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THE ROLE OF MUSICAL AND SOUND EFFECTS
IN "THE EMPEROR JONES" BY E. O'NEILL

About the year 1920 O'Neill began to feel the need of finding suitable methods for expressing insights and attitudes for which naturalistic play structures seemed patently inadequate. The European example, especially that of Strindberg, was a strong influence. In his search for an appropriate form to express his meaning, the American playwright undertook a series of experiments, the first of which was "The Emperor Jones". It inaugurated O'Neill's expressionist phase of the twenties.

The movement known as expressionism developed out of a preoccupation with the radical cleavage between the individual and society. The discrepancy between the way in which the individual perceives the world and the way it is perceived by others became the basis for a new theatricality. The alienation of the individual demanded a more clear-cut and dramatically heightened statement of his predicament. That is why the expressionist theatre was particularly concerned with expressing emotions, moods and subjective states of mind which could not be contained in ordinary verbal discourse¹. Other means of expression were required, such as more abstract and symbolic stage sets, lighting arrangements, music and sound, dance and pantomime, masks, and choral mass scenes. All of them were aimed at creating a new vision of life.

¹ Sphere History of Literature in the English Language, Vol. 9, American Literature Since 1900, ed. M. Cunliffe, London 1975, p. 77-78.

In "The Emperor Jones" O'Neill took the American Negro as the type of the alienated man. Divorced from his original tribal culture and contemptuous of it, he is even more lost and helpless in the world of the white man, where he is rejected and despised and where the attempt to assimilate its values and become successful, in the sense of acquiring wealth and position, leads only to a loss of self. The subject of the play is not primarily the problem of social antagonism. It is part of a continuing exploration of the potentialities of freedom². The dramatist poses here a question: to what extent is human life determined by one's background, social environment and racial inheritance? All these factors are deeply rooted in the subconsciousness, from which individual consciousness arises and by which it is motivated. Therefore human existence does not merely depend on the personal experience of the individual and the time he lives in. It is shaped by the experience of his race viewed in its historical perspective³. An attempt to deny one's social preconditions is doomed to failure and brings about alienation and loss of identity.

In order to dramatise the protagonist's predicament, and in particular to effectuate the distortion of vision resulting from Jones's peculiar state of mind, O'Neill strives to extend the spectrum of theatrical expression. The play, famous for its variety of scenic means, calls for the impressive sets of a palace interior and a tropical jungle, the interplay of light and darkness, music and sound, dance, pantomime, dumb show, costume, gesture and movement. The dramatist assigns himself the task of stimulating intellectual awareness on the part of the audience by way of sensory appreciation. He builds the play into a sequence of sensory impressions whose massive assault on the various senses excites the feelings of fear, awe and terror.

Music and sound are only part of the playwright's workshop, and cannot be easily divorced from the totality of other expressionistic means, constituting the very stuff out of which the

² Ibid., p. 78.

³ H. Filipowicz, Eugene O'Neill, Warsaw 1975, p. 110.

final artistic vision is carefully built. But in *The Emperor Jones* their role is particularly important. Referring to the circumstances which sparked the idea of the play, O'Neill said:

One day I was reading of the religious feasts in the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there; how it starts at a normal pulse and is slowly intensified until the heart beat of everyone present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum. There was an idea and an experiment. How would this sort of thing work on an audience in a theatre?⁴

This auditory effect was the first to catch the dramatist's interest. It inflamed his imagination to the point where he saw and felt the splendour and ecstatic fervour of the primitive ritual. In order to pass its atmosphere on to the audience he centered the play on the rhythmical basis, approaching a quasi-musical effect' much like that of Ravel's "Bolero". The latter composition also reclines on the rhythmical pattern carried out by the percussion and magnified progressively by the succession of other instruments.

The Emperor Jones rests primarily on two kinds of sound effects. One is the incessant, steady beating of the tom-tom, re-activating the Negro music. The other, consisting of the sudden spasmodic shots from the Emperor's revolver, forms a curious sort of counter point. As a result, we get a musical composition of two contrasted themes which, as the piece is being performed, fight dramatically with each other for supremacy.

