagery of a peep-show/strip joint, Vogel exposes the seamier side of suburbia in which violent pornography and pornographic violence is played out nightly in nondescript, cookie-cutter living rooms across the United States in the late twentieth-century. Additionally, this juxtaposition of these two physical spaces points to the closer-than-comfort proximity of living rooms and strip joints, and exposes the middle-class hypocrisy which seeks to deny and bury any association with the adult entertainment industry while secretly patronizing it.

Physically combining the two environments, then, Vogel intercepts the shrine of “family values,” implanting it with such “obscene” activities as underage girls stripping, boys masturbating to the sight of their mothers typing and the voyeurism that accompanies both activities. Perhaps more importantly, however, by historicizing and distancing the living-room environment by surrounding it with a pornographic context, Vogel forces us to look closer at the living room itself, the space in which the Woman’s family works and lives, and to reconsider our associations and assumptions that accompany our perceptions of what constitutes a “normal” living space.

The second historicized, pornographic distancing level of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is the pornographic action or movement accompanying the main plot-line of the dysfunctional family’s Friday night. In several instances, this action involves the Boy’s and Girl’s participation as silent automatons in the pornographic script the Woman is ostensibly writing throughout the course of the play. While the Woman writes, the Boy and Girl physically and silently act out the “stage directions” as articulated by the Voice
Over. One particularly graphic example of this marriage of pornographic mime, Voice
Over and the Woman scripting occurs early in the play:

(The Woman sighs; types.

**Blue Light.** The Boy Enters. The Girl emerges from bathroom in tight
pants.

Exaggerated movements of Boy humping Girl from behind with clothes
on.)

V.O.

"VOICE-OVER CONTINUED:

He wanted to enter her. Penetrate her secrets with his will . . . (236-237)

This scene is even more shocking to audience members when viewed in the
context of an ordinary Friday night, in which mother and daughter, sister and brother
argue over mundane, everyday items like makeup and curfews. Immediately following
this bit of action the Boy "slumps on the sofa" and the Girl continues her teenage rage
against her mother's insensitivity, declaring, like any other fifteen-year-old: "You just
don't care. You want me to stay in this boring house until I rot like you and four-eyes on
the sofa over there" (237). Indeed, the apparent normalcy of the "living room" life is so
extreme that a few lines later, the embarrassed and outraged Boy resorts to the
euphemistic "P.L.'s" to describe his sister's labial lips. Obviously the Boy in the stage
lights of the "living room" reality is not the same Boy who acts out in the blue-light
fantasy world of the Foxy Lady the pornographic image of sexual intercourse "doggie-
style" with his "sister." Inside the living room, he is Calvin, a fourteen-year-old subject
who wears glasses, is deeply devoted to his mother (as demonstrated by his reaction "I
AM. GONNA. KILL YOU!!!(266) to seeing the Man in the relative safety of the living room space later in the play) and is deeply embarrassed by all things sexual. Outside the “reality” of the living room, he is the Boy, an object caught in the pornographic text of pornographic fantasy, mechanistically acting out scripted desire rather than genuine human emotion. Like the character/actor doubling of Ruth, Anna and their three imaginary sons in And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel further distances this subject/object doubling by moving seamlessly from porn-object to Calvin-subject (or Leslie-Ann-subject), commenting neither on the move from the reality of the living-room to the fantasy of the Foxy Lady nor on the swift return back to reality in her text. Instead, Vogel demands the audience work to fill in the literal and rhetorical spaces in their active, intellectual involvement with the playtext, and make informed conclusions about the “truth” of Vogel’s pornographic text and pornography in general.

Vogel further distances these blue-light fantasy/stage-light reality transitions by constantly interrupting them with the narration, commentary and choral-like comments of the Voice Over and (in certain instances) the Voice. The Voice Over’s functions and interaction with the family, like all elements of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, are complex and multi-layered. The female Voice Over “voices” or speaks not only the stage directions which the Woman types as she attempts to work through a particularly sticky seduction scene, but also the “realistic” actions of the family and the inner “thoughts” of the Woman herself.7 Frequently the feminine Voice Over speaks to other characters directly, as in her tart reply “She thinks about it all the time” to the Man’s question posed to the Woman of whether or not she thinks she’ll ever run out of words while writing (259). Directly following this line, the Woman herself answers the Man with “I think about it all
the time” (259) indicating a shift – like that of the mechanistic porno acting of the Boy and Girl – from third-person objectivity in the form of the Voice Over to first-person subjectivity and agency in the character of the Woman.

Another example of this type of distancing – of the Voice Over’s commentary upon character and the Woman’s interior thought-process – occurs late in the play when the Man reminisces about the “good old days” when the Woman worked nights and he worked the day shift. The Woman says nothing in response to this particular trip down memory lane, instead silently pouring coffee; the Voice Over, however, speaks this odd, third and first-person speech:

And every night, she would stand in the middle of the ward and think, ‘I can’t do this any longer.’ Holding another bed pan, swimming with someone’s fluids. Urine, excreta, blood, infection, vomit, mucus. Bodies and mess.

Mess and food. Cleaning up messes. Cleaning up messes. This is where a high school diploma gets you, Charlene. Other people’s messes. (275)

It is telling that Vogel places these words in the mouth of the Voice Over rather than the Woman herself, pointing to the Voice Over’s function as a kind of an uncensored id which has been subsumed by years of strict, socialized discipline by the Woman’s ego and super-ego. To be feminine is to be silent, to not mind “cleaning up other people’s messes.” The messes, however, that the Woman suppresses and the Voice Over speaks, are much more than dirty laundry or scattered toys; instead, as a nurse, the Woman must “clean up” the stuff of life and death, “urine, excreta, blood, infection, vomit, mucus,” the
“obscene” fluids that make us human and which, like pornography, are frequently suppressed or euphemized by a “moral” society.

Even more significant than the distancing “id” functioning of the Voice Over is the Voice Over’s vocalizations of stage directions, a decidedly feminine, usually silent text, available only to actors, directors, designers and the playwright herself. By performing this task, the female Voice Over gives voice to that which is silent and unvoiced on stage, the playwright’s directions to the actors of how and when they move. This exposure of the silent text of a theatrical production is disturbing and disorienting for audience members and readers alike of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, forcing us as spectators to re-evaluate simple actions and who—character or playwright—is “in charge” of scripting these actions. An excellent example of this dizzying, vertigo-inducing dialogue occurs in the middle of the play following the Woman’s and Man’s attempt to hold a polite conversation after she has shot him. In this short exchange, the masculine Voice and the feminine Voice Over fight for control of the scripted action in an increasingly tense, complicated theatrical and cinematic battle of stage directions:

THE VOICE: “CUT TO: INTERIOR. THE WOMAN closes her eyes.”

(The Woman closes her eyes.)

THE VOICE: “CLOSE-UP on her lips as she kisses THE MAN, hard, on the mouth.”

(The Woman sits by The Man and gently kisses him. The look at each other.

Then they kiss again— a long hard kiss, breathing each other in.)
V.O.

"VOICE-OVER: What are you doing Charlene?"

THE VOICE: "THE MAN and THE WOMAN look at each other for a long time."

V.O.

"VOICE-OVER CONTINUED: This is not a movie Charlene."

THE VOICE: "THE MAN and THE WOMAN move toward each other, lips parted."

... 

V.O.

(Insistent)

"Get out of the house!" (265-266)

Both the male Voice and the female Voice Over begin their battle by relying on their usual, cinematic, third-person stage directions. In this particular scene and throughout the play, the Voice Over’s and the Voice’s use of such terms as “CUT TO” and “INTERIOR” blend the medium of film and theater, confusing the theatrical action on stage with the action of the film script the Woman composes while on stage. This strange blending of celluloid and theater is interrupted by Vogel’s own stage directions in which the commands of the Voice are somewhat mitigated by the Woman’s actual actions. Instead of immediately kissing the Man “hard” on the mouth, as the Voice dictates, she begins by kissing him “gently,” pointing to the possibility that the Voice functions, like the Voice Over, as expression of the Man’s repressed (and overt) desires, as well as the cultural pornographic script that surrounds them. As the sexual demands of
the Voice — and, by extension, the Man — increase, the Voice Over moves from her third-person narrative function to a direct, first-person invective to the Woman, whom she addresses as the specific character of Charlene in her lines “This is not a movie Charlene” and “Get out of the house!” (265-266). With this move from third-person objectivity to first-person subjectivity, the Voice Over herself becomes a participant in the action (albeit an ineffectual one since the Woman does not heed the Voice Over’s advice) and moves into a strange half-subjectivity of her own. This elision of narrator and actor, and this continual slippage between subject and object of the female Voice Over, as well as the vocalizations of normally silent text results in a multi-layered, specifically feminist and historically distanced effect.

The fourth and final layer of the historicizing Verfremdungseffekt in Vogel’s problematic subject matter is in Vogel’s creation of the Woman as both writer and participant in her own pornographic drama. By placing the scripting of the fluid interchange of subject/object relationships firmly in the decidedly gendered hands of her female protagonist — not the expected usual agent for pornographic production — Vogel surprises and jolts audience members and readers into reconsidering the character of the Woman/Charlene, as well as our preconceived notions of authorship of pornography, the audience of pornography, and the construction of subjectivity. This incredibly complex, dense process is perhaps best observed in the Woman’s discussion of her writing process with the repentant, bleeding Man, and of her ideas about her own participation in the production of pornography.

Responding to the Man’s accusation that she writes “porn” following a brief, comic verbal skirmish over the etymology of Gyno Production’s latest effort
“Moonfuck,” which she sharply defends as a “critique and satire of Moonstruck”, the Woman replies: “Gyno Productions is a feminist film company dedicated to producing women’s erotica” (261, emphasis mine). The Man counters this consciously political categorization with the observation “Erotica is just a Swedish word for porn, Charlene” (261); however, instead of mocking her or deflating her definitions with crass, cruel sarcasm (as is his usual reaction), the Man is surprisingly straightforward in his insistence that the Woman “face” that which she is participating in and to “take pride in it” (261). Encouraged, the Woman elaborates on her conceptions of the difference between voyeuristic pornography (and, by extension, obscenity) and erotica, or the feminist expression of mutual, reciprocal female desire:

WOMAN: For one thing, desire in female spectators is aroused by cinema in a much different way. Narrativity — that is, plot — is emphasized.

MAN (Stares at her): Yeah. There are lots more words. So what else?

WOMAN: The “meat shots” and “money shots” of the trade flicks are not the be-all and end-all of Gyno productions. — Why are you laughing?

MAN: I seen one of your movies — and it had tits and ass just like DEEP THROAT.

WOMAN: Physical expression is the culmination of relationships between characters. Most importantly, we try to create women as protagonists in their own dramas, rather than objects. And we try to appreciate the male body as an object of desire.

MAN: Now you’re talking! (261-262)
The Woman’s description of her goals as a writer of pornography (or “erotica”) and that of Gyno productions sounds suspiciously like a FACT-based promotion for a female-centered pornography; indeed, she appears to lift whole phrases from critical studies of the pro-sex side of the feminist pornography wars. The Woman’s vocabulary is consciously heightened and formal as she slips into the rhetoric of academia with such phrases as “narrativity,” “objects of desire” and “female spectators.” This eloquent explanation of her pro-pornography ideology, however, is continually undercut not only by the Man’s consciously debased vocabulary (“I seen” and “tits and ass”) but also by Vogel’s playful stage direction that the Voice and Voice Over “begin to make orgiastic noises when The Woman says ‘aroused’” (261). Both the Man’s comic undercutting and the Voice and Voice Over’s sub-vocalized participation in the Woman’s proclamation succeed in distancing her words, making them and their accompanying political ideology strange and therefore suspect.

What, however, is the critical message Vogel wishes us to intercept? What are we as audience members and/or critical readers to make of the Woman’s feminist, pro-sex manifesto in a play in which, a few pages later, she is strangled in a terrifying, distanced parody of a snuff film, destroyed, in effect, by her own erotic script? Herein lies the “rub” of the play, the dilemma of the difference (if any) between pornography and obscenity in Hot ‘N’ Throbbing and the links (if any) between pornography and violence. It would appear at first with the Woman’s participation in Gyno productions and in her continual scripting or creation of pornographic text throughout the course of Hot ‘N’ Throbbing that Vogel seems to land on the pro-pornography side of the feminist pornography wars, aligning herself with the ideology which encourages feminine and
feminist experimentation with and discovery of female desire. However, the violent, bloody and tragic ending of the Woman’s/Charlene’s story seems to point to the opposite, to Vogel’s decidedly siding with Dworkin and MacKinnon and other anti-pornography feminists – those who would legislate pornography – in her portrayal of the Woman whose attempts at scripting a female-centered pornography go tragically awry. This much more pessimistic look at the connections between pornography and violence seems to argue that the “living room” family members – the Boy and Girl as well as the Woman – can not, nor will not escape the violent fantasy world of the Foxy Lady until the links between the two are acknowledged and permanently destroyed, until each are self-contained spaces or until the pornographic fantasy of the Foxy Lady is eradicated entirely. I would argue, however, that it is neither the Woman’s participation in Gyno productions nor her ill-fated attempt to script her own feminist desire that leads to her violent demise but instead the Man’s confusion about them and his unwillingness to accept a fully realized feminine sexuality, one that can act as well as be acted upon.

In the end, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing is not just a play about domestic violence but about the Woman’s attempt (and, by extension, all women) to construct her own subjectivity. To the Man, the Woman’s script will always be about “tits and ass” and never a discovery of “female desire”; it is this negative, masculine, reductionary, objectified and violent pornography that drives the Man’s final actions. Indeed, the cautious, mutual seduction of the end of the play proceeds positively until the Woman laughingly notes that she has birth control in the house, which she refers to as “protection” (285). At this moment, the Man’s expression changes, the masculine Voice interrupts the text with the line “She’s got protection in the house” (286) and the Man begins to search for the
Woman's concealed gun, another type of "protection." With this sequence, Vogel implies that the Woman's control of her own reproductive processes, as well as her control of her own physical protection, is what causes the Man to move from pornography to the ultimate obscenity: violence.

In Hot 'N' Throbbing, a complex investigation of the play between pornography and domestic violence, Vogel plays with her audience, teasing them into a constant re-evaluation and alternation of sympathies between the two feminist definitions of pornography: between the 'conscious degradation of women' inextricably linked to violence against women, and pornography (or female "erotica") as the last frontier of sexual expression and explicitness in a patriarchal culture which represses any feminine expression of desire. Like her characters, Vogel seems unresolved as to which definition wins out in Hot 'N' Throbbing; although the play ends in unequivocal and horrific violence and murder, Vogel refuses easy polemical answers, refuses to identify with either binary of pornography as dangerous and disgraceful or pornography as a healthy expression of desire. Perhaps an answer can be found in Hot 'N' Throbbing's feminist, Brechtian structure. Like The Baltimore Waltz and And Baby Makes Seven, Hot 'N' Throbbing literally ends where it begins, in the Woman's living room and with the lines "She was hot. She was throbbing" (235 and 295). Like Vogel's open-ended position on the function of pornography in feminist discourse, the denouement of Hot 'N' Throbbing is open-ended and ambiguous. Returning from her night of stripping and sleep-overs and discovering her mother's body, the Girl "cinematically" ages before our eyes, taking up her mother's glasses and her place at the computer. Is this a signal that the Girl is taking her mother's text up where it left off, continuing to participate in the cycle of
pornography, domestic violence and death? Or is she instead re-visioning her mother’s ultimately fatal text with a warier, more cynical attitude towards the fine distinction between pornography and erotica? One hint might be found in the Girl’s voice, in which, instead of relegating the narration of the pornographic text to the feminine Voice Over, she speaks the words herself: “‘VOICE-OVER: She was hot. She was throbbing. But she was in control. Control of her body. Control of her thoughts’” (295). Unlike her mother, the Girl has control of her text—pornographic and otherwise—her voice and her body. And unlike her mother or the title character of Desdemona, Vogel is able to rescue the Girl by providing her with this feminist narrative control and with the recognition of the presence of the Foxy Lady outside her living room door. With this final scene, Vogel also implies that whether or not we as spectators retain a similar textual control in our own lives as men and women existing in a pornographic society is an ongoing battle, one that will not be resolved easily or soon, and that perhaps the greatest obscenity is to remain blind to the war raging around us.
Notes

1. MacKinnon observes that numerous studies have documented the relationship between pornography and violence, showing that "exposure to pornography increases normal men's willingness to aggress against women in laboratory conditions," and, perhaps more disturbingly, makes "both men and women substantially less able to perceive accounts of rape as accounts of rape" (304, note 11). Some of the studies she cites include Diana E. H. Russell's 1988 "Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model" in Political Psychology as well as such book-length studies as Pornography and Sexual Aggression (1984) and D. Zillman's Connection between Sex and Aggression (also 1984). MacKinnon concludes that these studies (among others) offer convincing evidence that exposure to pornography results in increased male "trivialization, dehumanization and objectification of women" (304).

2. MacKinnon notes that obscenity law, and its concerns with "good and evil, virtue and vice" are abstract and antithetical to feminist concerns, which are instead political and focus on concrete manifestations of "power and powerlessness" (196). Thus, although it may seem that cultural feminists collude with conservatives in supporting anti-pornography legislation, the two groups are in fact opposing pornography for two completely different reasons. However, as Deborah Cameron points out in her article, "Discourses of Desire," the moral majority has appropriated much of the feminist rhetoric in their battles against obscenity, resulting in a discursive shift and thus blurring the line further between the two groups (785).

3. Unable to resist the comic implications in phonemic sounds of "Gyno Productions," Vogel includes a discussion of the Woman's new business cards after she shoots her estranged husband. The business cards, in which the Woman evidently takes great pride, have a mascot, named "Rosie the Rhino," a dancing rhinoceros, complete with a G-String (258). Like all the comedy of Hot 'N' Throbbing, however, the verbal humor in this moment is quickly deflated when the Man responds with cruel, misogynistic and homophobic comment that the mascot looks like both the Woman "before Weight Watchers" and a "stripper in a lesbo bar . . . who's just taken off her flannel shirt" (258). That the comedy of Rosie the Rhino is meant for female spectators is a point the Man misses entirely.

4. Adding to the reflexive complications of placing pornography on stage is the fact that the American stage is one of the last bastions of middle-class respectability in which, as Elinor Fuchs points out, the line between obscenity and pornography is "much more rigid than it is in print or film" (54). Since the theater in contemporary American culture is often the entertainment of the "privileged and protected," the potential offensiveness of placing pornography on stage in full view and the potential resistance of audience members in examining it critically is doubled. However, as Fuchs sagely suggests, the theatrical medium is particularly apt for a critical analysis of pornography since both the
theater and the female body have traditionally been "sites of prohibition, subject to 'prophylactic' separation of the clean and the dirty" (55). In Hot 'N' Throbbing, Vogel refuses to allow audience members to separate the clean from the dirty, the guilty from the non-guilty, the moral from the immoral.

Vogel comments on her reliance on this type of distancing in her dramaturgy in her 1999 interview with David Savran: "As cultural animals, we do not forget because something is hidden, we forget because something is in our face and we don't want to see it anymore. That's what forgetting is. Forgetting is a way of not looking" (271). By extension, in Hot 'N' Throbbing, pornography is the "something" that audiences wish to forget by not "looking" directly at it. By placing her investigation of domestic violence in the center of the feminist pornography controversy, Vogel forces us to look, to take on the position of the voyeur – willing or un-willing – in order to better understand what pornography is and what effects it has on men, women and children.

In the same interview with Savran, Paula Vogel states her "love/hate relationship with Brecht," declaring not only his theories whole-sale "robbery" of the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky's theories, but also that she disagrees with several of his key concepts, one of them being his ideas about history and historicization (Savran 275). Instead of seeing history as a "neat demarcation, politically, ethically, between history and the present moment," she says she views history as a "continuum," a "way of us being enough out of the picture to analyze the shifting interconnections among politics, social history, economics, culture and gender" (283). Vogel's position is thus much more overtly feminist in its refusal to reinscribe binaries of past and present.

The male Voice, on the other hand, provides several distinct "characters" which inform, interrupt and distract the Woman's writing process, including (among others) narration from Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (done in a "rich, European baritone" (240)), James Joyce's Ulysses, D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterly's Lover, Henry James's Plexus and the first-person narration of nineteenth-century German "sexologist" Krafft-Ebing. By including the masculine voices of these male authored, highly-canonized texts through the masculine Voice, Vogel makes a pointed comment about the history of pornographic texts which have been protected by, as Catherine MacKinnon so eloquently puts it, centuries of "celebratory intellectual obfuscation" (195). Vogel's addition and juxtaposition of the Voice's literal voicing of these texts further problematizes the question of "what is pornographic" in literature, society and on stage.

One can't help thinking of the "divided" character of L'il Bit which appears in Vogel's later study of the effects of incest, the 1998 Pulitzer-prize winning play, How I Learned to Drive. In this play, L'il Bit states she is no longer attached to her body, that she has been living her life "from the neck up" since her incestuous relationship with the chillingly likable and monstrous Uncle Peck. Is this the fate of the Girl in Hot 'N' Throbbing, an ancestress of L'il Bit, a precursor of her disassociation? Vogel's vision of the Girl's future is opaque.
CHAPTER 5

WHY DESDEMONA IS A PLAY ABOUT A HANDBKERCHIEF

DESDEMONA: My heart’s subdued
   Even to the very quality of my lord:
   I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,
   And to his honours and his valiant parts
   Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate . . .
   -- William Shakespeare, Othello

DESDEMONA: I remember the first time I saw my husband and I caught a
glimpse of his skin, and, oh, how I thrilled. I thought – aha! – a man of a different
color. From another world and planet. I thought, if I marry this strange dark man,
I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind – I can
escape and see other worlds.
(Pause.)
   But under that exotic façade was a porcelain white Venetian . . .
   -- Paula Vogel, Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief

Early in Paula Vogel’s play Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief, the
cracter Desdemona frantically ransacks the set, described as a “mean, sparsely
furnished back room with rough, white-washed walls” (177), while Emilia, Desdemona’s
scullery maid/lady-in-waiting, bemusedly looks on, offering casual advice and
admonitions not to make too much of a mess. From just these few clues, we as audience,
critics and readers are lured into the “back room” of William Shakespeare’s Othello, an
imaginary space in Shakespeare’s imaginary Cyprus, in which, through Vogel, we are
allowed a delicious ‘behind-the-scenes’ peek at the lives of the three famous women of
one of Shakespeare’s most famous (and infamous) tragedies. However, any notions of a
besotted, lyrical and/or faithful tribute to the Bard are quickly exploded and distanced along with any sense of propriety as Vogel’s Desdemona, frustrated and angry, spits out a shocking, decidedly un-Shakespearean line: “Oh piss and vinegar!! Where is the crappy little snot rag!” (179).

Obviously, this is not Shakespeare’s (or Othello’s) “smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.5) Desdemona, whose seductive mixture of selflessness and sexual maturity has fascinated audiences and readers for hundreds of years and has generated mountains of literary criticism examining her character and her tragic fate. Instead, in Adrienne Rich’s feminist spirit of re-visioning and re-seeing canonical classics, Vogel’s Desdemona is an irreverent yet highly serious interrogation of the destructiveness of the heterosexual/patriarchal marriage system, misogyny, female friendship and female sexuality – themes relevant both to Shakespeare’s fictional Cyprus and to contemporary American society. As with her daring and comic re-visioning of Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? in her play And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel further tramples on sacred ground by using a canonical Shakespearean text as a springboard for her own unique brand of comedy and brutal social commentary; indeed, she turns Shakespeare’s Moorish play on its ear and gives it a good shake-down to see, as Jill Dolan has archly observed, what might “fall out of [its] pockets” (437) by confronting her audience with a Desdemona who is guilty of all the crimes of which Shakespeare’s Othello accuses her, and some "crimes" even Shakespeare’s salacious Iago can not imagine. Unlike her fast and loose re-visionary adaptation of and dialogue with Albee’s classic in And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel here relies more closely on her base text, focusing on the material relationships of the three female characters of Othello – Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca –
and confining them to the “back room” of Shakespeare’s play world.¹ Employing a feminist application of the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, Vogel ‘makes strange’ Othello, shedding bright light into the dark corners of Shakespearean tragedy, forcing both audience and reader to question culturally calcified assumptions about this classic text, to engage in the nagging questions of why, in both plays, women must die, and to reconsider why, ultimately, Desdemona – and by extension, Othello – is indeed a “play about a handkerchief.”

