

## Visible and Invisible Spaces in Topdog/ Underdog

Xinxin Tie\*

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 210000, China

### Abstract

**Topdog/Underdog, created by American playwright Susan-Lori Parks, is a unique experimental play. Focusing on the plight of two black brothers, Parks uses a minimalist spatial structure throughout the play. Investigating space theory is a continuing concern within the study of literary works during the decade. "Space" is closely related to the performance of plays, especially modern plays. In this paper, the term "space" proposes from three perspectives: theater, inner theatrical, and external theatrical to get a new experience by touching the visible and invisible spaces in Topdog/Underdog.**

### Keywords

**Topdog/Underdog; Suzan-Lori Parks; Space.**

### 1. Introduction

Susan-Lori Parks is the representative of contemporary African-American theater. *Topdog/Underdog* is one of the representative works of Parks. After the premiere stunned the American theater in 2001, it was praised as "New York had the best drama." In addition, the show in 2002 won the "Pulitzer Prize for Drama," It also made Parks the first black female dramatist to win this prize in American theater. Since the introduction of the drama to China, the analysis and interpretation of the drama have mainly focused on the perspective of New Historicism, the interpretation of trauma, the rise of female consciousness, the construction of masculinity temperament, and family ethics. This paper applies a new vision by analyzing "space" from three perspectives: theater, inner theatrical space, and external theatrical space to get a new experience by touching the visible and invisible spaces created by Susan-Lori Parks in *Topdog/Underdog*.

"Space" can be defined as an empty area, some outer space, a period or where things exist or move. From the perspective of materialism, space is an objective form of material existence. In traditional theater theory, the concept of space is limited to the stage or theater, and space exists as if only for better performance [1].

With the process of urbanization and globalization, space has become a text endowed with profound cultural significance and no longer a pure expression of time and geography. Whether it is Lefebvre's "production of space," Foucault's "power space," Jameson's "hyperspace," Harvey's "time-space compression," or Soja's "third space," they all seek to explore the value and connotation of space itself, and focus more on the existence and development of human being in the spatial dimension [2]. The title of *Topdog/Underdog* already contains a spatial and hierarchical metaphor [3]. The spatial theory provides a new perspective for the analysis of the literature.

### 2. Theater Space

Theater space is a sensible physical space where the play shows. The theater space can be divided into on-stage and off-stage, and the actors and audiences would appear at the same public space and share the time during the play. Susan-Lori Parks arranges *Topdog/Underdog* into one single set. The actors on stage do not have to adapt the different environment to

cooperate with the performance, and audience off-stage are always keep a certain angle to watch the play, enhancing the coherence and the sense of integrity. The new spatial orientation and transformation of time and space could change people's previous experiences. Although there is only a single physical space for several scene transformations, it gives the audience a more intuitive perspective to see things happening in the same position and angle.

Presence is one of the most controversial concepts in 20th-century literature and art. It has always been close to the theater and is the most fundamental vocabulary to describe the characteristics of plays with immediacy, spontaneity, liveness, authenticity, contingency, and intimacy [3]. Existing in the same space, the audience and actors all have the consciousness that they share the moment and are communicators for each other, and the sound, light, or the explosive speech and action could arouse audiences' emotion. In this atmosphere, the Presence of a play is realized by two simulation functions: from the external aspect, the actor is a holistic imitation of the heart, and the audience is an internal simulation. The audience replays the events on the stage in their minds, generating various emotional reactions [4]. The monologue, like the song from Lincoln's mouth, the spell-like words by Booth, and the fragmentary life interception, Susan-Lori Parks tries to create defamiliarization, separating the characters and the audience to lead the people watching the play to feel it objectively.

### 3. Inner Theatrical Space

Being similar to the theater space, inner theatrical space is also a tangible physical space, but being different from the former, it refers to the specific space the story tells. On the one hand, inner theatrical space resides in the physical theater space and has the characteristics of reality and perception, close to the theater space. On the other hand, it is the virtual structure of art, so it is illusory, which is close to the external theatrical space. In a word, the inner theatrical space has the dual nature of "real" and "unreal" [5].

Inner theatrical space is the space that the playwright sets for the characters to show the plot, and the stage space is a functional material space for actors to create and an aesthetic space as an aesthetic object. Parks sets the scene in "A seedily furnished rooming house room [6]." In this little room, audiences could only see a few things, including the door, the bed, the boxes, the recliner, a screen, and a window. Being one of the most apparent props on the stage, the door helps the brothers to create their own space in the city, and they can be who they were when the door closed. Arnold Aronsong once pointed out, "The door is a critical point that demarcates the boundaries of space [7]." Inside the door, there is a private room for them to spread their true feeling and actions. After Booth steals some goods from the shop, "Booth comes in looking like he is bundled up against the cold [6]". He comes into the room alone and puts out all the booties inside his clothes. Lincoln could only be himself in the room, "Lincoln takes off the frock coat and applies cold cream, removing the whiteface [6]." Moreover, the door also holds the function of showing Booth's dominant status of the house. "He slams the door trying to wake his brother who is dead to the world. He opens the door and slams it again [6]." The reproduction of the space stage design aims to create the living space or environment for the characters. In *Topdog/Underdog*, the two brothers have their way to get rest, the younger brother sleeps on the shabby bed, the elder brother on his recliner, and there is a screen to divide this tiny room into two parts. "He goes out into the hall returning with a folding screen which he sets up between the bed and the recliner creating 2 separate spaces [6]." Susan-Lori Parks wittily uses the screen to show the living environment of the two brothers and imply the miserable economic circumstances at that time.

In this limited space, Parks leaves the two characters with two different ways to connect with other spaces from two aspects. The window is the only access to link the hope of their life. Excepting the window, the other way to get in touch with other space is the gun. At the end of

the play, the younger brother Booth shot his brother to protect his possessions that he saved "through thick and through thin [6]." Parks leaves the characters hope and death by adding the function of window and gun, which shows the playwright's objective attitude towards the play. Besides the touchable space, the inner theatrical space also includes the characters' psychological space. Lincoln sings about life and the dire condition, from being abandoned by his parents and his lover to contemporary life. The theater stage space can appear as a huge psychological space, in which the psychological forces of individuals could collide with each other [8]. The final 3-Card game is the duel and a summit of the intense conflict between the two brothers. With the criticism and reflection on contemporary society, space has become an indispensable latitude. Space is conceived as the place of politics, conflicts, and struggles and the object of struggle. "Monologue" as the thoughts and feelings of the people and the natural language of the psychological activity, can significantly reflect the character of ideological confusion, chaos, and emotional loneliness, and closed on the interpersonal relationship. People tend to be without any secret to disclose their secret, and the desire of talking with an intense expression, and therefore it is the best way can reflect the characteristics of the individual character [9]. Booth made a long monologue after he shot his brother. During this progress, Booth finds a psychological space to express his true feeling and mind.

Parks, intentionally isolated in the real-life events on stage closely the internal logic of render time, deliberately destroyed the main character in the drama show character and integrity in the process of growth. Furthermore, this makes the drama plot structure and presents a linear progression from a single state transition to a space, the particular form of fragmentation [10], which dramatically helps achieve the defamiliarization effect.

#### 4. External Theatrical Space

Being different from the inner theatrical space, external theatrical space is illusory in the characters' minds or implied in the plots. Parks creates external theatrical spaces for her characters, the mentioned one and the implied one. According to Aristotle, every tragedy has two parts: the reason (or knot) and the solution. External theatrical events are often combined with plots to form a "reason" and the actions and performed events on the stage with a "solution." Aristotle pointed in his *Poetics* "the actions performed and the story are the end of tragedy [11]". In a word, the external theatrical spaces are where the seeds of the tragic end formed.

