Urban Drama
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The Metropolis in Contemporary North American Plays

J. Chris Westgate
For my wife, Sarah, and our beautiful son, Will
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In the title of this book is a double subject. On the one hand “urban drama” refers to the crises of urbanism—homelessness, rioting, gentrification, et cetera—that were unfolding in cities during the 1980s and 1990s. Of course, such crises had occurred in previous decades, especially the 1930s and 1940s, and the 1960s and 1970s. What was different about the period considered in this book is that 1980 was the year that Ted Turner launched Cable News Network (CNN), a business venture that not only changed the landscape of network and cable news but additionally changed the way that news covered the urban landscape of cities. Homelessness has been a problem in various decades, but the media’s coverage of homelessness made a profound leap forward with the advent of 24 hour news, probably as big a leap as the introduction of photography into newspapers that facilitated the work of Jacob Riis a century earlier. A better example, though, may be the rioting that took place in Los Angeles in 1992 after the acquittal of the four police officers who were caught on tape assaulting Rodney King. As the rioting played out in the streets of Los Angeles, it simultaneously played out in the living rooms of people all across the country. The relationship, epistemologically, of viewer to riot and of viewer to city was changed radically and, no doubt, irrevocably by images of the rioting playing out live.

With this new access to dramatic conflicts of urbanism came, critical geographers have argued, new understanding of the roles played by spatiality, here, the roles of urban spatiality. That is, changes to the media precipitated changes in epistemology that would inform most, if not all, of U.S. culture. Interestingly, a number of playwrights seemed to be at the forefront of this change, as many plays responded not just to the crises of urbanism of these decades but to the implications of those crises. This leads to the second way of reading “urban drama”: as the ways that dramatists writing during these decades made these concerns—political, cultural, and epistemological—part of their dramaturgy. In many cases, the link between dramatic event and dramatic representation was direct, such as Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight Los
Angeles, 1992, which she composed and performed in response to the afore-
mentioned rioting in Los Angeles, or José Rivera’s Marisol, which was written,
largely, in response to Mayor Ed Koch’s campaign against the homeless of
New York City in the 1980s. In other cases, the link is less direct but still
evident, as with Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, which addresses a num-
ber of themes about America, homosexuality, and history but which is deeply
concerned with the ideological mapping of urban spaces by conservatism,
or with Cherrie Moraga’s Giving Up the Ghost, which addresses various con-
cerns about immigration, nationalism, and sexuality but which locates those
concerns in the ethnical and racialized fault lines of Los Angeles in the 1980s.

The purpose of this book is to investigate this convergence of subjects,
with particular emphasis on how the dramas written in response to urban
crises experimented with aspects of form in order to advance the epistemo-
logical change described by critical geographers. That is, to consider how
the plays deliberately spatialize concerns of identity politics and social jus-
tice that have been debated for decades and what this spatialization adds
to these debates. Obviously, this study builds on the “spatial turn” of the-
ater and drama criticism that began with the work of Marvin Carlson,
Stanton Garner Jr., and Una Chaudhuri. While I could not have developed
this argument without standing on these considerable shoulders, I also offer
refinements of this “spatial turn” through rigorous investigation of contex-
tualization and through case studies, along the lines of Michael McKinnie’s
City Stages. The hope is that this book will amend some of the limitations
of earlier theorizing of theater, drama, and spatiality and, therefore, open up
new lines of discussion for drama and theater, now and in the future.
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