The first mention of the drum occurs at the beginning of the play when Smithers, a white English businessman, suggests that the revolt of the black subjects is brewing:

Well, I know bloody well wot's in the air - when they runs orf to the 'ills. The tom-tom'll be thumping out there bloomin' soon"⁵.

⁴ B. H. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*, New York 1947, p. 72.

⁵ E. O'Neill, *The Emperor Jones*, [in:] *Penguin Plays*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1960, p. 99. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

The utterance anticipates the events to come, and since there is something ominous in Smither's voice, we get an immediate impression of some impending calamity. The drum is said to be "thumping out", which again makes us sense some fearful practice and pursuit to start. Moreover, the tom-tom appears as a carrier of the pursuing force, so when we first hear its sound towards the end of Scene I, we are startled to alertness, and we realise in an instant that the Emperor's drama is beginning. Here is the stage direction announcing the drum:

From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat - seventy-two to the minute - and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterruptedly to the very end of the play.

(Sc. I, p. 108)

The word "low" implies that the enemy is as yet at a considerable distance, so there is still chance for the Emperor to flee to safety. On the other hand, the attributives "low and vibrating" qualify the sound as that of a remote but portentous storm filling the air with a tremor.

Having the drum beat at the rate 72 per minute O'Neill ostensibly associates it with the human pulse. To stress this point he applies the word "throb" to describe its action throughout the play. The pulse, in turn, is a measure of psychic tension. Thus the drum is an external projection of the Emperor's state of mind. It is, as it were, the amplification of his own feverish temples. The audience too, is to participate emotionally in what is going on. Hence the drum's other function is to exert a desirable psychological impact - in order to stir the excitement.

As the action progresses, the rate is accelerated reflecting the increase of tension. We have to remember that Jones is all the time exposed to fear, which grows in him from the baby-sized proportions of the Little Formless Fears, appearing on the stage in Scene II, to those of a terrible monster, the crocodile in Scene VII. And since fear pertains to the subconsciousness, the tom-tom may be viewed as its virtual auditory symbol.

The instrument is used by the natives to serve the purposes of the ritual. Its rhythm fills them with a spirit of war, musters

their courage, and spurs them to action. Thus the drum beats give the impression of the Negro music, which is in turn identified with the black savages, Jones's old race. Their revolt is an expression of hatred and revenge enacted in a ritualistic way. Since the Negroes do not appear on the stage until the very last scene, the tom-tom symbolizes their presence and reflects the ritual performed off-stage. As such, it virtually becomes an actor in the play. The rebellion exerts an external pressure on the Emperor. In this sense it forms part of the complex body of Fate, acting now to the hero's detriment. The other aspect of Fate, pertaining to deep psychology, is that same old race, objectifying the idea of collective unconscious - according to Jung - the individual's most inner self. Thus the drum, closely associated with the black race, reflects both the transcendent and immanent nature of Fate.

O'Neill wants the tom-tom to continue uninterruptedly till the end of the play. The drum, therefore, together with the terrifying visual image of the tropical jungle, pulsating with its own kind of mysterious ghostly night life, forms as well a sort of ever-present, vast, demoniac background against which the physical and psychological actions are carried forward. The following stage direction brings out this point:

A sombre monotone of wind lost in the leaves moans in the air. Yet this sound serves but to intensify the impression of the forest's relentless immobility, to form a background throwing into relief its brooding, implacable silence.

(Sc. II, p. 112)

Here we have another kind of sound, that of a mournfully whistling wind, which adds to the feeling of terror that the very jungle, gloomy and impenetrable, a virtual wall of darkness, evokes.

The dominant sound of the tom-tom is not simply flat and monotonous in the sense that it beats steadily without any variation of tempo and amplitude. It is, as it were, a living creature, agitated at times and then calmed down. Here is one of the many stage directions stressing this point:

He fires [...] The beat of the far-off tom-tom is perceptibly louder and more rapid.

(Sc. III, p. 117)

One might say that since the increase of tempo and volume of the drum coincides with the crucial moments of action, the role of those rhythmic sounds is primarily structural. Besides, at such moments they also evoke or amplify the atmosphere of awe and terror, therefore they perform an atmospheric function.