In her introduction to Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women’s Re-Visions in Literature and Performance, Marianne Novy comments upon the consummate ripeness of Shakespearean texts and traditions for feminine (and feminist) re-visioning. She notes that in part because of the “legal, social, political and cultural activities” of the “second wave” of feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, the widely disparate group of late twentieth-century female theatrical artists who choose to re-see Shakespearean texts cohere in their “aggressive back-talk” to the venerable tradition of humanist Shakespearean production and criticism, and its patriarchal and colonialist biases (“Introduction” 1).² Novy proposes that women who engage in dialogue with Shakespeare’s texts, criticism of these texts, or even the pseudo-mythical figure of “the Bard” himself use their art to accomplish three important goals: to allow characters to “escape plots that doom them to an oppressive marriage or to death,” to “demythologize myths about male heroism and also about female martyrdom” and to “imagine stories for figures who are silent or demonized in Shakespeare’s version,” endowing typically objectified female characters with much deserved subjectivity (“Introduction” 1).
Thus, Vogel is in excellent (and somewhat crowded) company in her feminist re-interpretation of a Shakespearean text. Some of examples of these re-interpretations include Jane Smiley’s Pulitzer-prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres*, in which she critiques, interacts and re-sees the story of *King Lear* from the point of view of Goneril, transforming the demonized Goneril (“Ginny”) into the victim of incestuous abuse from a tyrannical, Lear-like father; similarly, Marina Warner’s *Indigo* re-sees the patriarchal and colonialist fantasy of *The Tempest* from the point of view of the silent, demonized and displaced Sycorax and her family. Noting this preponderance of feminine and feminist re-workings of Shakespearean texts, then, perhaps the best way to begin my investigation of Vogel’s feminist/Brechtian re-seeing of *Othello* in *Desdemona* is by posing the question why, of all of Shakespeare’s comedies, tragedies, histories and romances, would Vogel choose to re-vision this particular Shakespearean text? What makes a tragedy about the disastrous consequences of early modern interracial marriage, male jealousy, female sexuality and cracking cultural and class boundaries ripe for Vogel’s particular brand of darkly comic, eminently subversive appropriation? Why *Othello* and not *Hamlet*? Or *Much Ado About Nothing*? Or even *The Winter’s Tale*?

There are many possible complicated answers to these equally complicated questions, not the least of which have to do with the shifting nature of Shakespeare’s investigation of gender relationships and the patriarchal construction of the heterosexual marriage system in his use of the different genres of comedy, tragedy, romance and history. It is perhaps an oversimplification to state in this age of postmodern, post-structural Shakespearean criticism that Shakespeare’s portrayal of women and their relative power in their personal and public relationships varies from comedy to tragedy,
romance to history, etc., shifting emphasis and focus in each genre. For example, both Rosalind and Desdemona powerfully manipulate the courtship system of the patriarchal, heterosexual marriage market: Rosalind by cross-dressing as Ganymede and offering wooing advice to Orlando and Desdemona by "hinting" to Othello through her rapt attention to his exotic stories and her subsequent elopement with him. However, the comedic heroine Rosalind marries the man she earlier woos through speaking while the tragic heroine Desdemona is smothered by the very man she earlier woos through listening. Rosalind is celebrated and rewarded for her quick wit and activity, while Desdemona is demonized and destroyed, both by Othello and other male characters in the play and by centuries of male critics, for her "foul" desire and her activity (5.2.198).

Although both plays contain active female characters who assert their subjectivity, the old cliché that early modern tragedies must conclude with the obligatory "pile of bodies on the floor" holds true for Shakespeare's tragedies, and, not surprisingly, Desdemona cannot escape Othello's body count. Equally unsurprising, Marianne Novy observes that although almost all of Shakespeare's plays have received some kind of feminine/feminist re-visioning, his tragedies are by far the most popular for the feminine and/or feminist theatrical artist's re-visioning ("Introduction" 5). Novy goes even further in her own essay "Surviving Desdemona and/or Ourselves," hinting that perhaps this attraction to the tragedies, particularly in the case of Canadian playwright Anne-Marie MacDonald's re-seeing of Othello in her play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), is due in part to the impulse to re-see a world in which the tragic heroines Desdemona and Juliet are rescued from their gruesome fates. MacDonald's play is a twentieth-century, feminist "happily-ever-after" update of the both Othello and Romeo.
and Juliet in which both Desdemona and Juliet give up their “tragic absolutism” for relatively normal lives in which they both explore their attraction to each other and to the third character “Constance,” an over-worked academic who saves Shakespeare’s heroines from certain death (Novy “Surviving Desdemona” 69).

However, a contemporary feminist reader, critic and theatrical artist driven by the impulse to reinvent Shakespeare’s women for the sake of “saving” them could as easily re-see the brutal treatment of comic heroines by male characters and patriarchal societies in Shakespeare’s comedies as well as in his tragedies; the deplorable treatment and “taming” of Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew or the accusations thrown at Hero in Much Ado About Nothing or Hermione in The Winter’s Tale, for example, present endless possibilities and fertile ground for future revision and re-invention. Thus I do not think Vogel’s choice of Othello is inherently genre-dependent, or that Vogel – like MacDonald – re-sees a Shakespearean tragedy for the sake of re-inventing its conclusion. Despite its irreverent humor and continually shocking content, Desdemona is not a “happily-ever-afrer” re-visioning of Othello, and, as Marianne Novy has noted, despite Vogel’s radical departure in Desdemona’s characterization of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, we as an audience are left with the unsettling sense that following the final “black-out” scene of the play, Vogel’s Desdemona and Emilia are about to suffer the same deadly fate as Shakespeare’s characters (“Surviving Desdemona” 67).

Answers to my earlier questions about Vogel’s reasons for choosing this particular Shakespearean play for uncompromising parody and feminist/Brechtian subversion are rooted, then, not in Othello’s genre, but in Othello’s unique interrogation of gender relationships, and, perhaps more importantly, in Shakespeare’s creation of
active, sensual and “desiring” female characters (Novy “Surviving Desdemona” 77). Although all of Shakespeare’s plays deal with the issues of sexuality and fidelity in some vein, from Hamlet’s disgust/fascination with his mother’s “rank garden” of a wedding bed to the midnight shenanigans of the lovers and fairies in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Othello is unique in its explicit investigation of what happens after the “happily-ever-after,” and with the disastrous disintegration of a marriage and of trust. This disintegration or “central fissure” of the play, as Evelyn Gajowski has observed in her book The Art of Loving, results from the division between the “constructions of women held by the male characters” of Othello and “Shakespeare’s [actual] theatrical representation of women,” a fact that, as Gajowski and other feminist critics point out, has been obscured by centuries of Shakespearean criticism which has diverted critical focus from Othello’s gender relationships to the more “masculine” plots of revenge and manipulation (52).

In Othello Shakespeare sets up a stark contrast between Iago’s, Cassio’s, Roderigo’s, and, eventually, Othello’s readily misogynistic and casually reductionary visions of womanhood and the actual objects of their denigration: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. For example, Iago cannot imagine a Desdemona who will not “change for youth” when she is “sated” with Othello (1.3.350-51), and Cassio repeatedly and callously refers to Bianca as “monkey” (4.1.128). Unlike their male counterparts’ tendency to both “idealize and devalue” them in one breath (Gajowski 61), Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are articulate, honest and hold a pragmatic view of sexuality and the relationships of men and women. Shakespeare’s supposedly subhuman “monkey” Bianca cuts through the evasion of Cassio’s dodging declaration “Not that I love you not” with
surprising insight and touching resignation with her comment “I must be circumstanced” (3.7.197, 202). Emilia’s Shylock-like observations in her monologue in the willow scene of Act Five that women, like men, have “galls,” “grace[s]” and “revenge[s],” stands in sharp contrast to her husband’s rabid, categorical dismissal of womankind; her defense of her sex/gender, Gajowski notes, explicitly serves also to remind us of the implicit “critique of male treatment of females” in Othello (82). Additionally, Emilia’s admission to Desdemona that although she might not “abuse” her husband by “this heavenly light” she might indeed “do’t as well i’th’dark” (4.3.65-66) is a quiet, frank and refreshingly humorous moment in the play, a kind of calm in the midst of the maelstrom that is about to ensue, reminding us of the elastic boundaries between comedy and tragedy in Othello.

Like Othello’s supporting female characters, Shakespeare’s Desdemona is also delightful in her earthiness and joyful sensuality, and, as she has been characterized by some critics, is no passive, blushing virgin. Instead, she publicly voices in front of the Venetian Senate her almost militaristic determination to consummate her marriage, declaring that she “did love the Moor to live with him,” and warning that “[her] downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world” if the patriarchal governing body of Venice deny her her marriage rites (1.3.249-251). Indeed, as Gajowski notes, Shakespeare’s Desdemona, like his Juliet, is an active heroine and is thus more subject than object, actively choosing her husband Othello, refusing her father’s prerogative in finding her a suitable mate, and, by extension, repudiating the entire patriarchal marriage system in which she must exist. Indeed, taking Juliet’s revolutionary activity of marrying one of her family’s arch-rivals one step further, Desdemona eloquently publicizes her choice of her Moorish mate, a deed which Juliet never even
Not only is she a revolutionary heroine, Shakespeare’s Desdemona is also a character who is articulate in her desire, verbally sparring both with the bitter, worldly Iago and the bawdy Clown, visibly appreciating male beauty — commenting to Emilia in the willow scene “This Lodovicio is a proper man. A very handsome man” (4.3.34-35) — and, unlike the romantic, dangerously Petrarchan (and later Ovidian) Othello, she chooses pragmatic desire and productive life over unrealistic idealization.

This practicality in romance and marriage is revealed, among other numerous examples, in Desdemona’s refutation of Othello’s fatalistic greeting in Act Two, Scene One that husband and wife were best to die when “most happy” with the sharp, forward-looking reply “The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow” (2.1.192-194). Along with their clear-eyed view of the men and the world surrounding them, all three of Othello’s female characters refuse to be silenced by their husbands, fathers and lovers. Bianca vehemently defends her reputation in Act Five with her strong declaration “I am no strumpet / But of life as honest as you, that thus / Abuse me” (5.1.122-124) punching holes in the commonly held assumption that she is a whore. Desdemona vehemently protests her innocence to the enraged Othello “I never did / Offend you in my life” (5.2.58-59) and categorically denies any relationship with Cassio. Finally, Emilia, whose vehemence both results in her own death and resolves the true nature of Iago’s manipulations, responds to Iago’s demands for “peace” with a loud, decidedly feminist protest against her silencing: “‘Twill out, ‘twill out! I peace? / No I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (5.2.217-220). Although
Emilia’s vehemence is too late to save Desdemona (or herself), it is an admirable and moving assertion of her subjectivity and her right to speak despite threat of damnation as well as death.

This vehemence, this active pursuit of subjectivity in a decidedly patriarchal play world is thus undeniably attractive to Vogel, whose Brechtian exploration of feminism and female characters in And Baby’s lesbian couple Anna and Ruth (who resort to fantasy in order to create a family), Hot ‘N’ Throbbing’s “The Woman” (whose “feminist erotica” eventually destroys her) and The Baltimore Waltz’s Anna (whose passionate seduction of the Third Man unfolds center stage) reveals a preoccupation with how women construct subjectivity and find palatable choices in worlds that offer them little of either. However, as I have noted previously, Vogel’s Desdemona is in no way a rosy tribute to Shakespeare’s feminine — and feminist — pioneering in Othello. Instead, Desdemona is as concerned with smashing Shakespeare’s optimistic portrayal of feminine friendship and in sullying Shakespeare’s model of feminine chastity in the character of Desdemona as it is in celebrating these innovations, leading to the question of why, unlike other feminist/feminine artists, Vogel seems to choose to mangle Desdemona’s, Emilia’s and Bianca’s relative subjectivity rather than to celebrate it. Thus, perhaps the answer to this dilemma lies in the nature of Shakespearean feminine subjectivity itself.

