

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

MORNING'S AT SEVEN



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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Doctor in the House Seat: Psychoanalysis at the Theater* by Jill Savege Scharff and David E. Scharff

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Morning's at Seven

Paul Osborn (1901-1988)

Premiere: Longacre Theatre,

New York, 1939

Lyceum Theatre, New York, 2002

Jill Savege Scharff

Morning's at Seven by Paul Osborn (1901-1988) brings us into the lives of an extended family in the 1920s in small town America. It is light comedy, but with a surprisingly strong emotional pull. The play opens with a small town setting for two adjoining houses owned by two sisters and their husbands. Cora Gibbs, now Swanson, lives in one house with her husband Theodore (Thor) and her unmarried sister Aaronetta (Aary) Gibbs. Next door, lives their sister Ida with her husband Carl Bolton and their son Homer who

can't get around to marrying his girlfriend Myrtle. The sisters are in and out of one another's houses and full participants in one another's lives. Esther (Esty) the older sister, lives up the road with her husband David Crampton, the intellectual, who keeps himself apart from the family dynamics and has recently forbidden Esther to hang out with her sisters. Finding out that she is seeing them against his wishes, he insists on an in-house separation.

The effect of the stranger

When a stranger enters in the form of Homer's girlfriend, anxiety about her arrival forces many family conflicts to the surface. The women are excited that Homer is bringing his girlfriend of eleven years to meet the family at last. The appearance of the young woman in their midst heralds change, revives the impact of a sexual choice made in Aary's youth, and pushes Carl now in his late 60s to re-evaluate the meaning of his life and the choices he made at her age.

Carl's anxiety and its meaning

In the case of Carl, Homer's father, excitement has spilled over into anxiety that has him in a state of tormented questioning of his choices and his identity that frightens his relatives and leads him to delay meeting the girlfriend. They all know about his anxiety, but they don't want to know what

it is about and dismiss it by calling it “his spells.” Carl experiences his angst in four ways: he leans his head against a tree, speaks of returning to the fork of the road, wishes he were a dentist, and asks repeatedly, ‘Where am I?’ None of the family members can comprehend what is bothering him. They simply feel socially embarrassed by his having “one of his spells.”

To me, it seems that Carl is the only one who tries to express his conflict. I might say that he is the one who communicates with his unconscious. The rest of the group lives the unexamined life, and he seems to me to suffer on their behalf. Carl does not have the language in which to subject his experiences to process and review, and the family members closest to him do not know how to listen to him. It is interesting to speculate on what Carl’s symptoms are trying to communicate to his family and to Carl himself. Wishing to have trained as a dentist might reflect a wish to have a higher social status and make more money for his family, or it might represent a fantasy of being able to locate and get rid of decay, or a fantasy that he could have saved his own teeth and would have one less problem of aging. At a deeper level he might think of a dentist as a powerful person who has the authority to inflict pain and inspire fear.

Returning to the fork in the road refers to a wish to re-evaluate his choices. Asking, ‘Where am I?’ infers that he feels lost and needs to re-orient himself. Resting his head on the trunk of a tree is a much more unusual

symptom. Does it speak of despair, of exhaustion, of a wish to reconnect to nature? I think I have found the answer in another of Osborn's writings, *On Borrowed Time*, in which an old man keeps Death at bay by trapping him up a tree. Is that what Carl is doing? Aging is not bringing serenity or self acceptance. His son may marry and leave the home. The life cycle is moving on. Carl's head is not able to think and express all this. In body and emotional state of mind, does he sense the threat of death coming towards him? Is he holding death up the tree by the force of his head to keep it away from him and his family?

Masculine protest to the matriarchy

Unable to connect fully with the deeper aspects of Carl, Ida has become overly close to Homer. Homer is unable to find the words or the energy to marry his new girlfriend. I see the husbands as the supporting characters in a matriarchy. They get absorbed in the gossip and the family dynamics and now that they are retired they do not have the excuse of work to get away. It's a claustrophobic set-up for a man, and leads to masculine protest in various forms: in having "spells," having a fling with his wife's sister, and getting a girlfriend pregnant before marriage.

The focus on Homer

Homer's aunts and uncles are as focused on him as his own parents are. They all look to him to stay with them and keep them company. At the same time they all know that he should be getting married. His parents have even built a house for him. He represents the future, the hope for the next generation, but the family dynamic keeps him in place with them in the present.

Male companionship as healing force

Only David can talk with Carl about his anxiety, and even though David remains highly intellectual and cannot solve his own problem of having to control his wife, he can connect with Carl. The two men amaze their wives by moving in together. Their "guy time" helps both of them. Soon both men are able to reconcile with their wives and life goes on as usual. When the secret of Aary's love for Thor and their fling during her adolescence comes out, she leaves the Swanson residence, only to move next door to live with Ida and Carl. This frees Homer to get married and live in his own home, because Ida will have her sister at hand instead.

The family secret as power

The secret about Aary's temporary liaison with Thor, which was kept from Cora all those years, gave Aary leverage. The threat of revealing the

truth and its probable effect on Thor and Cora gave her a trump card, small recompense for the helplessness and deprivation of her situation. When we realize that living at Ida's becomes her only alternative, we feel sad for her lack of choices. We realize the desperation and helplessness of a woman living at a time when her identity depended on her marriage to a man. At the same time the play persuades us to feel relieved that the family will stay together, that God will be in his heaven and everything will be all right with the world.

Women's attitudes to men

The sisters appear to run around after their husbands, fretting over their various idiosyncrasies, protecting them from public embarrassment, and keeping up a fiction of men as powerful. But the sisters as a tight-knit foursome have the real power and fill the emotional centre of the play. They respect the men's right to be in charge of real estate transactions, financial matters, and philosophical thinking but they trivialize their emotional issues. Carl is troubled and inarticulate, David is articulate but lacking in feeling and family loyalty, Thor is hospitable to the sisters but unfaithful with one of them, and Homer is so tied to his mother's apron strings that he can't leave home and take possession of his bride and his own home. The sisters' husbands may take center stage at times as their issues come to the fore, but in general they are secondary to the sisters' closeness, and are dominated by the sisters' style of living in and out of one another's homes.

Lasting effect of childhood attributes

In childhood the girls had been given their attributes by their father: Esther (smartest), Cora (mildest), Ida (slowest), and Aaronetta (wildest). Esther, the cleverest, is married to the professor but her own intellect is overshadowed by his and she is not smart enough to set her own course. His scholarly reclusiveness prevents her from visiting her sisters where she would enjoy the authority of the eldest. She is dominated by her husband's restrictions on her life with her family as surely as she is destined by her birth order to be the one who thinks she knows everything. Ida, the slowest, is unable to relate to her husband's existential anxiety, and her fears of being alone hold her son to her even while she tells him to get married. Cora, the mildest, puts up with the presence of her maiden sister for years and seems not to know about the secret at the heart of their threesome. Aary, the wildest, who set a fire in their midst has no other hearth than that of one of her sisters.

Contrast to post modern drama

Paul Osborn was born in Evansville Indiana, studied English at Michigan and playwriting at Yale, and went on to write many plays and screenplays including *East of Eden* (1955) and *Sayonara* (1957) for which he received Oscar nominations. He worked in menial jobs, and like Carl Bolton, he questioned his choices and his talent. At his own fork in the road, Osborn

chose between boredom of steady jobs and the excitement of the tenuous existence of writing for the stage. He lived with the uncertainty of whether that choice meant that he was an honest writer or a dilettante. In *Morning's at Seven* he goes back to the ordinary life that he left behind, and in its boredom he finds humor and pathos. He married the actress Millicent Green in 1939 when he was 38 years of age, almost as old as his time-expired bachelor character, Homer – an inspired choice of name for a man who cannot leave his family home and cannot inhabit his own. Osborn was suspicious of success, since a hit was often followed by a flop, and elation by let-down, and even when he was successful in writing movie scripts in his later years, he found “no serenity in getting older.”

Osborn had introduced the theme of love lost in *The Vinegar Tree* and showed how re-finding it could turn one's assumptions about life upside down. He dealt with the topic of love betrayed in terms of the life situation of Thor in *Morning's at Seven*. He returned to the topic again in *The Homecoming* (1948) in which a doctor who enlists in the Army falls in love with a nurse, and is guilty about being unfaithful to his wife back home.

By chance, when I was thinking about *Morning's at Seven*, I happened to read *The Homecoming* by Harold Pinter. In Pinter's *The Homecoming*, four men express their crudeness and brutality toward one another and toward women as sexual objects, even referring to their late wife/mother as a whore

and a bitch. One of the men makes a sexual advance to his older brother's wife as if this is perfectly acceptable. Pinter's *The Homecoming* epitomizes all that is wrong with patriarchy. Aggression, competition, contempt for intellect, and hatred of success abound, and there is really no resolution. The only solution for the characters is total identification with the depravity or physical departure from the scene and emotional cut-off. The atmosphere in Pinter's play could not be more different from the nostalgic quaintness of *Morning's at Seven*.

In contrast to *Morning's at Seven*, which is centered on four women in small town America, Pinter's *The Homecoming*, is centered on four men, a father, his brother, and the father's two sons living together in lower class, sleazy circumstances in the 1960s period of anger and unrest in Britain. The four male family members hate one another. In *Morning's at Seven*, the women may quarrel but basically they have secure attachments. They love one another. The gritty Pinter play shows only the worst effects of a vertical patriarchal culture. The nostalgic Osborn play shows the strengths and weaknesses of a horizontal matriarchal culture.

In contrast to Pinter's bold portrayal of the chaos, disconnection, and nastiness of family life in *The Homecoming*, in *Morning's at Seven* Osborn provides a loving family picture full of quirks and quibbles, but basically caring, and a regularly predictable pattern of existence with little ripples.

Where Pinter's is a loud shout and a curse, Osborn's is a quiet chat and a hug. Osborn gently confronts and modifies the undercurrents of tension in the extended family. The rocking of the family boat is extremely gentle, amusing, and touching. Watching Pinter's play, you may feel gripped by the raw emotion and crude thinking, but you tend to recoil from the horror of it. In *Morning's at Seven*, you have a much easier, more pleasant experience. It's easy to recognize yourself and your family relationships, suffer with them, laugh at them, and learn from them.

Resolution

Cora becomes positively nasty in her new found assertiveness and fights to have her husband to herself. Aary accepts the constraints of reality and leaves the Swansons to be a couple without her. Ida lets her son go, but only because she can accept her sister as a replacement child. Estee gets her husband back without really having to do anything. You get the sense that David will continue to retreat to his books and try to pry his wife away from her sisters, that Carl will continue to have his spells and no-one will understand them emotionally, and who knows how Thor and Cora will do without Aary as the thorn, the guilty secret, the child they never had. The family has its problems with dependency, but the supportive network is reassuring and resilient, conflicts blow over, and the relationships endure.