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Withstanding Reality:

Self-conscious Dramatization in Tennessee Williams' *The Two-Character Play*

Haruka Murakami

Although the responses from critiques were not good, *The Two-Character Play* was one of Tennessee Williams' most favorite plays, ranking alongside his early successes, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.¹ It was revised and rewritten several times after it was first produced in the 1960s, including a temporal title change to *Out Cry*. In an interview on *Out Cry*, Williams has explained about his play as below:

Williams: I think it's my best play since *Streetcar Named Desire*. But they (critics) don't understand it, but they will one day.

Int.: What does it have that your other plays do not? What's so great about it?

Williams: It's a very personal play. It's my own human outcry. The style is different too. (Brown 255; underline mine)

As for the reason why he called this play "personal" and his "own human outcry," we must consider the period he was working on it: the so-called "stoned age." Frank Merlo, Williams' partner for 15 years, passed away after suffering from cancer; Williams was lost in alcohol and drugs in the 1960s. Maureen Stapleton explained how Williams was at that time:

“He just didn’t have an armor for the criticism offered to his plays in the 1960s,” according to Maureen Stapleton. “There was no life for him but his writing,” and when he thought his writing failed, he thought it was the beginning of the end.” (Spoto 257; underline mine)

For Williams, writing had been a way to cope with reality ever since his childhood. The inseparability of writing and life is reflected in *The Two-Character Play*, where Felice appears as a playwright/actor and Clare as an actress. In addition, the play is set in a theater. Lionel Abel has called metaplay a “necessary form for dramatizing characters who, having full self-consciousness, cannot but participate in their own dramatization” (Abel 78). Felice and Clare are creating the play-within-the-play, which is also titled “The Two-Character Play,” which they are acting out at the same time. *The Two-Character Play* deals with playwriting and performing, showing Williams’ own thoughts and emotional turmoil towards his writing.

Williams explains that Felice and Clare are two sides of one person (Spoto 267), which leads to an idea that they represent two facets of the writer himself. Moreover, since the characters are siblings who are so close to each other that they are almost incestuous, critics tend to see Williams and his sister Rose through them. Just like the real brother and sister, Felice and Clare represent an inseparable pair.

In *The Two-Character Play*, Felice and Clare play roles “Felice” and “Clare,” the two characters in “The Two-Character Play.” Since the titles of both the frame play and the inner play are the same, and the characters’ names are also the same in both of them, the border between the reality-within-the-play and the play-within-the-play seems to blur. With a focus on the relation between the play-within-the-play and the frame play, and on the phrases “getting lost in the play” and “being confined” repeated by Felice and Clare, this paper examines how the two charac-

ters are isolated from the outer world both in the frame play and in the play-within-the-play.

The Insane Brother and Sister – A Confinement to “the House”

The settings for the frame play (which is reality for the actor/playwright Felice and the actress Clare) and the play-within-the-play are as below.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Before and after the performance: an evening in an unspecified locality.

During the performance: a nice afternoon in a Southern town called New Bethesda. (2CP 307)

The frame play is set in an isolated theater situated in some cold and unknown place. Other members of the company have abandoned Felice and Clare. One reason for this abandonment is financial difficulties resulting in unpaid salaries. However, the company members have sent Felice a telegram saying that “Your sister and you are – *insane!*” (2CP 321; emphasis original). This shows the distressing situation the brother and the sister are in.

This situation forms a parallel to the situation in the play-within-the-play: Felice and Clare in “The Two-Character Play” are also seen as insane brother and sister. Their father who was an astrologer shot his wife and killed himself with the same revolver. After this horrible incident, Felice and Clare have become afraid of how people see them and therefore have refused to come out of the house.

As I mentioned in the introduction, “being confined” is a key element of *The Two-Character Play*. Felice and Clare talk repeatedly about being locked in closed wards of an asylum in the play-within-the-play. Just before the first act ends, when Felice says the word “confined,” Clare reacts violently and says that

the word is prohibited. Though they are not in the closed wards, the brother and sister of “The Two-Character Play” are still confined in the house they occupy.

