Status Quo Supplies Playwrights with a Cause

Every day society deals with status quo. According to Dictionary.com, status quo is “the existing condition or state of affairs.” We are constantly battling what is going on in society at that time, both politically and formally, too. Throughout modern theatre, status quo is constantly being set as an underlying tone; I believe, both politically and formally many of the playwrights are commenting on the status quo in many of the plays that we have studied this far in the semester: Uncle Tom’s Cabin, A Doll’s House, Cherry Orchard, Heartbreak House, Six Characters in Search of an Author, The Good Person of Setzuan, and The Hairy Ape.

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, written by Harriet Beacher Stowe and adapted by George Aiken, we are faced with the realization about what is taking place in society at that very moment. The major politics that we are faced with are slavery, fighting to free themselves, and people acting as God outside the realms of them being God. During the time that Uncle Tom’s Cabin, slavery was a big status quo issue. They had people fleeing their homes to gain freedom. In the play, Eliza runs off with Harry as soon as she discovers that Harry has been sold to Mr. Shelby. In fact, Eliza’s husband, George, has already left and is attempting to make it to Canada to create a new life for Eliza and Harry. As soon as he does create that life, he has every intention of going back and buying them. Many of the slaves during that time had the goal to create a better life for themselves. They wanted to out run slavery and get a way from it. I believe Stowe and Aiken are simply commenting on the semi-reality behind slavery. They are sold, taken to a new place, and separated from their family. There is a point where Tom jumps in the water and saves Eva. In my opinion, I believe that he is playing God in this situation because there is the stereotypical thought that many African-Americans could not swim that well. I believe this comment still existed at this time. I believe that the status quo that the playwright is commenting on is the fact that slave owners are playing God. They are fixing marriages, creating “new” families, and controlling their slaves every move. They end up controlling their work, what time they get up, and much more, too. The playwrights believe that this has gone on for too long and it is now time to speak out against it.
Formalistically speaking, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was originally based on a book. Stowe was preaching to the masses about the status quo that was taking place at this time. She was informing them that slavery is wrong. At the same time I believe that they are also reflecting on Romanticism, too. Romanticism is the idea to become a “Freedom Thinker,” (758). The playwrights were acting out about their time. They were fighting against the political oppression that was taking place. They believed that slavery was wrong and it should no longer exist.

Taking a stand politically is exactly what *A Doll’s House* did because it is considered to be fighting against the status quo of women’s rights. Henrik Ibsen, the playwright, was creating a play that went against the social norms. For example, Nora was the main person who went against the social norms and stood up for women’s rights. In the past, before the play begins, Nora steals money from Torvald to cure his disease. She ends up plagiarizing his signature to receive the money. This is very much against the social norms at this point in society. Besides the fact that it is wrong in the plagiarism area, but it is the fact that the woman is handling the money. This is not heard of, unless the woman does not have a husband. I believe that Henrik is speaking out on it because it occurs more and more frequently then what the typical person believes. In the end, Nora leaves Torvald. Gasp! What will the typical women do next? During this time period, plays were beginning to turn into realistic situations. This play is based on an actual situation. Henrik is providing the status quo with the reality to not expect a happy ending because more and more situations and life is not ending like that. We also see a more gradual change from romanticism to realism in a *Cherry Orchard*.

Typically a common term heard about change is out with the old and in the new and does good justice towards a *Cherry Orchard*. Anton Chekhov is commenting on the status quo of new technology taking over old technology. Within the analysis it states, “We see telegraph poles in the distance,” (943), we are being informed that technology is soon being taken over and will be controlled by something new and different. This, formally speaking, tells us about the shift from romanticism to realism. We see the gorgeous cherry orchard, very wholesome, and we come across the buyer, Lopakhin, and he wants to and does tear down the cherry orchard and builds nice summer houses in their places. Chekhov makes the transition seem just as though it is an industrial change when it is really the idea of being honest and real about situations and forgetting the idea of being able to question life anymore. Shaw does the same thing as Chekhov
by creating a transition between two different –isms, this time it is with realism and expressionism.

*Heartbreak House* has a very unique way of dealing with the status quo that affects society. George Bernard Shaw speaks out about his reaction to World War I. He uses realism from what is actually taking place in society at that time and applies expressionism to the situation. He is very clever in his way of supporting typical social values with the way he titles his characters. For example, he names a woman Mrs. Hushabye. I believe that he appreciates the idea of a quite woman and a woman that only speaks about things that actually matter in life. Shaw focuses on the human dilemma. At that time in history, there was quite a lot occurring in politics and social form. People were recovering from WWI, they did not know what was exactly going, and they were faced with many decisions to make, too. They were confused, just like in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

In metatheater, we are approached with the idea of society and boundaries not really existing any more (1467). In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, people are dealing with trying to find answers to what is going on in society but they are unable to discover them. Pirandello is commenting on this, too. In Italy, it was a time there were many social questions that arose and came out of the woodwork. The status quo was dealing with revolting against a new government that was beginning to take over Italy. Many people fled for normality and arrived in America at that time to seek answers for their questions. It was almost as if it was the rebirth of the enlightenment era, when it was alright to question what was going on and who an individual truly was in many cases. Pirandello is commenting on this because all throughout the play, the manager wants to know why he is doing this and what his purpose is. However, in the end he revolts against the status quo and no longer asks questions to try to find answers – he just simply gives up on the idea of discovering the truth. Instead of fighting against the idea of finding the answers to these questions, the *Good Person of Setzuan* deals with wanting a change but doing nothing about achieving that change.

When I think about hiding behind a mask, I constantly see myself as being faced with a change that I want to make but am unable to make it. In the *Good Person of Setzuan*, Shen Te deals with that exact same thing and I believe that is what Brecht is speaking out against with dealing with status quo, especially in China. At the time that Brecht wrote this play, it was during the conquer of China by Japan. Many people did not approve of this at all and a majority of them
wanted to speak out against it. Shen Te wants a better life then a prostitute and wants to be able to be better off in life, too. However, she must act as a man to achieve that goal. Formalistically speaking, this play has a lot of expressionism that Brecht slips in there about his comments towards the current status quo taking place in the society of China. He thinks what is happening there is wrong and that people need to fight for their freedom. He also throws in romanticism because we see the issue of religion popping up. She begins to only trust religion and then, in the end, her three main gods desert her. Brecht is speaking out against people that are following their religion and only putting their beliefs in religion and not opening up to technology. It is wrong. He believes that you are not pre-destined to a future; a person creates their own future as they go along in life. In the *Hairy Ape*, it also deals with the idea of man creating his own future.

Every person at one time goes through their life and feels completely out of place, I know I do at this moment. In the *Hairy Ape*, Yank constantly feels out of place. He is trying to find what his journey is meant to be and he cannot discover where to go in his life. He is constantly being told by “voices” bad things that are occurring in society, like unions are bad. However, when he goes to one, he discovers how wonderful they are in reality. I believe Eugene O’Neil is commenting on the unions in that time period. I look at it as if it was how business looked at unions, but yet at the same time what a savior they were to the common man. At that point in society, businesses were required to pay the union wage versus some low cut worthless salary to their workers. This in return put them farther back in debt then what they already where.

Each play that we have discussed this semester deals with the status quo that is being dealt with in the time period. I feel that it is the playwrights’ way of expressing their ideas about the status quo taking place in their eras. They were revolting by theatre to express their politics and their philosophies on life both politically and formalistically.