In her feminist/psychoanalytic study of the mother figures in Shakespeare’s plays, Janet Adelman also notices the singular subjectivity of Othello’s female characters, and posits that Othello differs from such plays as Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida in which Shakespeare neatly divides his female characters into “whores” and “Madonnas,” thus
fulfilling the male conception of "good" (chaste) women and "bad" (sexually active) women. In contrast, in Othello Adelman suggests that Shakespeare becomes "critical of the process of splitting itself" (64). Thus, according to Adelman, the Petrarchan/Ovidian "split" between "Madonna" and "whore" in Othello is unique in that it is enacted not in the female characters of the play but in the "diseased imagination" of Othello himself: in Othello’s mind Desdemona is both Madonna and whore, both promiscuous and chaste, a condition which, as Adelman hypothesizes, leads him to destroy her since he is ultimately unable to reconcile the two conflicting binaries (64). Herein, I think, lies Vogel’s "rub." By re-working Othello in Desdemona, Vogel zeroes in on this motif of the masculine splitting of feminine identity and sexuality, and re-examines these binary traps of Madonna and whore by creating a Desdemona who is decidedly closer to Iago’s and Othello’s "whore" than many critics’ (feminist critics included) "Madonna," a Bianca who is proud of her status as Cyprus’s sole prostitute, and an Emilia whose hatred for her husband is only outweighed by her hatred for her mistress. This re-visioning, which recasts Desdemona as a lusty young woman whose first sexual experiences include “doing” her cousin Ludovicio “à la main” in chapel every Sunday under the not-so-watchful eyes of near-sighted nuns (Vogel 192) in effect throws metaphorical icy water upon the audience, distancing the reader/spectator and forcing them to change his/her perspective of the characters of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca and of the play itself. In addition, this de-familiarization of Shakespeare’s characters and the plot of Othello causes the spectator/reader to question previous critical assumptions regarding the characters of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, and, finally, pushes them to reexamine the parameters of female desire. Vogel also uses her investigation of the binaries in Desdemona as an
opportunity to examine the intricate – and ultimately fatal – economic, social and material relationships between Desdemona the mistress, Emilia the servant and Bianca the “working woman.” Vogel accomplishes these subversive feminist goals via her implementation of Brechtian techniques.

Like most of Vogel’s work, Desdemona has a relatively uncomplicated structure. A three character, one act play, unfolding in the single setting of the dingy back room of servants’ quarters, Desdemona is divided into thirty short “cinematic” scenes separated by blackouts, some of which, much like those in The Baltimore Waltz and And Baby Makes Seven, are no more than a tableau or mimed action. As noted previously, Desdemona follows the characters of Desdemona and Emilia of Shakespeare’s Othello from the time Desdemona “loses” the “spotted handkerchief” Othello has bequeathed her (Act Three, Scene Three in Shakespeare’s Othello) to Emilia’s and Desdemona’s fateful last night together in which they begin to realize the exact nature of the danger that awaits them in Desdemona’s bed chamber (the “willow scene” of Act Four, Scene Three of Othello). Between these two framing scenes, however, and beyond the initial premise and characters of Othello, Vogel’s Desdemona diverges from Shakespeare’s plot and from his representation of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Instead of re-creating the relatively few moments in Othello in which we are allowed glimpses of lives of Shakespeare’s women, Vogel chooses to focus on the silences of Shakespeare’s tragedy, portraying what happens off-stage and in-between Shakespeare’s main-stage scenes.

An example of this focus on the “unseen” moments of Othello occurs early in Desdemona. Instead of showing the confrontation between Othello and Emilia in 4.1 of Othello, Vogel chooses to portray what happens immediately before and after
Desdemona’s greeting of her cousin Lodovicio with the sole stage direction “we hear distinct sound of a very loud slap” (Vogel 186). As a result, instead of hearing how Desdemona reacts to Othello’s violence filtered through Lodovicio’s observation to Othello “Make her amends, she weeps” (4.1.242), Vogel allows us to see Desdemona’s actual reaction in the stage direction “... Desdemona returns, closes the door behind her, holding her cheek. She is on the brink of tears” (Vogel 186). With this silent image, Vogel’s Desdemona moves from helpless “weeping” object to active (albeit almost weeping) subject. As with her use of the female “Voice Over” in Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, whose spoken stage directions both amplify and comment upon “The Woman’s” actions, Vogel’s endowment of voice and movement to the “silent” texts of Othello – that which is unseen, unvoiced and private – and her focus on earthy, domestic dialogue of Othello’s three women, transforms Desdemona into both an emphatically feminine and feminist text. Desdemona is a “feminine” text in its concern with exposing female experience, focusing on such actions as washing dishes, mending clothes, and discussing the sexual habits of men, and it is a “feminist” text in its private critique of the public, patriarchal world in which Emilia, Desdemona and Bianca exist; one of the great ironies of Desdemona is that though Bianca, Emilia and Desdemona do loudly condemn Othello, Iago and Cassio for their mistreatment of them, their condemnations are confined to the “back-room” of the play and are thus unheard by the men they critique.

By de-familiarizing the familiar, public text of Othello and instead focusing on the private, female, offstage action, Vogel implements the Brechtian theatrical device of Verfremdungseffekt in order to wake audiences up from their anesthetized Shakespearean slumber in which, so familiar are they with Othello’s text, they could conceivably mouth
the words along with the actors during the performance. As with *The Baltimore Waltz, And Baby Makes Seven* and *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, Vogel uses *Verfremdungseffekt* to her advantage in *Desdemona*, and her refreshing re-working of *Othello’s* plot and characters inject the much-needed element of surprise into the theatrical space, keeping audiences and readers on the edge of their literal and figurative seats, wondering if this time Desdemona and Emilia might escape their husbands and death.

Indeed, Vogel’s appropriation of Brecht’s distancing-effect in *Desdemona* is perhaps, of all her plays, *most* in the spirit of Brecht’s political, epic theater, and more closely aligned to that which Brecht called for in his essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” one of his first articulations of the benefits of the distancing effect. The artist’s job, Brecht proposed, is, above all, to “appear strange and even surprising to the audience” (92). An actor can then achieve this goal, Brecht theorized, by “looking strangely at himself and his work” and “as a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing” (92). As Elin Diamond, Marianne Novy and other feminist theatrical critics and scholars have previously discussed (see introduction), this Brechtian technique of defamiliarization, of endowing the theatrical space with the “touch of the amazing,” can be accomplished not only by actors and directors but also by playwrights as well in their “surprising” and “strange” re-visionings of canonical texts. Not only does Vogel endow *Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief* with the “touch of the amazing” by imaginatively investigating the previously silent relationships between Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, and de-familiarizing the “truth” of Desdemona’s promiscuity, Bianca’s profession and Emilia’s friendship, she also interjects her own feminist, political and ideological goals into her use of *Verfremdungseffekt* by awakening audiences to the
silencing of the feminine texts she articulates. By doing so, Vogel effectively stimulates audience awareness of the constricting and ultimately fatal gender roles to which all three women have been confined.

Perhaps Vogel's greatest and most distancing stroke is in, of all places, her title: by re-seeing Shakespeare's title *Othello* with *Desdemona*, Vogel refocuses our attention from the plight of Shakespeare's doomed, duped male tragic protagonist to her female, darkly comic and sexually subversive protagonist, redirecting our attention from Othello's, Iago's and Cassio's subjectivity and point of view to Desdemona's, Emilia's and Bianca's, with strange, startling, hilarious and often bone-chilling results. Instead of watching Shakespeare's Othello's slow disintegration from "honorable" soldier to insanely jealous murderer, we watch Emilia attempt to wash out the "maidenhead blood" from Desdemona's wedding sheets, the resulting stain which, of course, is not Desdemona's but a "old hen on crutches" supplied by Bianca who swears its blood will wash out as "clean as maidenhead or baby droppings" (180). Instead of watching Shakespeare's Iago plot and scheme, we see a cynical, impatient and spoiled Desdemona receive a pedicure from an embittered Emilia; we watch Bianca crack bawdy jokes and gossip while getting drunk with Desdemona; we watch Desdemona's and Emilia's poignant and tense last moments together as Emilia counts brush-strokes while she brushes Desdemona's hair: "ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine . . ." (224). All these images serve to distance the audience and reader, shocking them into a fresh experience of Shakespeare's *Othello* via Vogel's *Desdemona*.

Another excellent example of Vogel's appropriation of Brecht's distancing effect and her departure from Shakespeare's *Othello* in *Desdemona* lies in her re-
invention of the characters of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Vogel’s Desdemona, whose characterization is rooted in Shakespeare’s lusty, yet paradoxically chaste, lover of life, is perhaps the most shockingly estranged of Shakespeare’s three characters. Unlike Shakespeare’s Desdemona, who chooses to contain her sensuality within the confines of her marriage, Vogel’s Desdemona is decidedly unchaste, and is everything the “diseased imagination” of Othello fears, having slept with almost every man on Cyprus, except, ironically, the one man with which he accuses her: Michael Cassio (who, Emilia implies, is a bit of a “Nancy” and whose career in the army is no “acc-i-dent” [213]). This Desdemona, recent-debutante-turned-bored-society-matron, longs to break out of the suffocation of her marriage and the rigid societal constrictions of her role as wife and mistress of a large household, much as Shakespeare’s Desdemona longs for release from her father Brabantio’s control and household. While Shakespeare’s Desdemona’s sense of adventure seems to be satisfied with her marriage to Othello and her voyage to Cyprus, Vogel’s Desdemona’s restlessness is not assuaged by marriage vows, fine clothes and a single sea voyage. She expresses this dissatisfaction to the disapproving Emilia in a somewhat radical feminist statement in scene eleven of Desdemona: “Women are clad in purdah, we decent, respectable matrons, from the cradle to the altar to the shroud . . . bridled with linen, brindled with lace . . . These very walls are purdah” (193).

Desdemona’s use of the word “purdah,” a screen, curtain or veil which is used for the express purpose of hiding women from the masculine gaze, reveals her profound sense of isolation and enslavement to a patriarchal system which seeks to “protect” her from the outside world. Through Desdemona, Vogel paints a picture in which women who are “trapped” in marriage are choked and gagged with fine frippery, silenced, tied
down and trussed up with the alliteratively binding "lace" and "linen," items for which, Desdemona implies, she — and, by extension, all women who have allowed themselves to be "sold" into marriage — have traded their freedom and their voice. In this context, Desdemona's use of the words "respectable" and "decent" becomes more obscene than her decidedly un-Shakespearean epithets "dog piddle" and "goddamn horse urine!" (178). Vogel also subtly reverses Shakespeare's characterizations of Emilia and Desdemona, giving Othello's Emilia's famous, worldly responses to the thought of adultery — "Nor I neither, by this heavenly light: / I might do't as well i'th'dark" (4.3.65-66) and "The world's a huge thing: it is a great price / for small a vice" (4.3.67-68) — to her Desdemona, who on three separate occasions reminds Emilia that the "world" is indeed a "huge thing for so small a vice" (Vogel 193).

Vogel's Desdemona, of course, has found an outlet from the slow stifling death of the married woman's "purdah" and the tedium of Cyprus, a kind of steam valve for her energies in the form of her extra-curricular activities — her "small vices" — at Bianca's brothel. In the same scene in which she rails against her purdah, Vogel's Desdemona describes her experiences at the brothel to (the still disapproving) Emilia:

I lie in the blackness of the room at [Bianca's] establishment . . . on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights. And the men come into that pitch-black room — men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, with rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia — seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the
globe. And I simply lie there in the darkness, taking them all into me. I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh how I travel! (194)

This surprisingly poetic speech— in a play that consistently seeks to explode any trace of Shakespearean poetic eloquence—reveals not only a sensual appreciation of the human body, but also Desdemona’s connection of sexual promiscuity and adultery with a viable (albeit particularly passive, as indicated in her line “simply lie”) form of liberation.

