



Arthur Kopit: Inveterate Analyst of Frail Human Minds

by Jeff Loomis

Presented at the William Inge Theater Festival.

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"Wings," produced in 1979 to high acclaim, is a key work in Arthur Kopit's dramatic canon. In preparing this poignant transcription of one character's efforts to conquer the debilitation caused by a cerebral hemorrhage, Kopit researched much medical data, after first having confronted his own father's stroke and resultant death ("Wings" 142-143). Indeed, some critics have surmised that Emily Stilson, the central character of "Wings," also dies, after enduring her *second* stroke, at the culmination of her drama's plot (Simon 78, Rosen 78). The conclusion of the play seems ambiguous to me, though, and the drama surely strives, through much of its action, to demonstrate the slow, but apparently sure, dimensions of a recuperation that Emily Stilson had known, at least for a time. Meanwhile, of course, she did suffer (and we thus see dramatized) abundant personal anguish. She deemed herself, frequently, to be a little "nuts," while struggling monumentally to regain powers of speech ("Wings" 186).

In no other major Kopit play do we as audience members concentrate our attention so steadily and unreservedly, as we do, in "Wings," upon emotions of *pathos* and sympathy for a central tormented character. We may try to cheer on certain victimized secondary characters in others of his dramas (two examples being the "Amelia Earhart" would-be aviatrix mental patient, in the asylum setting of *Chamber Music*, and the maligned child-man Jonathan in *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*). Yet those works basically exist as farcical satires, and so they usually seize our energies for expressions of rather harsh scorn. Their more *central* personages are almost always highly follied, and hence pretty much standard comic (or at least *seriocomic*) *alazon*-figures. It is truly somewhat fascinating to realize that "Wings"—this painstaking examination of medical trauma, and, most pointedly, of a struggle

against cataclysmic mental breakdown—seems the one major Kopit play not functioning as satire at all.

Nonetheless, as Brendan Hennessy (172) recognized already forty-six years ago, even the very first Kopit plays shaped themselves especially around “concern[s]” over human mental dysfunction. Even by 1968-1969, when Hennessy already made such observations, Kopit’s writing repeatedly had focused, Hennessy said, on psychological conundrums: a vindictively compulsive version of motherhood in *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*; mental ward patients’ delusions of grandeur, in *Chamber Music*; bickerings among clueless, daft-brained country clubbers, in *The Day The Whores Came Out To Play Tennis*; and, finally, the imperialism of hubris-laden Wild West buckeroos, in *Indians*. To be sure, critic Hennessy, during his 1968 interview of Kopit, did not know that, one decade after the time when he made his comments about Kopit’s psychological interests, the playwright would etch, in *Wings*, a compelling vignette about a woman’s frustrated attempt to deal with a stroke-addled brain. But Hennessy did know (172) that Kopit was already ever-attentive to frail human mentality, especially as it caused behavior that was “neurotic and psychotic”—both as such mental states afflicted individuals and as those individuals’ case histories came to represent an entire “sick” society.

Hence, for example, in *Chamber Music*, a simulated “business meeting” conducted by the inmates of a mental asylum’s women’s ward turns into an expression of their “collective hysteria” (Murch 371-372)—first made apparent when a record album, one that has been a beloved possession of the patient called “Mrs. Mozart,” is cruelly smashed into little fragments by her angry institutionalized peers. Later, the women’s “hysteria” veers into actual homicide, when the patient known as “Amelia Earhart” is slain (supposedly only as a gesture to make inimical *men’s* ward patients acknowledge the women’s bravado). To Jürgen Wolter, such

scenarios demonstrate, for all of us, that “[i]n governing our affairs,” even seemingly-normal folks prove often nearly “as insane as these women.” Most of us do, of course, find our way, unlike those tormented and encaged souls, to a socially acclimatizing greater degree of self-control. Yet Wolter warns that we may do even that seemingly beneficent action largely only because provoked to do so by our “fear of threat from outside” (Wolter 61-62).

In his “Preface” to the play “Wings,” Kopit insists (145) that the elderly female patient who became the model for his character Emily Stilson was “in no way . . . demented.” An anonymous but definitely acerbic 1964 critic for the magazine *Show* had accused Kopit’s entire *Oh Dad, Poor Dad* play of being “demented”—a jaundiced view that I do not share. I do, though, judge Madame Rosepettle, the central character of *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, as herself rather strikingly bonkers—even though she definitely believes no mental illness to be hers.

Her conviction of her own solid mental health might actually be brought into question by Madame Rosepettle’s willingness quickly to disparage others as mentally unbalanced. When the Head Bellboy at the Port Royale resort hotel, where Madame R. and her son Jonathan are arriving, declares that her command to have her dictaphone placed on a room’s center table is a concept that “must have slipped [that bellboy’s] mind,” La Rosepettle implies that he “flatter[s] him]self” in judging himself actually to possess any worthy *version* of a mind (16-17). I would say that her caustic willingness totally to dismiss this man’s mental acuity may actually indicate her own brain’s lack of full health.

I actually believe, on the other hand, that this woman’s surname may hint at some sympathy for her from Kopit. Especially when she recalls her late husband’s extramarital sexual roguery, she seems to expose society’s wrongful privileging, over against petal-delicate ladies, of male patriarchs like that man to whom she was wed. Thus she looks more justified, later, when

she humiliates her latest suitor from patriarchalist realms: the aptly named, and fairly obviously socially privileged, Commodore Roseabove (emphasis mine).

Indeed, Madame Rosepettle may even rather fully convince us of some righteous observation when she pronounces “Life” (67) to be in many ways a “lie” of “ugliness.” She expresses these views, if rather spitefully so, to Rosalie, the young girl who is somewhat flirting with Rosepettle’s befuddled and utterly sexually repressed son Jonathan.

However, later, Madame Rosepettle lashes out much more vigorously, now addressing Commodore Roseabove about her fierce conviction that “Life” is “never funny.” Here, though, she expands her tone of menace, now defining existence as “a husband hanging from a hook in the closet, . . . [his] tongue sticking out” (81). At this point we realize how much she herself exemplifies the violent extremes resident within primal human psychic chaos.

Such a disturbing (albeit surely partly true) vision of human psychological reality later becomes frighteningly perceived by Madame R.’s own poor son. Jonathan at one point comes shockingly to sense surrounding him a viciously libidinous life-force, which consists of “LAUGHTER,” “CUBAN DRUMS,” “ORGIASTIC MUSIC,” and “weird COLORED LIGHTS”: a sort of carnivalesque “insane amusement park” (63-64, 100).

Jonathan thereafter feels absolutely *besieged* by such Freudian-toned imagery of ferocious *id*-impulses. Unfortunately, his awareness of such forces pushes him into such irrationality as to motivate his own berserk rampage of maddened murder (95-122). In sequence, he eradicates the lives, first, of his mother’s pet piranha fish, next, of her Venus flytrap, and, finally, of the flirtatious human nymphet Rosalie, who unfortunately decides sexually to tempt him, and at just the wrong time.

Madame Rosepettle remains unwilling to admit that she not only is affected by, but also to a large degree has *caused*, Jonathan's destructive acts. When she returns to her hotel room (from an incredibly weird evening frolic, involving her kicking beach sand onto 23 romancing couples), she responds to Jonathan's frenzied carnage with an ignorant (but extraordinarily neurotic) proclamation: "As a mother to a son, I ask you. *What is the meaning of this?*" (124).

If Aristotle had ever attended a performance of *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, he might, quite dispassionately, have labeled Madame Rosepettle as just a typical comic buffoon. She is, after all, one who suffers from a comic flaw quite bluntly defined, in Aristotle's own manner, as pure "ridiculous[ness]" (Aristotle 74). Henri Bergson, if seeing the same play performed (although, obviously, many centuries later), would doubtless remark that La Rosepettle, as typical comic fool, suffers from unbendingly obsessive "rigidity" (Bergson 151-152). Others, upon calling to mind such famed comic theorists, might likely claim that Kopit simply observes comic conventions. However, I think that he asks deeper psychological and philosophical questions about human behavior and epistemology, about the murky mazes which constitute our minds. And I also believe that his answers to those queries are complex ones: he is not simply musing, with a clichéd collection of commonplaces, about human sanity and insanity closely bordering each other.

Studied by David Rinear as a rather brilliant but arcane parody of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Kopit's *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis*, another often hilarious work of Kopit during the 1960s, introduces us to the male elite leaders of a decaying East Coast country club. These men repeatedly deal with each other, and with their wives, and with their social organization's protocols, like "immature male children" (Burgoyne and Brayshaw 201). It thus appears good riddance when these goofy gents find their pristine lawns invaded by

a passel of prostitutes— and, indeed, harlots with great tennis-playing skills. These women eventually pelt dozens of slam shot aces directly against the country club buildings, thus expressing their officially lower social class's long-suppressed will for “vengeance” against wealthy, pompous, and generally idiotic country club bigshots. The ‘ladies’ also may indirectly demonstrate that the overweeningly proud male honchos have denied, within their masculine selves, a “feminine aspect,” or, in other words, a Jungian anima (Dieckman and Brayshaw 200).

