



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

**Supervisor's Report:**

**Bc. Ondřej Polák, "Wearing the Mask: The Manifestations of Performativity in African American Drama from 1950 to 1970," MA thesis**

In his BA thesis, Mr Polák examined African American theatre of the 1920s and 30s through the lens of the ideas of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke. His MA project builds on this foundation to continue developing and deepening his understanding of the field. The result is a dynamic and thought-provoking piece of research that successfully brings theories of performativity into conversation with work by African American dramatists from the post-WWII period. Although Mr Polák's original intention was to cover the period 1950-2000, the decision to scale back to a focus on the decades from 1950 to 1970 is a strategic one, promising a more thorough engagement with a set of important theatrical works in a more consistent context. Unfortunately, as a consequence, the work of many exciting, more recent playwrights had to be omitted. The goals of the thesis, laid out in the opening chapter, are lucidly explained and of intellectual merit. Mr Polák explores the resonances of performativity, racial identity and politics of spectatorship in post-war African American theatre and performance in ways that provide keen insights and open spaces for further debate.

Chapter 2 is one of the highlights of the thesis. It maps the emergence of the term performative from J.L. Austin and John Searle through to Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. His synopsis of their ideas showcases a competence in handling complex concepts accurately and with precision. By page 17 Mr Polák begins to angle the theoretical term towards questions of racial identity. Crucial here is the notion of *passing*, described by Butler as a process of transformational identification with a more desired group or class (p.19). As Mr Polák notes, the term does not originate with Butler, but with Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*. The novel is described in some detail here, as is necessary, however it is never directly cited and is not listed in the bibliography. This is a pity, since it would be good to have Larsen's voice credited. The issue of passing is brought to a new level of complexity through Nadine Ehlers' work *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (2012) and her argument that "there is no internal "truth" to race. Rather, through being read as "belonging" to a particular racial category – that is, visually appearing and continuing one's acts, manners, and behaviors in accordance to disciplinary racial demands – *all* subjects are passing-*for* a racial identity that they are said to *be*." (see p. 23) is vital to the analysis that follows. The chapter closes with a discussion of performativity and theatre primarily via W.B. Worthen. Mr Polák productively uses these debates to introduce a discussion of spectatorship, visibility and preconceptions that deftly moves back to the matter of performativity, public discourse and images of African Americans in theatrical spaces.



## FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

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Chapter 3 traces the heritage of images of the African in America, dwelling at length on the phenomenon of minstrel shows and their politics. Some of this chapter in consequence retreads the history of the Harlem Renaissance and The Black Arts School, Locke and DuBois, that Mr Polák treated in his BA thesis. While all this material is deeply interesting and handled with skill and care, it really postpones the analysis of the period and works that should take pride of place in the thesis.

Chapter 4 arrives at the core material of the project with an acknowledgement that the distinctions of the 1920s/30s have largely disappeared, while a host of new issues and tensions arise. The chapter rests on distinguishing the 1950s from the 1960s in terms of passing and entrenchment. While there are some merits to this approach, there are also drawbacks. Summing up the 1950s as the era of passing and the 1960s as one of entrenchment might easily be critiqued as a very simplistic binary. It also opens questions about the fundamentals of performativity as it intersects with race and the extent to which those who advocated 'entrenchment' are, in effect, racial essentialists. There are obvious conundrums here:

- Is being identified as Black to be equated with being visible or invisible?
- If an African American writer chooses not to flag race, are they merely attempting to 'pass,' or is this a valid choice without a pejorative dimension?
- To what extent are patterns of perception (as relayed in critical/historical studies) really just built around individual critics predispositions, prejudices or anxieties?
- What role does gender play? What role does class play?

Spectatorship, too, is a notoriously difficult and fluid domain; significantly as we all know, works are viewed in very different ways in different locations by different groups, and at different times. There is some fine discussion of specific plays here, but as a reader I would have liked much more. The material on Hansberry and Jones/Baraka is articulately developed, however it would have been interesting to hear more about the junctures and disjunctures between race and gender (a particularly problematic dimension of Jones/Baraka's work, that is left aside). It would also have been constructive to have a wider critical panorama of the reception of the plays and their legacies. It is good to have other writers given space here including Ted Shine, Kalamu ya Salaam and Douglas Turner Ward. Again, given the extent of the context mapped in chapter 3, these writers are treated with relative brevity. It is also a shame that Hansberry is the only female dramatist. Alice Childress might have been worth a look here.

In terms of research, the thesis demonstrates superior skill in searching, selecting, and evaluating sources to meet the needs of the topic. Mr Polák's research shows both initiative and, more importantly, mature critical judgement. He has assembled a strong bibliography of critical and theoretical materials, and suitably varied theatrical corpus (despite the gender imbalance observed). His sources are not only appropriately cited, but actively engaged and



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analytically with throughout. This is an articulate and linguistically nuanced thesis. Presentation and format are excellent indicating strong attention to detail.

Mr Polák has worked in a systematic and timely manner during the process of composition, responding actively to feedback and demonstrating an ability to revise and enhance his ideas in a most promising way.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "EXCELLENT" / 1.

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Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD