

Review of Distinguished Professor Annette Saddik’s presentation “Clowning Around?: Reimagining Political Transformation in Late Twentieth-Century Grotesque Theatre”

On November 18th, 2021, Distinguished Professor Annette Saddik gave a brilliant, engaging talk entitled “Clowning Around?: Reimagining Political Transformation in Late Twentieth-Century Grotesque Theatre” for the NYCCT Humanities’ Department’s *Works in the Works* series. Professor Saddik is a renowned scholar of theatre and literature focusing on Tennessee Williams’ later plays (which she feels received neither the popular nor the critical acclaim they deserve) and what she has termed the “theatre of excess.” In this absorbing presentation, Professor Saddik transitioned from Tennessee Williams to her current book on international grotesque theatre. Her lecture focused on clowns, Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro’s *Siamese Twins*, and the role of grotesque theatre in opposing political dictatorships.

First, Professor Saddik established the trope of the clown as a character both funny and horrific, creating “disorientation and confusion” in an audience. She drew on theory from Mann, Wall, Lecoq, Aristotle, and others, and used Alex de la Inglesia’s film *Balada Triste de Trompeta* (English title *The Last Circus*) to support her claims that the clown is the ultimate subversive figure—transgressing social norms, bodily constraints, and political expectations. Next, she introduced grotesque theatre as a genre beginning in 1916 with Italian playwright Luigi Chiarelli in response to WWI, and then described the transition to absurdism during and after the atrocities of WWII, and the subsequent return to the grotesque in the 1960s during the aftermath of the two world wars. What separates the absurd from the grotesque, in her view, is absurdism’s minimal setting, lack of particularized locale, indeterminant time, lack of overt emotion, and acceptance of futility (*Waiting for Godot* is a prime example). By contrast, theatre of the grotesque embraces a particular socio-political place and time, bodies unbounded, and bodily fluids escaping in a way marked by excess (engendering horror and disgust). This destabilization of social order and overt failure of the rational opens the possibility for political transformation. From here, Professor Saddik brought in Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro’s *Siamese Twins* (written 1965, first produced 1967). This play ultimately explores the hypocrisy of re-establishing Western Christian values (while actually erasing the individual and destabilizing the economy) during the violence and military coups that would eventually become Argentina’s “Dirty War.” The play doesn’t contain literal Siamese twins but clown-brothers with a destructive, symbiotic relationship emblematic of the interdependency of oppressed and oppressor. At the end of the play and after one brother has killed the other, there is only the smile of the deceased brother remaining. As the living brother weeps and laments the loss of this brother, he suddenly sees that the smile is empty, false, and hypocritical. Professor Saddik says, this lack of cohesion, sincerity, received convention, and stability allows for redefinition and the possibility of renewal. Thus, grotesque theatre, where the entire world of the play is the world of the clown is, innately and inevitably, a political theatre. Finally, Professor Saddik argued that trope of the clown applies to the 21st century as well; we are emerging from the pandemic with many plays about clowns.

Questions from the audience after the presentation ranged from tying in Julie Taymor’s *Titus Andronicus*, to the film *The Joker*, TV show *Will and Grace*, playwright Branden Jacobs Jenkins’s play *Neighbors*, TV show *Family Guy*, Jeremy O. Harris’s play *Slave Play*, Jacobean theatre, and audience reception. This thought-provoking and rigorous presentation left us all with many connections to ponder.

--Sarah Ann Standing