Desdemona’s language is that which longs for physical journey and adventure, as seen in her references to geography in a “thousand lands” and the “surface of the globe.” Thus, although Vogel’s adventurous Desdemona, like Shakespeare’s Desdemona, cannot herself travel to these thousand lands, or traverse the surface of the globe as she so longs to do, she can travel vicariously through the semen of the nameless, faceless men she meets at Bianca’s brothel, a kind of grotesque, highly sexualized arm-chair traveling. That Vogel’s Desdemona not only allows numerous unknown men to “spill their seed” into her is distancing, but Vogel’s added layer of Verfremdungseffekt— that Desdemona enjoys these night-time “journeys”— is even more shocking to audiences and readers who, like Shakespeare’s Othello, expect Desdemona to be, if not “silent,” then “chaste and obedient” to the point of self-abnegation. Although rooted in the delightful sensuality of Shakespeare’s Desdemona, Vogel’s vision of a casually cruel Desdemona who belittles Emilia and actively pursues sexual adventure outside the confines of the patriarchal purdah of her marriage to Othello is a radical step away from Shakespeare’s tragic heroine whose last words “Nobody. I myself” are full of self-blame and “commendations” to her “kind lord” (5.2.123-24). With this speech, and with Desdemona’s overall restlessness throughout the course of Desdemona, Vogel accents
her subversive, feminist theme of the tragic containment of women such as Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca to “purdahs,” soft, beautiful and well-appointed prisons built especially for the control and restraint of women and their dangerous sexuality.

As with her characterization of a somewhat unsympathetic, sexually thrill-seeking Desdemona, Vogel also drastically departs from Shakespeare’s Othello in her characterization of Emilia. Gone is Shakespeare’s good-natured, worldly-wise Emilia as well as the camaraderie and female solidarity of Shakespeare’s famous friendship; in its place Vogel creates a bitter, continually cranky Emilia and an antagonistic class relationship between mistress and maid. In Vogel’s re-visioned Othello, Emilia’s pious Christianity, her jealousy and her resentment of Desdemona – which has built up from years of cleaning up after “m’lady” – all conspire to destroy Shakespeare’s subversive vision of female friendship. The “prologue” of Desdemona devotes itself entirely to Emilia, beginning the play not with the marriage of Desdemona and Othello and the late-night alarum set by Iago, but with Emilia’s pivotal, fateful (and ultimately fatal) action:

A spotlight in the dark, pinpointing a white handkerchief lying on the ground. A second spotlight comes up on Emilia, who sees the handkerchief. She pauses, then cautiously looks about to see if she’s observed. Then, quickly, Emilia goes the handkerchief, picks it up, stuffs the linen in her ample bodice and exits. Blackout. (177)

With this simple, silent action, Vogel establishes the tension between Emilia and Desdemona, addressing one of the questions left open by Shakespeare’s text of why Emilia would steal the handkerchief from Desdemona in the first place.10 Not accepting Shakespeare’s Emilia’s rather weak defense that she took it for Iago because of his
frequent beggings of “solemn earnestness” (5.2.225) and to satisfy his “fantasy” (3.3.303), Vogel instead uses this prologue as a launching point for her play to investigate why a supposedly devoted Emilia steals the “trifle,” or, as Vogel’s Desdemona so delicately puts it, “the crappy little snot rag.” Again, this interruption of audience expectations and refocusing of the plot from Iago’s machinations and deception of Othello in Shakespeare’s play to Emilia’s deception of Desdemona in Vogel’s play is distancing, forcing audiences and readers to reexamine their ideas of what fuels Desdemona’s and Emilia’s personal and working relationships. In addition to fleshing out Shakespeare’s supporting character Emilia and providing her with motivations unspoken in Othello, Vogel’s jealous, embittered and deceptive Emilia is as unsettling as Vogel’s unchaste Desdemona.11

Miserable in her marriage to Iago (whose sexual paucity is a frequent butt of raunchy jokes throughout the play, and, Vogel implies, the source of his rampant misogyny), Vogel’s Emilia is also singularly concerned with the material things of life, equating wealth with her only possible happiness. She has come with Desdemona to Cyprus not because of any particular loyalty or love of her mistress, but because Desdemona, unable to bring her entire entourage along on her elopement with Othello, has lured Emilia with the promise of a promotion from “scullery maid” to her “fille de chambre” (196). Throughout the course of the play, Emilia and Desdemona bargain for various commodities: for silence (specifically Emilia’s silence about Desdemona’s extracurricular activities with Bianca), for personal advancement (Emilia’s long-promised, and never-delivered, promotion) and for material things (such as an expensive
ring and barely-used dress which Desdemona dangles in front of Emilia for information on Othello and Ludovicio).

Emilia even bargains with Desdemona not for herself but for Iago, negotiating for a better position for a husband she despises from a mistress she equally dislikes; suddenly eloquent in her honesty, she explains to Desdemona her bleak point of view and reasons for remaining in her loveless marriage to Iago:

You see, Miss, for us in the bottom ranks, when man and wife hate each other, what is left in a lifetime of marriage but to save and scrimp, plot and plan? The more I'd like to put some nasty rat-ridder in his stew, the more I think of money — and he thinks the same. One of us will drop first, and then, what's left, saved and earned, under the mattress for th' other one? I'd like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates — no matter what class buggers they all are. I says to him each night, "I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow!" (187)

When compared to Desdemona's previous 'travelogue,' Emilia's middle-class ideals of denial and hard work and her accompanying alliterative language ("save" and "scrimp") stands out in bleak contrast to Desdemona's poetic idealization of prostitution. Along with a more informal syntax and diction — Emilia uses the term "drop" instead of die, and calls men "class buggers" — Vogel's rhetorical device of question-asking rather than the use of declarative statements demonstrates the gap in class, experience and education between "handmaid" and mistress of the household. For Vogel's Emilia, the only certainty in life is hardship, a lesson she has obviously learned bitterly and well from years of marriage to the misogynistic Iago and years of service to the spoiled Desdemona;
however, even this first-hand knowledge cannot be directly presented to her social "better" and employer. Emilia is constantly, painfully aware of her "place," and although this is a particularly truthful moment for Emilia, she cannot rely on the power of declarative statements to argue her point of view; instead she must phrase her hard-won, joyless knowledge of the weaker form of questions, showing grudging, rhetorical deference to Desdemona in order to retain her position.

In addition, for Emilia, love and hate, life and death are all inextricably bound together by economics and the language she uses to describe her relationship with her husband is that of commerce; what is valuable in her marriage is what and how much she can inherit from Iago if she manages to out-live him. Unlike Desdemona, however, who marries Othello for adventure and for a chance to escape her own personal Venetian "purdah," Emilia marries to be locked up, safe within her own purdah, to be comfortably and safely confined behind the security of masculine walls and the power of money — to live long enough to become a "lieutenant's widow." This concern with commerce, with the grim practicality of remaining trapped in an abusive relationship in which the only outlet available to her is death, shocks an audience expecting a witty, wise Emilia who selflessly serves a "heavenly true" mistress she loves (5.2.133) and whose marriage to Iago remains a puzzling enigma. This re-visioned Emilia effectively places theatrical distance between the shadow of Shakespeare's Emilia and our reception of Vogel's Emilia, forcing us to re-see our assumptions about Desdemona's "fateful handmaid" (Vogel 184). Of course, ironically, in Vogel's Desdemona both mistress and maid marry for the wrong reasons and both suffer the fatal consequences at the inevitable conclusion.
of the play in which death awaits Desdemona and Emilia as surely in the final
“hairbrushing” scene of Desdemona as it does in the “willow scene” of Othello.

Like Vogel’s Emilia and Desdemona, Vogel’s Bianca also sharply differs from
Shakespeare’s Bianca in Othello, and Vogel’s characterization of her as a “whore with a
heart of gold” is comically disturbing and distancing, demanding audiences to re-evaluate
their assumptions about this supposedly “minor” character. Whereas in Othello, Bianca
has no contact with Desdemona, and very little with Emilia (and what little she has is
contentious), in Vogel’s play, Bianca plays a major role, arriving halfway through the
action of the play to “settle accounts” with Desdemona for her recent Tuesday night’s
“work.” While in Shakespeare’s Othello Bianca is maligned by both male and female
characters as a “strumpet” and “whore” because she is Cassio’s “mistress” (even though
Shakespeare offers no textual reference to her profession), in Vogel’s Desdemona she is
the sole “working woman” on the entire island of Cyprus, who, according to Emilia, is
“so loose, so low, that she’s got to ad-ver-tise Wednesday Night Specials, half price for
anything in uniform” (184). 12

In early scenes of Vogel’s play, Desdemona venerates Bianca (again to a snorting,
cynical Emilia) as a “new woman,” a kind of feminist heroine who is free to “make her
own living in the world, who scorns marriage for the lie that it is” (194). And indeed,
Bianca is her “own” woman, as well as the most honest, unpretentious character in the
play, forthright in her unguarded admiration for Desdemona’s wealth and position, and
unashamed of her profession, crying to the bristling Emilia that “Aw have a place ‘ere
and Aw’m not ashamed t’own it,” proud of the fact that the “only ponk [she] has to clean
up is [her] own” (201). Unfortunately, Bianca is as naïve in her affection for Michael
Cassio as Desdemona is misguided in her desire for exotic sexual travel in her relationship with Othello and Emilia is determined to outlive Iago in her own marriage. After being entertained by Desdemona while a disapproving Emilia complains in the corner over her mending of the torn “crotch” holes of Othello's underwear, a drunk Bianca explodes Desdemona's romanticization of Bianca's profession and her apparent rejection of the patriarchal, heterosexual marriage market:

Aw’m still young, an’ Aw’ve got a tidy sum all saved up fer a dowry. An’ m’lord Cassio’s only got t’ arsk fer a transfer to th’ garrison ‘ere. We’d make a bleedin’ jolly life of it, Aw c’n tell you. Aw’d get us a cottage by th’ sea, wif winder boxes an’ all them kinds of fings, an’ ‘e could go to th’ tipple’ouse as much as ‘e likes, wifout me sayin’ nay. An’ then . . . then Aw’d be berin’ ‘im sons so’s to make ‘im proud . . (214)

While in Shakespeare’s Othello, Bianca and Desdemona are truly alike in their unmitigated devotion to their lovers/husbands, in Vogel’s re-visioning, the lower-class Bianca is instead a kind of negative image of the upper-class Desdemona. The greatest wish of Vogel’s Desdemona is to shed her unmitigated devotion, her respectability and her marriage and be “free” to pursue her own relationships and journeys (in short to become Bianca). The greatest wish of Vogel’s Bianca, however, is to shed the social stigma of her profession and become respectable, a completely opposite portrait than that of the liberal, liberated picture Desdemona paints of her at the beginning of the play. It is one of the truly tragic ironies of Vogel’s dark comedy that, although Bianca is “free” of the patriarchal, heterosexual marriage system – or “purdah” – in which Desdemona and Emilia are trapped, she attempts to buy her way into this system with a “dowry” saved by
selling her own body. One might argue that the twisted, circular logic of Bianca's reasoning – selling her body twice over – is, in fact, a profoundly feminist act since Bianca herself is in charge of both her own finances and her own "property," as well as her imagined role of bread-winner and head of the household ("A w'd get us a cottage by th' sea") in her fantasy.¹³

This supposed feminist subversion, however, quickly collapses back on itself since Bianca participates in the Madonna/whore binary established by the patriarchal hierarchy in Shakespeare's and Vogel's Cyprus, attempting to buy her way from the "whore" identification into a "Madonna-like," marriageable state. Like Emilia and Desdemona, Bianca cannot imagine, much less transcend, the hierarchy that traps her in an economic system that allows her to sell her body for sex but not to buy her way out of social stigma and isolation into the "respectable" Cyprus community. Emilia's vituperative reaction to Bianca's presence in her respectable, middle-class "back room" kingdom of laundry and potatoes reflects the misguided impossibility of Bianca's dream of transcending class and buying her way out of social disrepute. Emilia threatens to have "m'lord Othello" have Bianca's "tongue . . . cut clean out of [her] head with none of the citizens of Cyprus to say him nay" (200). She concludes this threat with the grimly humorous observation "And then what would you do for your customers!" (200). Unfortunately for Bianca, as Emilia is quick to remind her, once a "free woman," always a "free woman." Perhaps even more than Desdemona's "journeys" and Emilia's long watch for Iago's death, Bianca's fantasy of the cottage by the sea is heart-breaking and distancing, disrupting and displacing audience expectations of what a "whore" might
want from life and the true nature of liberation for women trapped inside the power structure of a hegemonic, patriarchal society.