To Michael O’Neil (493), “one of the most accomplished plays of the Vietnam era,” Kopit’s 1968-1969 *Indians*, may have chiefly intended, according to its author’s own words, “to expose,” through a heavily symbolic version of “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s biography, a critique of American “involvement in Vietnam” (qtd. in Kopit and Lahr K4). Yet this theme is conveyed in Kopit’s play principally through oblique satiric characterization like that of *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis*. Likewise as in that play, *Indians* shows us plenteous numbers of churningly confused human psyches, even while the dramaturgical technique always remains rather coyly subtle. Kopit does not usually preach at us with furious imperatives, and yet we cannot mistake his reserved but still-rumbling castigation of characters who abound in weird inner flounderings.

Hence, we do observe, in *Indians*, the regularly schizoid self-division of the protagonist Buffalo Bill himself, with his “contrary impulses to help the red man and [also] to destroy him” (O’Neill 494). Perhaps even more pointedly schizoid is the supporting character Wild Bill Hickok. At first, he seems far more alert than Cody—growling with “outrage” when forced to play, at Cody’s instigation, a ludicrously melodramatic stereotype of himself, in a grotesque Wild West play (*Indians* 44-56; Jones 444). Later in *Indians*, however, a money-hungry Hickok himself goads Cody to hire Buffalo Bill impersonators. He then suggests that the two of them

should send these blokes out, even to multiple nations, with the very same sort of distorted Wild West “theatrics” that he had once so vehemently opposed (*Indians* 96-97).

In two of his later plays, 1984’s *End of the World* [*With Symposium To Follow*] and 1991’s *The Road to Nirvana*, Kopit locates much mental sickness within the sanctums where money-hungry entertainment *practitioners* and, especially, cash-ravenous entertainment *producers*, create wildly bizarre scenarios. These entertainment merchandisers want to believe that their sketched-out inane dramatic plots just might win (at least in an adequately weird world) supportive financiers and pixillated-with-enthusiasm audiences.

In *The Road to Nirvana*, unstoppable greed leads some drug-devouring would-be film producers to curry the favor of their gorgonlike potential lead actress through an array of outrageous actions. They perform such scurrilously servile rituals of obeisance, toward the satisfaction of her wishes, as wrist-slitting, coprophagy, and self-castration. One of the men, Jerry, strives at first to fend off such demands for self-humiliation, proclaiming that he has “SOME BRAINS LEFT!” (76). But, much like Hickok in *Indians*, he eventually sacrifices his dignity. In his case, he voluntarily contributes his surgically removed testicle as a disgustingly demanded bribe (or sacrifice) to the inane but power-hungry actress Nirvana. While he is screaming with pain during the actual castration rite, we absurdly hear his cronies, at another corner of the stage, rejoice that Jerry’s gesture has allowed God Himself to be revealed as their film-project’s special providential guide (125-126)!

Kopit’s *End of the World* ... play, early on, portrays similar sick-brained producer characters, this time guardians of would-be stage plays. Shown dining in New York City’s Russian Tea Room, several of these producer characters speculate that Paramount Studios might come to option their originally theatrical script about apocalyptic catastrophe, but that

Paramount would do so only if the resulting film featured a happy ending (Watt 273)! Such men win no particular favor in *End of the World*—for the play instead sympathizes with the inner conundrums of the playscribe protagonist.

Evidently like Kopit himself, this dramatic character was enticed with huge funds if he would compose a nuclear proliferation scenario, but he could never grow fully comfortable with the notion, even while struggling considerably to fulfill it (ix, 3-27). Terms like “mad,” “certifiable,” “out of [one’s] goddam mind,” “cuckoo,” “crazy,” “insane,” and “in the hands of assholes!” abound in this truly very inventive exploration of what motivates nuclear munition-makers. The script lambastes them as trenchantly abusive, incessantly pseudo-rational, and basically ever-fraudulent—especially considering that their policies take the entire planet of Earth hostage.

Still, in surprising plot turns at the play’s conclusion, Kopit shows his playwright protagonist coming to resolution of his ethical dilemmas as he realizes how normatively human is “the seductiveness of open windows.” Much of the human race, he realizes, may have been tempted, at some juncture or other, to throw other human beings, perhaps even babies, out into open-aired vistas and toward their deaths. Even naming one of his nuclear proliferation theorists The Shadow, and thus recalling Jung’s psychological archetype of human psychic darkness, Kopit, according to Gerald Weales (599), allows us “to recognize the [dangerous] pull [toward evil or at least self-destructiveness that resides] in all of us.” We may, with such recognition, Weales adds, come to realize our need “to start *closing* windows” (emphasis mine)—a gesture which, as Thomas Adler postulates (118), may, actually help “creation [to] win out [against the impulse to] destruction.”

Surely Adler could be said to have captured the message underscored by the final, and rather transcendently suggestive, moments in Kopit's *End of the World [With Symposium To Follow]*. Apparently, even Philip Stone (the tempter character who has long been urging playwright Michael Trent to concoct a "nuclear proliferation" drama) comes, near the final curtain, to a view that life must be greeted with a reverence that the nuclear proliferators decisively lack. Although Stone expresses a residue of cynicism during early moments of the two men's final conversation, it is he who eventually guides Trent's eyes to the window, through the panes of which the two men can share a near-to-salvific vision. They see not fission-destroyed corpses, but ongoing intergenerational love:

TRENT: You want it to come, don't you [?] !

STONE: What?

TRENT: Doom. You'd like to see it come!

STONE: No—no, of course not, that's ridiculous. *(He sips)* I just know that if it did, it would not be altogether without interest. I mean it has its appeal, that's all I mean. It arouses my *curiosity*. . . .

TRENT: Don't you understand, I can't write this play! Really, that's the truth, it is totally beyond me!

STONE *puts his hands on TRENT's shoulders*.

STONE *(Warmly)*: Work on it.

He turns and starts out. At the rear of the room, by the window, he stops and looks out. Then he looks back at TRENT.

The lights go nearly to black on everything but TRENT and the field outside the house. In this darkened room, STONE is but a shadowy presence. The

*curtains on the rear window flutter. TRENT looks out, lost in thought. Through the rear window ANN[*Trent's wife,*] can be seen strolling hand in hand across the bright field, hand in hand with [*their son*] ALEX.*

Curtain

(Kopit End of the World [With Symposium to Follow] 95-96)

Meanwhile, nevertheless, scary news stories daily seem to validate folks' personal nightmares—perhaps especially about the hacker-stalked world of modern cyberlife. Many of us are well-aware that just about any computer user could mentally “ma[k]e some sort of terrible blunder,” resulting in such dire events as those that follow the protagonist couple in Kopit's play of the year 2000: *Y2K* (81)—a work which since has been revised as *BecauseHeCan*. Indeed, as this play surely reveals, the liabilities, many of them technological, which threaten this new millennium's human minds prove starkly chilling.

We would be foolhardy not to fear such heinous deeds as are practiced by this particular play's computer criminal character, one Costa Astrakhan (a.k.a. BCuzICan). Still, Astrakhan's apparently all-villainous tale might actually, to some degree, be revealed as our own story (albeit not probably so much our narrative as are the tales of those whom he victimizes: the play's married protagonists, Joseph and Joanne Elliot). Astrakhan's troubled (hence, definitely frail) and nonetheless still highly inventive human mind both monumentally creates and monumentally destroys. Yet, we might, if only to a very small degree, feel some limited sympathy for him. After all, we learn that creative writing teacher Joseph may have helped to unleash Astrakhan's destructive polarity by calling the young boy a dolt, totally lacking in writing talent (Kopit *BecauseHeCan* 65).

At least potentially as a result of anger toward that long-ago insult, a horrendously nasty and vengeful Astrakhan has used complex wiles of computer hacking subterfuge—thus ‘writing’ Joseph and Joanne into banishment of both their social esteem and their financial wellbeing. It is as if he were the human version of the pottery shard *ostrakon* that was tossed into group-vote-collecting baskets back in ancient Greece. Such shards, when they were counted up, could banish rejected political leaders into decade-long exile and shame (“Ostracism”).

Astrakhan therefore reflects one strain, although it is a dangerously *unhinged* strain, of generally human creative energy. Luckily, as a counterforce to such scalawags as he, we have been fortunate enough to encounter Arthur Kopit, an artist whose own seemingly boundless creative gifts so deftly have infused themselves, for a half century, into multiple skilled and revelatory dramas. And Kopit has there regularly aided us in finding modes of wariness with which to fend off the Astrakhans of life. The playwright has helped us to meet more wisely the tempestuous ambivalence dwelling within our much-challenged, our surely-often-frail, human brains.

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