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### Paula Vogel's Christmas Plays

**"I don't think there's a neat demarcation, politically, ethically, between history and the present moment."**<sup>1</sup> Paula Vogel

*A Civil War Christmas* and *The Long Christmas Ride Home* both focus around a traditional and popular American holiday, yet the playwright treats it in quite different ways. Both plays have a definite agenda, and to understand it one has to look at the role of Christmas as an event which shaped American history and identity.

**"Christmas isn't just a day. It's a frame of mind."** *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*

Christmas was not a widely celebrated American holiday until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The holiday helped to create a unity within the various religious cultures (Protestants, Baptists, Puritans) and festive greenery and decorations invited people into churches. Commercially, as early as 1831 stores in New York stayed open until midnight during the Christmas season. Also, during that time, the belief that children are born sinners was replaced with the notion of children as innocents, needing protection. St. Nicholas became a very popular figure, which enforced children to be on their best behavior, and it may not come as a surprise that "anthropologically and socially, the essential characteristics of Santa match those associated with Jesus"<sup>2</sup>. Gifts were becoming a large part of the celebration, although some religious groups discouraged the materialism of the gesture. Initially gifts were not as popular in the South, where they were more commonly given to slaves.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the fact that slaves were given presents, treats and time off during the holidays (which naturally resulted in uplifted moods) was used as a weapon against the abolitionist movement. An observer after seeing slaves in holiday attire said "I changed my opinion in regard to the condition of the down-trodden slave."<sup>4</sup> During the coming war, Christmas would become important as a tool of escapism, as well as a unifier. Due to its growing popularity (beating Thanksgiving, which had more regional connections) Christmas is declared a federal holiday by the United States Congress on June 26<sup>th</sup> 1870. Around this time, the holiday starts making its way into secular realms, which is reflected in the creation of secular Christmas music (Jingle Bells). By 1928 there are over 2,000 cities with community carol singing. Christmas trees become increasingly popular, in the community, as well as the home. Christmas fulfills an important national role, where "gift giving, gestures of charity, even the friendly exchange of a holiday greeting and the decoration and enjoyment of an evergreen tree, linked members of each nuclear family to one another, to church, and to society"<sup>5</sup>.

**"This is part of our country's past and history. How can we have a conversation about the country we radically need to shape if we don't have that moment of acknowledgement?"**<sup>6</sup>

*A Civil War Christmas*, subtitled *An American Musical Celebration* premiered in December of 2008 at the Long Wharf Theater. The plot is centered around historical and domestic events relating to the Christmas of 1864. The characters include Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Walt Whitman, John Wilkes Booth. Additionally, we see characters that are socially and racially diverse, such as Decatur Bronson, and African-

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<sup>1</sup> Pellegrini, Ann. "Repercussions and Reminders in the Plays of Paula Vogel." *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Restad, Penne L.. *Christmas in America- A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p.53

<sup>3</sup> Restad. p. 68 It's customary for slaves to go to masters friends collecting gifts, there are detailed lists of gifts for slaves, not family gifts. Interesting to note, slaves did not receive money.

<sup>4</sup> Restad. p. 87

<sup>5</sup> Restad. p. 45

<sup>6</sup> "Offstage- An Interview With Paula Vogel". Long Wharf Theatre. 11-4-09 <[http://www.longwharf.org/off\\_CWCplay.html](http://www.longwharf.org/off_CWCplay.html)>.

American blacksmith for the union, Hannah, an escaped slave and a Jewish soldier who after being wounded in battle receives a visit from the first lady. The songs feature popular holiday songs of the period (Silent Night, O Christmas Tree), as well as lesser known hymns. The play utilizes actors as narrators and includes occasional flashbacks.<sup>7</sup> This play was written for Paula Vogel's family as a "Christmas gift" and this play is intended to be age-appropriate for children and young adults. Vogel says: "I've always thought that theatre is a form of patriotism for every one of us involved, including the audience. It's a form of patriotism and service to the community to come together, to support the arts and culture, and to make sure that children have access to it so that it's something that we enjoy and participate in for a lifespan. This, too, is serving our country. It's a time for us to look at who we are. And in order to look at who we are, we have to recognize who we were."<sup>8</sup>

**"In classical Japan it was poor form for an aristocrat to lose self-possession and express emotion. Hence arose the euphemism: 'to wet one's sleeve on dew,' which meant: 'to wipe away one's tears'."**<sup>9</sup>

*The Long Christmas Ride Home* (a puppet play with actors) focuses on one simple act of violence that changes the lives of a family forever, while questioning family values, discrimination, sexual deviancy and many other issues. Inspirations for this piece come from Bunraku puppet theatre as well as Thornton Wilder one-acts such as *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*. The setting is very simple, with the car represented by chairs, the puppeteers dressed in all black and the man and woman narrators dressed in their "Sunday best". Much like in *The Happy Journey* we open with a family, about to enter a car to visit family. They are going to spend Christmas with the grandparents. Before going on the trip, they went to church (Unitarian church, as the husband is Jewish and the wife is Catholic.) Sounds like a perfect, diverse, nuclear modern family. This notion disappears quickly, as we find out that the man has a lover. When buying jewelry for her (his wife, in contrast, receives a vacuum cleaner) he purchases a charm bracelet for his youngest daughter, Claire. When her brother Stephen wants to try it on, the bracelet breaks. The man kicks his son, and in return, the grandfather calls him a kike, and after a fight, the family gets back in the car. With tensions high, when the mother breaks the silence, the father hits her, and the lives of the three children change forever. Both of the sisters end up in unhappy relationships (one straight, one gay) and Stephen, the brother, dies of aids. "I felt it take over and suckle my blood, diminishing the life inside me, striking the very cells. It is a very terrible beauty. But it is a beauty all the same. It takes distance to see the beauty in it. And now I have all the distance in the world. As my grandmother would say: 'It's amazing what people throw away'."<sup>10</sup> The Ghost of Stephen gets to come back for one day a year and observe the living, and he chose the Feast of Stephen. The character of Stephen is based on Paula Vogel's brother, Carl. The relationship in the play reflects the closeness she felt with her brother, and part of the use of the Bunraku puppets has to do with Carl's (Stephen's) love for all things Japanese. This also creates an estrangement effect (Verfremdungseffekt), although Vogel describes her relationship with Brecht's theories as one of love and hate, as she objects to a view of history that is "somehow containable in its effects."<sup>11</sup>

**"To me, a play doesn't need to make me feel good. It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life."**<sup>12</sup>

In *A Civil War Christmas*, we take a look at the ghosts of the past in order to understand our present. In *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, there is a sense of disillusionment connected to destroying the American dream. Paula Vogel's Christmas play, while fulfilling two different agendas, help reinforce the ideas of American as a nation.

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<sup>7</sup> Isherwood, Charles. "A Nation Divided Stands Throughout the Holidays.". The New York Times. 11-4-09 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/11/theater/reviews/11civi.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Offstage.

<sup>9</sup> Vogel, Paula. *The Long Christmas Ride Home*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004. From letters from Carl.

<sup>10</sup> Vogel.p. 66

<sup>11</sup> Pellegrini p. 481

<sup>12</sup> Pellegrini p. 480