It is in the three woman’s fantasies – the upper-class Desdemona’s dreams of travel, the lower-middle-class Emilia’s embittered visions of bourgeoisie life sans Iago and the working-class Bianca’s vision of marriage, 2.5 children and a cottage by the sea – that Vogel reveals her explicitly material feminist concerns. In her article “Saving Desdemona and/or Ourselves” Marianne Novy implies that part of the problem of Vogel’s re-visioning of Shakespeare’s “problem” play is that the three women never learn how to get along and work together. Novy points to Emilia’s bleak observation to Bianca “as long as there be men with one member but two minds, there’s no such thin’ as friendship between women” (200) as proof of this tragic lack of solidarity, positing that if Emilia, Desdemona and Bianca could pool their resources and experiences they could indeed escape the tragic fates that await them, a kind of tantalizing “what if” Vogel leaves dangling in front of the audience and then cruelly snatches away. I disagree, since this analysis ignores the gaping chasms of class divisions between Vogel’s Emilia, Desdemona and Bianca which effectively destroy any attempts to combine their female power and triumph over Iago, Othello and, by extension, Shakespeare himself. The patriarchal, hierarchical system which binds the world of Desdemona (and of Othello) together has effectively enslaved all three women with economics.

All of Vogel’s characters’ “escape plans” depend, in some way upon money: Desdemona’s depends upon her wealthy cousin Ludovico’s patronage and help in her flight from Cyprus, Emilia’s depends upon frugality, hard work and stamina to out-last her husband, and Bianca’s depends upon saving enough to buy a cottage by the sea, to
keep Cassio in comfort and to giving half her money earned every week to a priest to
“pray fer me sins an’ t’ gi’ me absolution” so that she can be married “unstained” (214).
More tragically, although Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are all dimly aware of the
economic system that has enslaved them to “purdah” or to prostitution – as shown in
Desdemona’s rants against the enslavement of marriage, Emilia’s hard-bitten
observations on the nature of men, and in Bianca’s capitulation to priests and social
opinion – they cannot envision a world without class divisions or masculine hierarchies.
Unlike Shakespeare’s Desdemona, Vogel’s Desdemona determines half-way through the
play to escape her boredom and her increasingly abusive marriage with Othello by
returning to Venice and appealing to her father with a “few tears” for sanctuary; Vogel’s
jaded Desdemona also observes that she is not above blackmail, and “if the disgrace of
eloping with a moor is too great for Venetian society, a small annual allowance from
Papa, and I promise never to show my face in town; and then . . . who knows . . . Paris!”
(195).

In spite of her mercenary tendencies and her rather pragmatic take on the true
power of Venetian racism, and although she is willing to venture into Bianca’s brothel on
her own, Desdemona is unwilling to leave Cyprus without a male protector (Ludovicio)
and the power of his economic protection. Likewise, Emilia’s disgust with Iago and with
Desdemona are tempered by her desire to “rise up a bit” in the world. Vogel’s Emilia
does seem to express an inkling of her utter enslavement to a patriarchal, hierarchical
economic system which relies on the commodities of her labor and her body yet ignores
her essential self in her assessment at the end of the play: “Women just don’t figure in
their heads – not the one who hangs the wash – not Bianca – not even you, m’lady. That’s
the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes. Only each other” (220). Unfortunately, this realization – and her confession to Desdemona that it was she who stole the handkerchief in the first place – comes much too late, and although Vogel does not choose to include Othello’s onstage murders of mistress and maid, we know that with Emilia’s final hairbrush stroke in Desdemona’s final scene that these two women face the same fate as Shakespeare’s Desdemona and Emilia.

As I have discussed, in re-naming her re-vision of Shakespeare’s Othello as Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief, Vogel distances and displaces audience’s expectations from tragedy to comedy, from male hero to female heroine(s), and from an examination of the “masculine” plots of masculine honor, manipulation and revenge to a feminine and feminist examination of the previously-silenced nature of feminine subjectivity and material relationships. This observation, however, ignores the second half of Vogel’s two-part title, with its rather puzzling, explicitly Brechtian label indicating Desdemona is a “play about a handkerchief.” As with Shakespeare’s Othello, the action of Desdemona revolves around the theft of Desdemona’s strawberry-embroidered handkerchief, the search for it and its eventual retrieval. The paths the respective handkerchiefs take, and their symbolic significance, however, varies from Shakespeare’s Othello to Vogel’s re-visioned Desdemona.

In Othello, the handkerchief, a “first remembrance” from Othello to Desdemona (3.3.295), is initially “lost” when Desdemona uses it to “bind” Othello’s forehead in attempt to cure the headache he has received from “honest” Iago’s manipulations. Shakespeare’s Othello rejects the handkerchief, snapping that her “napkin” is “too little” (3.3.292), indicating the relatively small value he places on it at this point in the play.
Shakespeare's Emilia, providing us with some valuable background information on the handkerchief when she comments that Desdemona "reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to" (3.3.299-300), then takes the handkerchief for Iago who has "a hundred times / Wooed [her] to steal it" (3.3.296-297). When Emilia presents Iago with the handkerchief he snatches it away from her with little thanks except with the acknowledgment that she is a "good wench" (3.3.316), and Iago then plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room. Cassio, liking the work of the handkerchief, gives it to Bianca to have it "taken out," a point of contention between the two lovers which Iago later uses to his advantage of visual proof of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio. The sight of the handkerchief (which Bianca angrily returns to Cassio) is enough to convince Othello of Desdemona's "betrayal," and effectively seals her fate, for it is after he sees the handkerchief in Cassio's possession (after Desdemona has hedged and told him it was not "lost") that Othello resolves to "chop her into messes" (4.1.196).

The journey of the handkerchief is slightly different in Vogel's *Desdemona*, and the handkerchief reappears onstage after Bianca produces it as a "token o' [Cassio's] esteeem" and as proof to the disbelieving Emilia and Desdemona that he intends to marry her (215). When a relieved Desdemona realizes it is the handkerchief that has been "lost," she declares she is "saved" and asks Bianca how she ended up with her handkerchief. Bianca, of course, does not take the news at all well that Cassio has given her another woman's handkerchief and lunges at Desdemona with the hoof-pick, declaring she will "carve [Desdemona] up into cag-meat an' feed [her] to the pigs" (216). Although a moment of comic mistaken identities in which Bianca's colorful language adds to the scene's hilarity, the reappearance of the handkerchief in *Desdemona* - this
time not to Othello, Iago and Cassio but to Desdemona, Bianca and Emilia — serves as the turning point and climax of the action in which Bianca realizes she has been duped. In retaliation, Bianca reveals that Iago was one of the men who frequented Desdemona’s “travels” during her last stint in the brothel. This admission of Iago’s known infidelity (which Desdemona vaguely recalls as the “one man who . . . didn’t last very long”[219]) results in Desdemona’s revelation she had no intention of taking Emilia with her on her escape from Cyprus with Ludovicio, Emilia’s revelation of the true nature of the “loss” of the handkerchief, and the two women’s realization of the danger that awaits them (219).

By redirecting the journey of the handkerchief to feminine, private realm in Desdemona and focusing on the women’s reaction to it, Vogel distances and re-directs our attention to this heavily symbolic “napkin,” forcing us to re-examine this supposedly feminine trifle which, according to Shakespeare’s Othello, was given to his mother by an Egyptian charmer as a way of “subduing” and making “amiable” his father (3.4.61). The story of Shakespeare’s Othello is a curious one, in which he describes the handkerchief as an exotic charm for women to retain power of men, handed down matrilineally from his mother to his future wife, and containing the “true magic” from the “prophetic fury” of the “sibyl” who embroidered it with threads died from the embalmed liquid of “maidens’ hearts” (3.4.71-77). Shakespeare’s handkerchief is thus a dense metaphor, containing many symbolic layers depending upon who possesses it at the time and much critical attention has been given to it. Carol Thomas Neely asserts that it “represents women’s ability to moderate men’s erratic (and erotic) ‘fancies,’ to ‘subdue’ their promiscuity, and perhaps, by extension, their vanity, romanticism, jealousy and rage as well” (“Women and Men” 229); Karen Newman reminds us that “in the early modern period, the
handkerchief was in fact a sign of wealth and status” and that in “cinquecento Venice, possession of a lady’s handkerchief was considered proof of adultery and led to stringent punishments” (155); Janet Adelman proposes that the handkerchief is in fact a “miniature representation of the wedding sheets, ‘spotted with strawberries’ (3.3.442) as those ‘lust-stain’d sheets’ are ‘spotted’ with ‘lust’s blood’ (5.1.36)” as well as a “talisman” that stands both for the “loss” of Othello’s mother and Desdemona, both the “perfect object of desire” (68).

In Vogel’s Desdemona, the handkerchief has lost its slippery symbolic significance, moving from a beloved “token,” “napkin,” “magic” talisman and proof of betrayal to a “pittance of musty linen” (186) which, Emilia prosaically observes, looks like “anybody’s handkerchief, savin’ it has those dainty little strawberries on it” (178). Although Bianca places great symbolic significance in the handkerchief, lovingly keeping it near her “knockers” and next to her heart (215), the handkerchief in Vogel’s Desdemona is to Desdemona and Emilia merely a piece of cloth, one of many delicate pieces of “linen with fancy work” (178) that Desdemona possesses and casually leaves lying around. The handkerchief only gains significance as a bargaining tool between Emilia and Desdemona when Desdemona begins to realize that her husband’s escalating mistreatment of her is somehow connected to “piddling” handkerchief, his sole gift to her in their entire marriage (190). Indeed, Desdemona bitterly observes that the loss of the handkerchief and Othello’s subsequent, off-stage rage is proof that her husband “guards his purse strings much dearer than his wife” (190).

Vogel’s subversive, continual deflation Shakespeare’s heavily significant signifier, her poking continual holes into its characterization in Desdemona and including
mention of it in her title, thus re-directs our attention to the “crappy little snot rag,” and in a decidedly Brechtian style, peels away the multiple rhetorical layers of illusion from the handkerchief to reveal it as a simple piece of cloth with embroidered strawberries. For Vogel – as it might be for Brecht himself who abhorred the “monumental muzziness” of realistic theater (Brecht 15) – the handkerchief is not a magical talisman of feminine power or a symbolic representation of Othello’s “diseased imagination,” but instead merely a means by which Iago manipulates Othello into murder and the ultimate undoing of Bianca, Desdemona and Emilia. By distancing the handkerchief with irreverent language and by stripping it of much of its symbolic significance, Vogel also calls into question the actions that result from the loss/theft of the handkerchief, pointing out to her audience and readers that the betrayals and murders that ensue are the true “trifles” of the play because they are based, in part, upon an ordinary household item whose sole purpose is to wipe one’s nose. Emilia asks the frantic Desdemona (and the audience) the crucial question: “After you blow your nose in it, an’ it’s all heavy and wet, who’s going to open the damn thing and look at the pretty stitches?” (178).