The tom-tom is definitely the most prominent expressionistic means utilised in the play. Its expressionistic nature reveals itself in personifying and animating both the Emperor's subconscious fear ever-increasing since his escape to the jungle, and the natives' ever-nearing pursuit. The drum has its counterpart, as has already been mentioned, in the other expressionistic device, namely in the shots from the Emperor's revolver which, synchronised with it, punctuate the end of nearly each fantastic scene. Each shot has again both physical and psychological aspects, dramatising the protagonist's former act of violence (the murder of the Negro Jeff, for example) and some present discharge of hatred or of panic⁶. Furthermore, as the incessant beating of the tom-tom enhances the continuity of action, so each particular shot, occurring at the end of each episode, marks the division of the central part of the play into scenes. It takes over, as it were, the function of the stage curtain.

The interplay between the drum and the shots seems to be an auditory projection of the battle between the two opposing forces: Fate and the individual. The tom-tom, expressive of the rebels, on the one hand, and of the hero's repressed racial inheritance on the other, stands for the successive attacks of the pressing Fate; the shot sounds, for Jones's desperate resistance. The battlefield is located in the protagonist's psyche, with the gun shots reflecting his "white" rational self. On the stage, it is dramatized in a very effective way. At the end of each fantastic scene the audience is thrilled by a sudden flash

⁶ T. T i u s a n e n, O'Neill's Scenic Images, Princeton, New Jersey 1968, p. 99.

followed by a loud report as Jones fires at some hallucinatory enemy. Each time afterwards the tom-tom is perceptibly louder and more rapid. The climax comes in Scene VII where the confrontation with the repulsive crocodile brings the Emperor's despair to the pitch point of intensity:

He fires at the green eyes in front of him [...] Jones lies with his face to the ground, his arms outstretched, whimpering with fear as the throb of the tom-tom fills the silence about him with a sombre pulsation, a baffled but revengeful power.

(Sc. VII, p. 129)

Due to the operation of the specific rhythm brought about by the drum beats and the shot sounds - the play takes on the appearance of some profoundly significant and dramatic "ghost sonata". It bears a curious resemblance to Beethoven's "The Moonlight Sonata" (part II), the left-hand accompaniment corresponding to the drum beat, the right-hand rapid succession of two loud accords reflecting the shots.

Against this kind of stormy auditory background other sound effects are occasionally heard. As we shall see, they represent a wide assortment of the expressionist's workshop. In Scene II the Little Formless Fears produce "a tiny gale of low mocking laughter like a rustling of leaves" (p. 114). Jones, hearing it, "leaps backwards with a yell of terror" (p. 114), and when his voice comes to us again, it has a significant "quavering" (p. 114) quality.

In Scene III we have a "queer, clicking sound" (p. 116) produced, as we realise after a while, by a pair of dice being shaken and cast by the Negro Jeff, once killed by Jones in an argument. This sound, together with "the regular, mechanical movements of an automaton" (p. 116) on the part of the apparition, contributes to the impression of some ghastly nightmare.

Integrally connected with the orchestration of the play is the effect of "soundlessness", occurring in Scene IV. "The Prison Guard cracks his whip-noiselessly" (p. 120), the convicts "swing their picks, they shovel, but not a sound comes from their labour" (p. 120). Quasi-silence, for the tom-tom is always present, is utilised here to enhance the phantom-like quality of the apparitions. It is made clear to the audience that the cha-

acters of the Prison Guard and the convicts should not be viewed as actually existing beings, but as the visionary products of Jones's tormented psyche. Furthermore, this kind of theatrical device creates an overwhelming atmosphere of terror.

The same effect is again put to use in Scene V for similar purpose. In the following scene we hear the "chattering moans" (p. 125) of the Negro slaves, which towards the end of the scene rise into "a long, tremulous wail of despair that reaches a certain pitch, unbearably acute, then falls by slow gradations of tone into silence and is taken up again" (p. 126). The slaves, singing their spirituals, apparently "blues", voice the uttermost misery of their condition. Their lament is aimed at working out a virtual "catharsis" on the part of the audience as pity and compassion are brought to the point of climactic intensity.