The characters in the inner play are confined in their family home, just as the actors Felice and Clare are confined in the theater. The characters in the inner play are isolated from the community in which they live, partly because of their eccentric behavior, but primarily because their father, who was mentally disturbed, killed his wife and himself and left his children to bear the burden of his act. (O’Conner 93)

As Jacqueline O’Conner mentions above, Williams wrote about people who had horrible experiences and talked about them honestly, seen as insane and isolated from their surroundings. An example of this pattern is Catharine in *Suddenly Last Summer*, who explains about the cannibalistic death of her cousin Sebastian. The more she talks, the more her aunt Mrs. Venable rages, claiming for Catharine’s lobotomy. The difference between Catharine and the siblings is that, to escape from their desperate situation, Felice and Clare plan to lie about what they witnessed. However, their plan is never executed. Felice and Clare are so afraid of being put into an asylum that they cannot call for help, finally ending up psychologically confined in their house.

In the ending of the frame play, Felice and Clare get locked up in the theater, unable to escape from there. Again, this shows the parallel between the frame play and the inner play.

The Incomplete Set – Restraints of the Theater

Felice and Clare’s inescapable situation is also indicated by several restraints they face when they perform “The Two-Character Play.” Some stage props are

missing and the stage set and costumes are incomplete. As a result, Felice and Clare have no option but to do without them. By using imagination and explanation, they perform the play-within-the-play on the incomplete set.

When Felice turns on the lights for the stage of the inner play, Clare notices at once that the stairs leading to the second floor are missing steps. This means that they will not be able to go to the room on the upper floor, which is a part of the inner play. Hearing the sister's complaint, Felice insists that they can just narrate that they climb the steps and go upstairs.

When they actually reach this scene, Clare does as she was told: explains how she has gone upstairs to get her things. One thing to notice here is that it is not only Clare who narrates her movements: Felice also explains what he is doing and thinking, almost like reading stage directions written in the first person.

CLARE: I'm just – just going upstairs to fetch you fair-weather jacket and a tie to go with it. [*She turns upstage.*] Oh, but no stairs on the set!

FELICE: The set's incomplete.

CLARE: I know, I know, you told me. [*She faces upstage.*] I have gone upstairs and you are alone in the parlor.

FELICE: Yes, I am alone in the parlor with the front door open. – I hear voices from the street, the calls and laughter of demons. “Loonies, loonies, loonies, *loooo-nies!*” – I – shut the door, remembering what I'd said.

(2CP 348)

Lines like these appear several times after this scene. In the scenes where Felice mentions the sunflowers in front of the house and the soap bubbles, the lines are obviously addressed towards the audience directly. In both lines, Felice asks the audience to use their imagination in order to overcome the realistic limitations of the theater.

FELICE: [. . .] The audience is supposed to imagine that the front of the house, where I am standing now, is shielded by sunflowers, too, but that was impractical as it would cut off the view. (2CP 353)

FELICE: [. . .] I pick up my spool and dip it in the water and blow a soap bubble out the parlor window without the slightest concern about what neighbors may think. Of course, sometimes the soap bubble bursts before it rises, but this time please imagine you see it rising through gold light, above the sunflower heads. (2CP 356)

The scene of the missing stairs mentioned above and these scenes of the sunflowers and the soap bubbles all imply the limits of spatial expansion. The missing stairs indicate the inability of Felice and Clare in “The Two-Character Play” to exit the room, even to the upper floor. Sunflowers cannot be put on stage for it will obstruct the view, making us remember that the two characters are nowhere but on stage, unable to go elsewhere. Moreover, for the characters in the inner play, the sunflowers function as the borderline between their house and the outer world. It is both a barricade and a wall that keep them inside. Felice’s insistence that they should be imagined emphasizes his detachment from the outside community. At the level of the play-within-the-play, the soap bubbles indicate the siblings’ psychological state in which they confine themselves to the house. The bubbles are blown when the two notice that their phone is dead and decide to call out to a neighbor from the window, but finally lack courage and fail to do so. Felice in “The Two-Character Play” calls this act “a sign of surrender, and we know it” (2CP 355). This obviously shows that their voice will not reach the outer world and that they now have lost the will to try it. They have noticed that even the soap bubbles they blow will not reach anyone. Felice and Clare in “The Two-Character Play” are not locked or confined. If they wish, they can come out.

However, they are stuck in there due to the fear of being seen as insane. The bursting bubbles show the lack of their will to leave the house.

Declaring these situations to the audience reveals that the play consisting of the inner and the frame play is merely a play, a piece of fiction. In the next chapter, we will consider this disclosure.

Self-conscious Acting and Getting Lost in the Play

Felice's lines work as explanations and stage directions. It clearly show that the two characters are conscious of the restrictions of the reality-within-the-play, performing the play-within-the-play under them. This means that they are conscious of playing the role of "Felice" and "Clare." Obviously metatheatrical, this situation seems to collide with the idea of "getting lost in the play."

In the play, Felice repeatedly emphasizes the importance of getting lost in the play. Just before the performance of the inner play begins, he stops Clare from peeking through the imaginary curtain to see the audience who comes for "The Two-Character Play."

FELICE [*seizing her wrist*]: You will not, you must never look at an audience before a performance. It makes you play self-consciously, you don't get lost in the play. (2CP 317; underline mine)

Felice insists that if you see the audience before the performance, the acting will become self-conscious and you will not be able to get lost in the play. It is as if Felice and Clare as actors were asked to forget that they are performing and to "become" Felice and Clare who live in "The Two-Character Play."

Nevertheless, the two do not forget that they are "playing the roles" of the desperate brother and sister. The lines I mentioned in the last chapter all appear in

the second act, but the inner play was already interrupted by the frame play in the first act, making the border between reality and fiction blur. Before the imaginary curtain of the inner play is raised, Clare claims that she will not participate in the performance unless cuts are made in the original “The Two-Character Play” which Felice has written. When her claim is rejected by her brother, she declares:

CLARE: I’m not going to be given cuts, I’m going to make them myself.
Now can you hear this C-sharp on the piano? [*She strikes a note on the piano.*] Whenever you hear this C-sharp struck on the piano it means a cut’s coming at you, and don’t you try to duck it or I’ll take a walk.

(2CP 323-4)

Saying this, Clare strikes the key and glares at Felice. Felice responds by shutting the lid of the piano. When Felice says the word “confined,” Clare runs to the piano and strikes the key fiercely. Since it is already said that striking C-sharp is an interference with the play by Clare, these actions are obviously done by the actress, not by the character of the inner play. Likewise, Felice is reacting to his sister as an actor, or to be more exact, as the author of “The Two-Character Play” instead of the character in it.

Since the characters in both the frame play and the play-within-the-play share their names and relationships, it seems as if the reality-within-the-play could be easily disturbed and absorbed into the inner play. In fact, the opposite seems to occur: the play-within-the-play never becomes anything more than “a play within the frame play” and the brother and sister never forget that they are performing it. Does this not mean that they will never “get lost” in the play?

However, when “The Two-Character Play” is forced to end due to the departure of all the audience, Felice says that he did not notice because he was lost in the play. In the next chapter, we will see what Felice means when he says “get-

ting lost in the play” and consider his, or their, playwriting.

Playwriting as Improvisation – Dramatizing Reality

When Clare notices that all the audience members have left, Felice seems stunned, saying “I was lost in the play” (2CP 357). Clare says that they could hear them standing, but Felice insists that he hears nothing when he is lost in the play. Just as he said to her before the performance, he was not conscious of the audience and was absorbed in the play.

However, this scene comes right after the scene of the soap bubbles. There, Felice obviously recognizes the audience and speaks directly to them, asking them to use their imagination. How could he recognize the audience, be conscious of performing, and get lost in the play all at the same time?

Annette J. Saddik focuses on how the phrase “lost in the play” occurs several times in the play and writes about this “lost.”

There are several references in *The Two-Character Play* to being “lost in the play” (5:317, 318, 367), a phrase which draws attention to the use of both “play” and “lost” as central puns. The characters must lose themselves both in the act of performance – the play – and in the linguistic play that saves them from the silence they fear. Moreover, they are “lost” not only in the sense that they are totally absorbed in their activity, but also in the sense that they are dislocated, disoriented, unsure of their whereabouts.

(Saddik 98; underline mine)

As Saddik argues, “lost” could mean not only being absorbing but also being dislocated and wandering. Felice and Clare do not know where they are (in the dimension of the frame play) and have lost their place in society (both in the frame

play and the inner play). Still, Felice's line is "lost *in the play*" (emphasis added) and even if we were to take it as being dislocated, we must consider how the siblings are lost in the theatrical work. In addition, since this line is said by Felice in the frame play, it should be taken as the words of an actor/playwright.

To get lost in the play so that he will even forget the audience and to explain the scenes directly to the audience: if these two situations can take place at the same time without contradicting each other, it is only when Felice stands there not as a character or actor but as a playwright who is showing his playwriting to the audience. When the frame play begins, Felice has a scratch pad with him, writing and reading notes for a monologue.

He draws a piano stool into the light, sits down to make notes for a monologue on a scratch pad.

FELICE [*slowly, reflectively, writing*]: To play with fear is to play with fire.
(2CP 309)

Moreover, though it is eliminated from the 1975 version of *The Two-Character Play*, in the beginning of *Out Cry* which was published in 1973, Felice again has a scratch pad and a pencil and says the lines below before the inner play begins.

FELICE: [. . .] (*He draws a deep breath to compose himself.*) Act One,
Scene One. At rise of curtain I am discovered on stage alone, yes, necessarily alone since she never enters on the cue and never in a condition that I can predict anymore.
(*Out Cry* 775-6)

When Felice is saying this, he is still in the dimension of the frame play and the curtain for "The Two-Character Play" has not been raised. This means that he is talking to the real life audience. These lines which start *Out Cry* are quite similar

to the ones Felice says in “The Two-Character Play,” considering how he explains the situation in the first person. What could be drawn from this fact is that these lines are neither spoken by the character of the inner play nor by the actor, but by the playwright Felice, writing the play as he performs it.

Another fact that supports this is that when Clare is getting ready for the second performance of “The Two-Character Play,” she puts the telegram from the company members on the sofa. When they commence the first performance of “The Two-Character Play,” the telegram is crumpled and thrown out of the set of the inner play.

CLARE [*in a loud stage whisper*]: The cablegram is still on the set.

FELICE: Clare, there wasn’t, there isn’t a cable gram in *The Two-Character Play*.

CLARE: Then take it off the sofa where I can see it. When you see a thing, you can’t think it doesn’t exist, unless you’re hallucinating and you know that you are.

[*He picks up the cablegram, crumples it, and makes a gesture of throwing it out the window.*]

FELICE: There now, it never existed, it was just a moment of panic.

(2CP 329)

Since the telegram does not exist in “The Two-Character Play,” it seems as if it interfered with the border between the frame play and the inner play like Clare’s persistent cut demands. However, in the second performance, Clare chooses to put the telegram on the sofa, just like it accidentally was in the first performance. Felicia Hardison Londré explains:

In *The Two-Character Play* the sequences builds more dramatically [than *Out Cry*] to the telegram as a stunning metatheatrical touch that suddenly rattles every convention we had bought into about the play's level of reality.

(Londré 101)

Since Felice always declares the commencement of the performance of “The Two-Character Play,” the audience in reality (who came to see *The Two-Character Play*) should have been sure from where to where is the inner play and from where to where is the frame play. However, the way Clare handles the telegram shows that this object that is supposed to exist only in the frame play now is included in the inner play. This disturbance of reality and fiction puts the audience into confusion. It may be one of the reasons why *The Two-Character Play* did not become popular in spite of Williams’ devotion. Under these circumstances, we will never be sure if the demands Clare makes and the quarrels due to it in the “The Two-Character Play” are really a part of the reality-within-the-play obstructing the inner play or a part of the inner play itself. The only thing we know for sure is that Felice and Clare are dramatizing their real selves and putting them in “The Two-Character Play.”

Although the author of “The Two-Character Play” is Felice, Clare declares that she also has a right to make cuts and that tonight’s performance will be a collaboration with her (2CP 324). Though it is true that it is mainly Felice’s role to use words to give lines like stage directions, Clare too takes the circumstances of the reality-within-the-play and dramatizes it, putting it in the play-within-the-play. For both Felice and Clare, to perform the play-within-the-play and to dramatize the reality-within-the-play are inseparable. Confronted by the realistic restraints, the two keep improvising during the performance. They are dramatizing what is happening in the frame play as they play the inner play: in other words, they are “lost” in the act of making and acting “The Two-Character Play.”

Self-confinement to the Theater

The improvised dramatization of the reality-within-the-play brings forth an ambiguous space which is both real and fictional. *The Two-Character Play* seems to consist of the dimension of the frame play—reality—and the inner play—fiction, but since the two characters’ performance itself is an act in reality, the border between the dimensions stays blurred. Taking this into consideration, this chapter will focus on the ending of *The Two-Character Play*.

When “The Two-Character Play” ends due to the audience’s departure, Felice and Clare suddenly notice how cold and dark the theater is. Realizing that they are locked in and that the phone is dead (just like in the inner play), the two choose to perform “The Two-Character Play” again, which is set in a warm summer day, in order to prevent themselves from freezing.

In the second performance, the revolver that killed their parents is put within reach, and right from the beginning, the lines have a stage direction saying “*very fast*” (2CP 368). The very fast lines are those that all appeared in the first performance. After several speedy exchanges, Clare asks her brother if he is lost in the play. Though the situation is obviously unnatural, Clare feels that Felice may be lost in the play and Felice replies that he is. Generally speaking, no one can declare that he is lost in a play when he really is. Still, if Felice is getting lost in both playwriting and performing at the same time, Felice’s declaration turns into an announcement that he is ready to improvise the following scenes. In fact, the second performance begins to branch off from the first one as their exchanges regain its normal pace. Felice looks out from the window, gazing at the sunflowers as Clare aims the revolver at him. When she fails to shoot him, Felice tries to shoot her but this ends in failure as well.

Felice and Clare are locked in the theater and to escape from there means to

escape from reality: in other words, to choose death. However, when they refer to confinement, they mention separation. Their fear of being confined is linked with the fear of being separated and alone.

Just before the first performance ends, Clare says:

CLARE: [. . .] Oh, what a long, long way we've traveled together, too long, now, for separation. Yes, all the way back to sunflowers and soap bubbles, and there's no turning back on the road even if the road's backward [. . .].
(2CP 357)

The inseparable brother and sister now reach their final play, "The Two-Character Play." Sunflowers and soap bubbles represent their impossible situation, but it also shows they will keep on dramatizing whatever realistic state they are put in. So long as this play is titled "The Two-Character Play," the two characters must stay together: if one dies before the other, the play will not hold.

The second performance has no audience: it is just for themselves. It is their means to endure the cold and darkness. Felice and Clare say that the theater is a prison for actors and playwrights (2CP 364). And as they say so, they try to maintain the function of this closed house as a place for performance, so it will not become merely an extreme environment that continues from outside. Felice and Clare confine themselves to the self-conscious act of improvising the play-within-the-play in order to withstand the severe reality surrounding them.

Conclusion

Williams explains about the stage set for the frame play as below:

It must not only suggest the disordered images of a mind approaching col-

lapse but also, correspondingly, the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in at present, not just the subjective but the true world with all its dismaying shapes and shadows . . . (2CP 308)

The situation surrounding Felice and Clare is no doubt a nightmare, and they struggle to take a run away by keeping themselves inside the world of the play-within-the-play. Still, they are conscious of dramatizing the reality around them, so they are not taken in the fiction, but are living the life of actors and playwrights.

About the scattered set of the frame play, Keiko Furuki points out that:

Nevertheless, the ambiguous setting of this play clarifies Williams's attempt to produce the artist's interior on the exterior stage. In other words, the ostensibly private dramatization, paradoxically, reflects the playwright's intention to stage the private world of the artists to the public. (Furuki 101)

The Two-Character Play is a play that Williams revised again and again during "the stoned age." How Felice and Clare never stopped playwriting and performing despite the extreme circumstances reflects the state Williams was in when he was writing this play. As Ruby Cohn insists, "[a]s in no other Williams play – early or late – *Out Cry* dramatizes the theatre as theatre" (Cohn 238). This shows Williams' own obsession with and reliance on writing to save him in a desperate situation.

C. W. E. Bigsby notes that "[a]t least to act is to convince yourself that you are still alive; to write is to resist a blankness which is no longer that of possibility, but that of nullity" (Bigsby 64-5). For people involved in theater, acting and playwriting are the means to elude nothingness and death. By confining themselves to the world of theater, Felice, Clare, and Williams tried to survive the im-

possible reality they live in.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was orally presented at the 57th Annual General Meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan, held at Jissen Women's University, on October 6th, 2018.

- 1 In this paper, I use the final version of *The Two-Character Play* which was published in 1975.

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