Similarly, Vogel suggests, the true purpose of Shakespeare's handkerchief (and of Othello) has been obscured by its many “pretty” layers of meaning, concealing the fact that its loss leads to the tragic destruction of two women. Thus, Vogel’s Desdemona is indeed “a play about a handkerchief” because it is “about” the laying bare, the distancing and re-examination of the process by which Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are silenced, which is, in the end, the true tragedy of Othello. By removing the layers of signification from Shakespeare’s handkerchief, language and female characters with comedic, Brechtian and feminist strategies, Vogel presents a often bleak, often hilarious, always
honest portrait of three vibrant, fully three-dimensional female characters. Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief is by no means an “easy” play to read or to watch; nor, I think, is it Vogel’s best work. Like Shakespeare’s Othello, it is a problematic play, and Vogel’s frequently hilarious non-canonical re-visions are often distinctly disturbing even to the most sympathetic spectator, pushing the limits of radical and material feminism, humor and decorum to their utmost boundaries. However, its value, both to Vogel’s canon, to the canon of feminist and feminine re-vision of Shakespearean theater and to the American theatrical canon as a whole is undeniable in its refusal to romanticize its characters or its signifiers, and in its refusal to allow us as spectators to look away.

Although seemingly a profoundly pessimistic statement — even in a feminist re-visioning of Othello women cannot survive or thrive — I think that Vogel’s re-working of Shakespeare’s classic is intended to be a positive, productive experience for readers, critics and audiences. Like Brecht, who espoused an epic, distancing theater which would jolt and shock audiences into awareness of the capitalist systems that enslaved them and move them to revolutionary action, Vogel seeks to jolt and shake audiences of Desdemona into a similar state of revolutionary awareness of the all-too-contemporary economic and gender roles which enslave Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Vogel implies that while we as spectators cannot rescue Desdemona from Othello or Emilia from Iago, or even Bianca from her voluntary coercion into the patriarchy which ostracizes her, we can work to transcend class and gender boundaries in our own lives, and, ultimately, work to “rescue” ourselves.
Notes

1 As Vogel notes in her introduction to Desdemona, another artist who has significantly influenced her re-working of Shakespeare's Othello is German playwright Wolfgang Bauer. Vogel proclaims “Desdemona was written as a tribute (i.e., ‘rip-off’) to the infamous play, Shakespeare the Sadist” (172), a play in which four bored, young characters contemplate going to the movies, drinking, playing cards and who will have sex with whom in forty-five short, “black-out” scenes similar to those in Desdemona. Bauer’s play is named for a series of scenes in which the characters Sonia and Bill act out the Swedish pornographic movie “Shakespeare the Sadist” Peter and Gerry eventually decide to see; in these scenes a porn actor named Shakespeare berates his female victim, beats her and “saws off” her head during climax while shouting “TO BE OR NOT TO BE!!!!” (Bauer 21). Bauer, who, like his contemporary Peter Handke and his most famous and shocking work Assault Against the Audience, is perhaps best known for his outrageous, amoral sixties trilogy: Change, Magic Afternoon and Party for Six. His plays, as Martin Esslin comments in his introduction to the English translation of Change and other Plays, demonstrate “utter rejection of accepted canons of taste,” “exuberant abandonment of convention” and “overflowing vitality,” as well as shocking on-stage brutality, casual misogyny and a deep pessimism (Esslin viii-x). Like Vogel – and, perhaps more importantly, like his countryman Bertolt Brecht – Bauer’s plays reveal a disgust with the “‘pretentiousness’ of the consciously artistic” and a commitment to exploding the dangerous illusions and fantasy of realistic theater (Esslin ix). Any further examination of Bauer’s influences on Vogel’s work presents fertile, fascinating critical ground for feminist critics like myself who are interested in the continuum of Brechtian influences on contemporary playwrights, both male and female.

2 Novy is careful to note that late twentieth-century feminists are not the first group of female writers to “re-work” Shakespearean texts, pointing to the work of Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish and Jane Austen and many other famous female authors who have “engaged in a kind of dialogue with Shakespeare” (“Introduction” 2). For more information on the history of female authorship and interaction with Shakespeare, see Novy’s edited volume Women’s Re-Visions of Shakespeare: On Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot and Others (1990) and Novy’s book on this subject, Engaging with Shakespeare (1994, 1998).

3 Carol Thomas Neely agrees with this assessment of Desdemona’s critical “condemnation” because of her activity, noting that critics have historically accused Desdemona of being “domineering, of using witchcraft, of rebelliousness, disobedience, wantonness” (“Women and Men” 212), subtly shifting the emphasis of blame in Desdemona’s fate. Such arguments use the fallacious, insidiously misogynistic logic that Desdemona somehow deserves her death, indeed asks for it by not remaining silent, much as (so this type of argument goes) a rape victim might invite rape by wearing provocative clothing, remaining out of doors after dark, or by the sole crime of being born a woman. Neely also observes that regardless of how Shakespearean critics have historically characterized Desdemona, any discussion of her and her motives is “virtually an afterthought to the analysis of the men” (“Women and Men” 212); of course, it is
important to point out that Neely's argument was written in 1978 during a period of vast paucity of critical examination of the female characters of Othello. Since her first publication of this article, post-structural and feminist Shakespearean criticism has done much to fill in the critical gaps she notes.

Novy's essay is also one of the few current critical commentaries on any of Vogel's work to date. Ironically, her assessment of Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief is less than glowing. Novy's critique, in which she compares and contrasts Vogel's play with MacDonald's play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), reveals her obvious distaste for Vogel's version, implying that, like Wolfgang Bauer's Shakespeare the Sadist, Vogel seems to invoke the character Desdemona purely for the "shock value of profaning" her name and/or character ("Saving Desdemona" 74). Novy also dismisses Desdemona as a "degraded" Othello, whose tragedy has been "turn[ed] into melodrama mixed with satire" ("Saving Desdemona" 74). Novy does give grudging credit to Vogel for having "un-nostalgically rewrit[en] the past to make points about the present," and instead of venerating a saintly Desdemona, uses her character to investigate the difficult "roles women have to play" in contemporary society ("Saving Desdemona" 77). Of course, while I agree with Novy's conclusion of the value of Vogel's "un-nostalgic" re-writing of Othello, I find Novy's assessment that Vogel's work should be given less critical approval by a feminist critic because her play is less politically-correct or user-friendly than MacDonald's play disturbing and reductive.

For additional, informative discussion of marriage as a "male-centered institution" as well as the shifting and destructive patterns of the Ovidian and Petrarchan discursive traditions in Shakespeare's Othello, please see Gajowski's chapter on this subject, "Female Subjectivity and the Ovidian Discursive Tradition" in The Art of Loving.

I am not alone in this reading of a lusty, life-loving Desdemona. For other similar (often feminist) readings, please see Carol Thomas Neely's articles "Women and Men in Othello" (1978) and her own re-visioned argument in her 1995 article "Circumscriptions and Unhousedness: Othello in the Borderlands," Karen Newman's "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello," Shirley Garner's 1976 "Shakespeare's Desdemona," Mary Beth Rose's assessment of Desdemona's desires in The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in Renaissance Drama, and, of course, Evelyn Gajowski's The Art of Loving.

Obviously, Vogel's deviation from Shakespeare's blank verse is another major departure point from Othello and is, in itself, highly distancing and disconcerting to audiences who expect unrhymed iambic pentameter and instead receive Bianca's thick cockney dialect, Emilia's Irish brogue and Desdemona's upper class British accent. I think Vogel's choice to write Desdemona in late twentieth-century English prose is in part due to her desire to shock audiences into a new awareness of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca (as well as Shakespeare's text Othello) and in part because she is more comfortable working in colloquial prose than in blank verse. Perhaps more importantly, Vogel's specifications that each character be delineated by their accent, both in her introduction to Desdemona and in the syntax and diction of the text itself, is also a
indication of her profound material feminist concerns in this play. By disrupting Shakespeare’s verse and by requiring each character to speak in a class-specific dialect, Vogel can more effectively examine the material conditions that lead to the final, tragic consequences of the play and the economic systems that confine all three women.

8 Vogel’s use of short, episodic scenes emphasizes the utter boredom of Desdemona and the tedium of the everyday domestic routine of the “back room” of Desdemona’s playing world. Several scenes, such as Scene Four, consist purely of stage directions indicating this sense of lassitude: “Emilia, scrubbing. Desdemona lies on her back on the table, feet propped up, absentmindedly fondling the pick, and staring into space” (Vogel 183). Although Desdemona is idle Emilia is not, “scrubbing” while her mistress props her feet up, indicating the rigid class system in which Vogel’s Desdemona takes place. While rich, upper-class Venetian wives can have the time to be idle and thus bored, the servant Emilia has no time for reflection and participation in her mistress’s dissatisfaction with her confinement in Cyprus’s purdah. Indeed, as insinuated in an earlier scene by Emilia, this tableau is symbolic of Emilia’s and Desdemona’s entire relationship, pointing to an earlier time “when m’lady was toddling about the palace,” and an adult Emilia “would be follerin’ after, stooping to pick up all the pretty toys [Desdemona] be scatterin’” (Vogel 178). Not much, it seems, has changed for Desdemona or for Emilia.

9 Never one to allow a serious moment to linger in her plays, Vogel quickly undercuts Desdemona’s serious, feminist realization about the “purdah” that is marriage with Emilia’s hilarious response: “I don’t know what this thing called “purr-dah” means, but if it stands for dressing up nice, I’m all for it . . .” (193). Casting rhetorical pearl before a particularly uncaring swine, Desdemona’s momentary radical insight is lost on Emilia, and Emilia’s much more pragmatic and dour outlook on life continually grounds and acts as a comic foil to her mistress’s rather pompous oratories.

10 Vogel’s specific use of Emilia’s action of picking up the handkerchief to begin Desdemona is also an excellent example of her continued feminist play with the Brechtian theatrical device of social gestus. There are other numerous examples of Vogel’s feminist use of Brechtian social gestus throughout Desdemona, including Bianca’s tutoring of Desdemona in the subtle arts of sado-masochism (or, as she calls it “lam an’ brim — first they lam you, an’ mayhap you lam them, then you brim ‘em” [210]), Desdemona’s ripping of sheets and her play with a particularly large “hoof-pick,” and Emilia’s continual scrubbing, polishing and mending throughout the course of the play. As with a comparative analysis of Bauer’s Shakespeare the Sadist and Vogel’s Desdemona, Vogel’s use of social gestus in Desdemona, how these actions/tableaus/words/gestures “open up” the play to the “social and discursive ideologies that inform its production” (Diamond 90), is a topic ripe for further, careful analysis.

11 Emilia’s vociferous piety also acts as a counterpoint to Desdemona’s prolific, casually amoral promiscuity. Although at times quite humorous, as in the stage direction in Scene Eight in which we hear Emilia singing a hymn in the dark, “La-la-la-la – Jesus;
La-la-la-la-Sword; La-la-la-la-Crucifix; La-la-la-la-Word" (189), Emilia’s dependence upon the church for emotional and spiritual support can also be quite heart-breaking, as in her description to Desdemona of how saying the rosary and “pictur[ing] up [her] Rosary, so real [she] could kiss the silver” helped her survive years of Iago’s abuse and marital rape (220). Of course, true to Vogel’s continual comic explosion of any pathos in her plays, Emilia follows up this description with a jab at Iago’s sexual staying-power, wryly admitting she never “made it to the medallion” since Iago would be “all through with [her] by the time of the third ‘Hail Mary’” (220).

12 One reason for continued mis-characterization of Shakespeare’s Bianca as an actual prostitute arises, Gajowski suggests, from editorial influence; as evidence of this insidious editorial misogyny, Gajowski points specifically to Kay Stanton’s argument in her paper “Male gender-crossing in Othello” that it was not until Nicholas Rowe’s edition of Othello that Bianca was given the “designation of ‘Courtesan’ in the dramatis personae” (Stanton 11, cited in Gajowski 133, note 15). This practice of editorial influence on the received identity of Bianca continues to this day, as demonstrated by the 1998 third edition of the Arden Othello in which dramatis personae lists Bianca as “a courtesan [and Cassio’s mistress]” (114).

13 In this way Vogel’s re-vision of Shakespeare’s Bianca is much like that of another pioneering female and feminist playwright, Aphra Behn. In Behn’s play The Rover (1677), Angelica Bianca, “a famous courtesan” who controls her own “buying and selling” by placing pictures outside her balcony to indicate she is available to the highest bidder. Behn’s Angelica Bianca, like Vogel’s Bianca, prides herself on her economic independence, declaring her resolve that “nothing but gold shall charm [her] heart” (2.1.135). However, like Vogel’s Bianca, Behn’s Angelica Bianca is infected by the “general disease of [her] sex” (2.1.138) when she falls in love with the title “roving” character, Willmore, who, like Shakespeare’s (and, one assumes, Vogel’s) Cassio, cheats and casts her away. Like Vogel, Behn seems to be exploring the toxicity of a society which will not allow “whores” to act like “Madonnas” or vice versa, and Angelica Bianca’s repudiation of Willmore is a serious moment in this (supposedly) rollicking comedy.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RE-VISIONARY BODIES

"I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind."
-- Adrienne Rich, "Planetarium"

WOMAN: Well, they’re the characters speaking, or the script itself. I mean, I know it’s me, but I have to get into it. At first it spooked me a little. But now I know when I hear them, it’s a good sign. And I am in control.
-- Paula Vogel, Hot ‘N’ Throbbing

As demonstrated in the last four chapters, Paula Vogel successfully appropriates Brechtian dramaturgy in order to create her own uniquely feminist and often absurdist theater. In The Baltimore Waltz, Vogel re-visions her brother’s untimely death from the AIDS virus, inventing a powerfully comic, frequently absurd and often profoundly moving journey that examines both her own personal lost opportunities and American public denial and disavowal of the AIDS crisis. In And Baby Makes Seven, Vogel literally re-invents the American nuclear family, re-visioning Albee’s tragic Martha and George as a delightful, homosexual threesome and endowing Anna, Ruth and Peter with generous imaginations and even more generous procreative power. In Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, Vogel exposes and critiques American culture’s silent acceptance of pornography and domestic violence by literally giving voice to the silenced, feminine
voice and allowing The Woman a successful (albeit brief) attempt at re-visioning feminine desire. In *Desdemona*, Vogel re-vision one of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies along with the patriarchal bard himself, creating vocal, complex and active heroines in the characters of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca.

Within all of these plays (and, I would argue, in all of Paula Vogel’s canon), there exists a much darker vision than I have pursued, a more pessimistic, more disturbing reading of the worlds she creates. This reading points to the harsh facts lurking at the ends or at the margins of these plays: Carl dies; Anna and Ruth invent *male* children and thus re-inscribe the patriarchy they attempt to escape; the Woman is murdered in her own living room; Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are doomed to exactly the same fates Shakespeare assigns them. Based on these readings, one might argue that Vogel’s feminist/Brechtian attempts at re-visioning her female characters and American theater itself are thus unutterably destroyed by the patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic, sexist and racist society in which she works. What, then, are we to make of this death, violence and despair lying in the wings of all four of these plays? What is really re-visioned?

In his essay “Subjectivity, Sexuality and Transgression,” a discussion of the transgressive power of cross-dressing in Jacobean England, Jonathan Dollimore suggests that the postmodern and post-structural criticism of the past two decades takes exactly this dim view of textual production, condemning any attempts to “transgress” as failures. It has become customary, he argues, for critics to concentrate on the “containment” of transgression (such as Carl’s death, Anna and Ruth’s male children, etc., in Vogel’s plays), instead of focusing on the inherent and subtle power of the transgressor. Although any inversion or re-vision of power structures may be contained by the play’s
conclusion, Dollimore continues, it is still possible to glean a more optimistic, more subversive reading:

Inversion becomes a kind of transgressive mimesis: the subculture, even as it imitates, reproducing itself in terms of its exclusion, also demystifies, producing a knowledge of the dominant which excludes it, this being a knowledge which the dominant has to suppress in order to dominate. (61, emphasis mine).

Thus, although The Woman is strangled in an extravagant mimesis of the culture she attempts to imitate with her own pornographic script, the very existence of a female pornographer and her active, feminine and decidedly non-silenced “Voice Over” in Hot ‘N’ Throbbing suggests the possibility of change. To extend Dollimore’s argument to Vogel’s work, once the “Voice Over” is allowed to speak and The Woman is allowed to write, her/their words cannot be un-voiced or un-written, and, as The Man quickly discovers, the dominant culture must first acknowledge that voice/Voice before it can re-contain and/or destroy it. David Savran also notices this lasting, transgressive power in Vogel’s plays, positing that Vogel’s female characters are a lot like their creator; they are “playwrights” who “attempt to write their way out of difficult situations and script more creative, bountiful lives” (“Paula Vogel” 265). I would add to Savran’s claim and Dollimore’s theory that Vogel’s female protagonists are able to retain their transgressive power as writers of their own destinies for a few brief shining moments in her plays. We are aware of these moments through Verfremdungseffekt, that powerful tool that allows both character/actor and spectator the insight to see afresh the play world. With her use of the distancing effect, Vogel repels and attracts the spectator (both male and female,
masculine and feminine and any shades in between) into a clear-eyed critique of his/her own society as well.

Vogel's most transgressive act, however, and one of the strongest links between all four of these plays lies not so much in her active and aggressive use of *Verfremdungseffekt* but in her introduction of her own unique brand of social *gestus* to contemporary, feminist American theater. In all four plays, Vogel uses *gestus* to interrogate and expose issues of gender, female and feminine desire, female agency, and, most importantly, the feminine body. The female body is placed center-stage in *The Baltimore Waltz, And Baby Makes Seven, Hot 'N' Throbbing*, and *Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief*; this body is not allowed to hide, disguise or clothe it/herself, and is instead displayed in all its/her messy, loud, rude, fluid glory. While *Verfremdungseffekt* exposes the stitches and the unseemly (and un-seamly) knots of theatricality within Vogel's theater, and episodic structure isolates these knots allowing the audience to examine the social and political issues critiqued with a lucid, unsentimental eye, Vogel's feminist application of social *gestus* extends *Verfremdungseffekt*, overflowing into new and more dangerous theoretical and theatrical territory. Vogel's social *gestus* stitches the exposed female and feminine body into the tapestry of the dramatic worlds of her plays, using it to comment on the abuses heaped upon this often ignored, often abused and highly theatrical arena of flesh and ideology.

In *And Baby*, Anna's self-identification as a lesbian is complicated by her visibly pregnant body which is a site of physical and emotional gratification both for her lover Ruth and her friend/sperm donor Peter; instead of being denied or rhetorically and physically subsumed as unsightly, her literally over-flowing pregnant body and breasts
are celebrated and “stroked” by all three characters. In *The Baltimore Waltz*, Anna explores the bodies of her lovers in various incarnations of The Third Man, conducting her (often comic and joyous) experiments of sexuality and feminine desire onstage, out-loud and in full view of the audience. In *Desdemona*, Desdemona and Bianca engage in a little friendly, eroticized “lam an’ brim” center stage, exploring the truths and pleasures behind the constructs encoded in bondage, female friendship and their own uniquely feminine brand of sado-masochistic theatricality. Paradoxically, although all aspects of The Woman’s and The Girl’s feminine bodies are displayed in *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*’s elaborate strip-teases of escalating sexualized violence, their essential selves remain fully clothed; the feminine body displayed is a false body, and is instead the air-brushed body of male, patriarchal fantasy, exposed and distanced for the spectator’s intellectual appraisal. Within all of these plays, the feminine body in the highly social act of *gestus* is de-mystified, its/her silence interrupted, its/her desires unveiled, its/her purdahs exposed. Once Vogel’s theoretical, theatrical strip-tease begins, there is no going back. Once naked, there is no re-concealing of her character’s feminine bodies. Desdemona’s, Ruth’s, Anna’s, and The Woman’s subversive, active feminine and female theatrical existences cannot be fully contained once enacted, even by the deaths or violence prescribed by the patriarchal cultures surrounding them.

Not only does Vogel’s transgressive estrangement of the action and characters of her plays force spectators into an intellectual, personal and political rebellion against the destructive ideologies of dominant American society, it also permanently “outs” this silenced, feminine body and voice. With the exposed bodies of her female (and often feminist) protagonists, Vogel answers Judith Butler’s first question in *Gender Trouble* -
“To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender?” – by seizing Butler’s second question and literally “reconceiv[ing] the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will” (8). Once exposed, Vogel’s women escape the stultifying, paralyzing masculine gaze of traditional, patriarchal “realistic” theater, and move from exotic, eroticized objects to active, fully conscious subjects. Like The Girl in Hot ‘N’ Throbbing, they are “in control” even as their world spins out of control, and for the few moments before their respective final black-outs, these women reflect back the spectator’s image of herself, “in motion and at risk” (Diamond 90).

It is in these (decidedly non-transcendent, non-realistic) moments of spectator/character recognition that Vogel’s women are the most Brechtian, the most feminist and the most themselves, moments in which Vogel’s use of social gestus most completely embodies Elin Diamond’s complex, liberatory and radical gestic feminist criticism. Indeed, Vogel’s theater is much like Diamond’s speculative gestic feminist theater, a space not in the “dark” but closer to Brecht’s “semi-lit smoker’s theater,” where the “free” reciprocal gaze of feminine, female and feminist character and feminine, feminist and female spectator meets:

Because the semiosis of Gestus involves the gendered bodies of spectator, actor/subject, and character, all working together but never harmoniously, there can be no fetishization and no end to signification. In this Brechtian-feminist paradigm, the spectator’s look is freed into ‘dialectics, passionate detachment.’ (90)
Thus, through social *gestus*, Vogel’s female characters and their feminist bodies are not only re-visioned, they are also *re-visionary*, perceiving the spectator as they themselves are being perceived, seeing and being seen in all their complex, often messy, often disturbing splendor.

As I near completion of this study in the fall of 2000, Paula Vogel’s work has received unprecedented critical and popular attention. Although previously ignored by an American theater which prides itself in embracing gay male playwrights such as Tony Kushner yet ignores its lesbian population — as Vogel has bitterly observed “Tom Stoppard can do *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* but Paula Vogel can’t do *Desdemona*” (Savran “Paula Vogel” 282) — Vogel’s plays are now in production all over the world, largely thanks to her 1998 Pulitzer Prize and subsequent recognition. However, even though Vogel’s plays have chiseled considerable, hilarious cracks in the heterosexual, patriarchal phalanx of popular American theater, we should not be like her mournful Little Dutch Boy at 50 in *The Baltimore Waltz*, content to hold back the inevitable flood with his thumb in the “dyke.” Instead, we should, as spectators and critics, take cues from Vogel’s women and overflow as messily and as loudly and as violently as we can, both in our readings of her plays and our re-visioning the possibilities of American theater.

Vogel demonstrates her commitment to the re-visionary spirit of Adrienne Rich and feminist theater when she advocates championing the work of new playwrights, even if that work is disturbing or un-commercial. In a 1999 interview with Caridad Svich, she asserts one of the greatest challenges to American feminist theatrical artists is facing down the “Oedipal principal” and the next generation of “king-slayers:”
How do we say, ‘Come through the door. Here’s my breast, Oedipus. Come through the door. Your art is antithetical to everything I stand for, and isn’t that wonderful? That’s how it should be.’ Great artistic directors do this. Great institutional theaters do this. It’s not just making plays. It’s making new structures for collaborations . . . (“Coast to Coast”)

The work of discovering the true contribution of Paula Vogel and her re-visionary dramaturgy to feminism, to feminist theater and to American theater in general has still yet to begin in earnest. Much fertile theoretical ground remains to be explored, as I have suggested, in examining the connections and intersections between Vogel’s canon and that of her contemporaries, in examining the resonances of queer theory in her work, and in contextualizing her plays in the decidedly postmodern society in which they exist. What, for example, are all the connections, both serious and silly, between The Baltimore Waltz and the cold-war classic The Third Man? What kinds of homoeroticism exist in Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief? How do Wolfgang Bauer’s plays inform and influence Vogel’s? How can we as feminist critics and spectators trace the lineage of such as plays as Hot ‘N’ Throbbing forward to the work of Susan Lori Parks or backwards to the work Caryl Churchill? It is my profound desire that this study, like Vogel’s and Brecht’s work, produce its own personal and political revolution, moving other theatrical critics, playwrights, artists and readers (feminist or otherwise) to continue to engage in a critical conversation with Vogel’s re-visionary, never “obvious” and always compelling plays.
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