In Scene VII we witness a ritual composed of dance and chant, and performed by the Witch-doctor, dressed up in ritual garb, in front of the primitive altar. The drum beats are identified with the Negro ritual music. In the stage direction it is stressed that "the tom-tom grows to a fierce, exultant boom whose throbs seem to fill the air with vibrating rhythm" (p. 128). The doctor's voice "rises and falls in a weird, monotonous croon, without articulate word divisions" (p. 128), and at moments of great intensity it is "punctuated by shrill cries" (p. 128). This fearful, exotic performance, reminiscent of some magic tribal practices of Jones's old race, epitomises the Emperor's tragic predicament and musical effects play an essential role. The accelerating pace of the second half of the play reaches here its full momentum. It assumes the character of a ritual incantation in which Jones's world of unreality, of sham civilisation he has built around himself, finally collapses. At this point in the action the ritual acquires a universal dimension, dramatising the archetypal situation of man exposed to fear as he is besieged by supernatural evil forces which he neither understands nor controls, but believes in.

In this scene the tempo and volume of all the sounds mount to the point of real frenzy. The tom-tom beats at its highest rate, and since according to the playwright it corresponds to the human pulse, the protagonist is now driven to an awful dis-

traction of mind bordering on insanity. The spectators' alertness is bound to be at its highest as all the different sounds join the drum, like all the instruments in "Bolero", to trumpet out the play's "finale". And this is exactly what O'Neill wanted to achieve. He said of the drum:

[It is] part and parcel of the psychological action; at first it is the call to war, then it merges into the Emperor Jones' vision of the slaves rolling to its beat; finally it becomes his own throbbing feverish temples, and all the while it is our heart beating more and more rapidly as we follow his fate⁷.

As we gradually become aware of the fact that the fantastic scenes are dramatic externalisations of Jones's guilt-ridden conscience, we come to identify the group of sounds employed there with the Emperor's torturous subconsciousness. They appear to be the carriers of the psychological action. Along with other sensory effects, they become powerful vehicles of dramatic expression through which the hero's long-repressed subconscious contents, pertaining both to his personal experience and to the collective experience of his race, are enacted on the stage. The expressionistic character of these sounds, therefore, consists largely in dramatising the protagonist's psychological condition in the way that is both novel and theatrically more pronounced. They merge with the dominant tom-tom, adding harmonious overtones to its body.

In the last scene there is the following stage direction:

The reports of several rifles sound from the forest, followed a second later by savage exultant yells. The beating of the tom-tom abruptly ceases.

(Sc. VIII, p. 131)

We must not forget that the natives are using silver bullets, and a silver bullet happens to be the Emperor's talisman, the only superstition he has yielded to, the one on which he has founded his imperial power. Therefore one has to see a connection between the hero's shots and those of the natives. It has

⁷ O. Cargill et al., *Four Decades of Criticism*, New York 1963, p. 240.

already been mentioned that the shots from the Emperor's revolver symbolise violent resistance and hatred. The "bush niggers" reveal the reciprocal emotions. Bearing in mind that they stand for the old race, and the playwright seems to bring out through them the immanent aspect of Fate, their shots might be viewed as Fate's final punishment inflicted upon Jones for his self-betrayal.

Moreover, the curious interplay of the shots, the Emperor's and the natives', evokes the effect of dramatic irony. The reports from the Negroes' rifles sound as a recurring echo of the ones discharged by the protagonist. As he has striven to dismiss his subconscious visions by a resort to his gun, so the natives, externalising the deepest layer of his subconsciousness, come out victorious, getting rid of him by that same weapon. Only then the tom-tom ceases to beat. The ritual has been carried to its triumphant end and justice has been wielded. Jones is killed by a silver bullet made of coins. Symbolically, it is not only that he falls a victim to his greed of money (it is made clear in Scene I that he is in the Emperor business simply to make out of it what he can while he can). He is destroyed by the only superstition he maintained. He has outwitted himself while effecting the white man's cynical lore.