The plot should be constructed so that even without seeing it, it is as if people could hear the frightening event and be lament what happened. The distinct characteristics of theater and urban space became important during this period [12]. In the *Topdog/Underdog*, Booth and Lincoln talked about the past and the present places not shown on the stage. In the past, they recalled the house where they lived with their parents as children "2-room place with the cement backyard [6]". Even it was not a good place for children to grow, it saved their memories with their parents. Through the memory line of the house, audiences are informed that their parent's broken marriage ended with the continuously leaving of the tragic family and why the two brothers have such kind of life. For the present place, Lincoln's working spot in the theme park is the concretely described "It's pretty dark. To keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing. But on the wall opposite where I sit there's a little electrical box, like a fuse box. Silver medal. It's got uh dent in it like somebody hit it with the fist. Big old dent so everything reflected in it gets reflected upside down. Like yr looking in uh spoon [6]." The outer world that surrounds the characters influences their behavior. Lincoln must stand in the dark and limited place to please these "assistants" to make a living, and this kind of working environment increases his inner insecurity, and therefore he back home and does not want to leave at the

night when Booth wants to propose to his girlfriend Grace. The working place shows the bad living condition of the brothers.

Henri Lefebvre shows his idea in his *The Production of Space* "Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information [13]." Being a part of society, although there are no words in the play to describe the big time, the audience could get clues between the lines. A black man needed a white-like name to get the interview, and Lincoln could only get the lean salary in the dark and blue workplace. Michel Foucault put forward the "power space," and in the time in the *Topdog/Underdog*, the black people made their living in the shabby room and worked in the wrong place. All these phenomena show that the voice right of the society is in the white people's hands.

Last but not least, Parks uses the audience's imagination masterly. The death of the former president Lincoln is linked with the two brothers' cognominal names and the place of the Ford's Theater where Lincoln was assassinated.

## 5. Summary

In this paper, the term "space" is proposed from three perspectives: theater space, inner theatrical space, and external theatrical space to get a new experience by touching the visible and invisible spaces in *Topdog/ Underdog* and have more understanding of Parks's "less is more" philosophy in the play.

## References

- [1] M.Y. He: On Drama Spatial Criticism, *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, (2014) No.2 , p. 49-54.
- [2] B. Q. Zheng: Space: A Keyword in Critical Theory, *Foreign Literature*, (2016) No.1 , p. 89-97.
- [3] K. J. Wetmore Jr, A. S. Howard: *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook* (Taylor & Francis Group, the U.S.A. 2007).
- [4] D. Sun, M. W. L. Chan: On the Idea of "Presence" in Contemporary Theater, *Foreign Literature Studies*, (2010) No.5 , 145-153.
- [5] R. S. Hu: The Chronotope of Drama, *Drama (The Journal of the Central Academy of Drama)*, (1999) No.4, p. 4-13.
- [6] S. L. Parks: *Topdog / Underdog* (Theater Communication Groups, the United States 2002).
- [7] A. M. Chen: Incongruous Urban Landscapes: On the Space Construction of A Streetcar Named Desire, *Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, (2018) No.4, p. 128-134.
- [8] A. Ubersfeld: *Reading Theater* (trans.by F,Collins, University of Toronto Press 1999) A.M. Chen: Incongruous Urban Landscapes: On the Space Construction of A Streetcar Named Desire, *Journal of Nanjing Normal University(Social Science Edition)*, (2018) No.4 , p. 128-134.
- [9] Z. W. Li: Soliloquy in Drama, *Drama(The Journal of the Central Academy of Drama)*, (2011) No.3 , p. 61-70.
- [10] G. Sun: On Defamiliarization in Parks's Play *Topdog/Underdog*, *Foreign Language Education*, Vol.37 (2016) No.5 , p. 89-97.
- [11] J. S. Aristotle : *Aristotle Poetics* (Focus Publishing/ R. Pullins Company, the United States 2006).
- [12] M. Mckinnie: *City Stages: Theater and Urban Space in a Global* (University of Toronto Press, Canada 2007).
- [13] H. Lefebvre: *The Production of Space* (Shanghai Education, China 2003).