The above analysis gives us an idea of the many functions that musical and sound effects perform in "The Emperor Jones". They bring out the conflict, underline the leitmotifs, highlight the play's message. In short, they perform a thematic function. Furthermore, they evoke an appropriate mood and stir lively emotions on the part of the audience by way of auditory perception. The psychological function ensues from their dramatising and manifesting various psychological contents. The structural role is evident in their arranging the central part of the drama into scenes while unifying the loose episodes into a coherent whole. It is extended by their combining the external and internal aspects of the play, that is by fusing the physical and psychological elements of action. Last but not least, they bring out the effect of dramatic irony. Their function in the play is, therefore, not merely decorative but vital and organic.

The immediate purpose for employing the auditory effects in *The Emperor Jones* consists in exerting a psychological impact through creating tension on the stage and passing it on to the audience. But the dramatist's ultimate aim seems to be aesthetic. He makes all his sounds form a musical composition based on a firm rhythmical pattern. And although the particular sounds hardly bear any musical quality, they assume musical implications, appearing as the components of the overall musical structure. In this sense music is implicit in the drama.

Moreover, the drum beats function as the Negro ritual music and are associated with the Negro culture. The tom-tom becomes an actor as it were. It stands for the natives who do not appear physically on the stage until the final stage. The means of expression in O'Neill's theatre attain increasing importance. Each of them is aimed at objectification or reenactment of the inner experience. Each transmits the emotional and intellectual complex. And all of them become a manifestation of the creative vision that moves beyond mimesis. O'Neill, developing along the expressionist lines, indicates by the use of his extra-literary devices that the ultimate meaning of human existence lies beyond its purely external appearance.

Music and sound, together with various other scenic means creating the play's vision, have made "The Emperor Jones" the most perfectly theatrical of all O'Neill's dramas. But apart from purely spectacular effects, the means of expression convey the idea that what man takes to be reality, is only a surface, underneath which inscrutable forces - exterior and interior - are at work⁸. And this is exactly what O'Neill himself phrases as "super-naturalism", his own individual stylistic venture and contribution to the avant-garde expressionistic experiments of the twenties. The term implies a new vision of life regardless of a mere projection of reality. It is created by the use of new technical devices and stage practices, music and sound appearing among them all important if not indispensable.

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⁸ E. T o r n q v i s t, *A Drama of Souls*, Uppsala 1968, p. 237.

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ROLA EFEKTÓW MUZYCZNYCH I DŹWIĘKOWYCH
W "CESARZU JONESIE" E. O'NEILLA

Sztuką "Cesarz Jones", napisaną w 1920 r., E. O'Neill zapoczątkował serię swych dramatów ekspresjonistycznych. Tu właśnie po raz pierwszy z pełną świadomością szeroko wykorzystał nowe środki przekazu teatralnego, m. in. elementy muzyczne i efekty dźwiękowe. Podstawą rytmiczną utworu jest nieprzerwane, jednostajne bicie bębna, na tle którego występują inne dźwięki, jak strzały z rewolweru lub śpiewy murzyńskie. Środki te spełniają szereg zasadniczych funkcji. Jako symbole zarówno pobudzonej podświadomości bohatera oraz całej czarnej rasy z jej odrębną, swoistą kulturą, odgrywają one istotną rolę tematyczną. W tym ostatnim przypadku uderzenia tam-tamu, uosabiające na scenie zbuntowanych tubylców, stają się jakby aktorem i uzyskują status autonomiczny. Wszystkie efekty audialne obliczone na ewokowanie silnych emocji wśród widzów, stwarzają atmosferę pełną napięcia i grozy. Z punktu widzenia struktury dzieła służą jako ogniwa łączące różnorakie elementy akcji i spajające luźne sceny w jedną dynamiczną całość. Spełniając wszystkie te funkcje, efekty muzyczne i dźwiękowe stają się organicznym składnikiem sztuki i wraz z innymi środkami scenicznymi kreują nową twórczą wizję artysty, który w ten sposób zrywa z tradycyjnym odwzorowaniem rzeczywistości.