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On Collapsing Time and Withholding Endings, or Hopeful Failure

HEIDI LUCJA LIEDKE

How it ends? It's up to us. When there are no actors, the audience must step in. When the world is in danger, those living in it must act. When there are only uncertainties, everyone can either divorce themselves from reality or contribute to the collapsing of hierarchies. In two of Caridad Svich's recent plays, *How It Ends* (2024) and *The Next One Hundred Years* (2023), the main concern is with individual tales, the episodic and chance. As ecologically sustainable productions, they require only one performer while the rest of the performance is in the hands of volunteers in order to create a poetic for and by the audience. Both plays describe the contemporary as a time when the experience of many individuals is characterized by a constant missing of things in life – mundane things, such as missing a train, or an existential forgetting of what makes life worthwhile. For Svich, the here and now is characterized by necropolitics that is, according to Achille Mbembe, a dominance of structures of racist origin that systematically oppress and racialize people (Mbembe 2019). To critique this, in her plays, Svich wants to collapse hierarchies and create stories that do not normally get told.

In my article, I read these two plays through the lens of queer theory, especially taking up Halberstam's concepts of 'queer time' and 'queer failure' (2005 and 2011) to argue that what emerges in Svich's work is a specifically post-Covidian anti-dramatic form of theatre that only works by withholding an ending. Picking up on Brian Richardson's claim that 'all endings are artificial and ultimately arbitrary ruptures in a larger web of events' (2011: 181), I think about the ways in which Svich's plays, as exemplary of post-Covidian partly participatory forms of plays, seem to grapple with this (deficient, but to-be-expected) structural arbitrariness by attempting to circumvent providing an ending at all. This withholding of an ending is created

through the establishing of a semantic field of brevity versus duration and, on the one hand, the repeated assertion that 'we' are only 'here' for a short time. In *How It Ends* one of the spectator-performers reads the lines: 'After all, we are here./ Much has transpired between us. /... But we are more than photographs' (Svich 2024a). On the other hand, the ending of the play is deliberately left open, ending with the almost anti-climactic assertion that it is 'up to us' to know how our stories will end.

Similarly, in *The Next One Hundred Years* audiences are invited to imagine a near future in which 'Maybe we are all dreaming this moment, right now, / As we sift through the evidence of our lives, / And imagine the future traces that we will leave behind' (Svich 2023). The play consists of 779 statements that are to be read by randomly assigned volunteers in the audience. The ending – and what comes after – is playfully, but also urgently, and constantly, postponed, not only from the present moment but also via the archived traces of the past, thus creating a collapsing also of the hierarchies of the temporal. I argue that what manifests itself here is a queering of the linearity of time that provocatively invites a reflection on the definite quality of endings as full-stops. By withholding endings, the plays still *hold with* the present moment, primarily by consisting of long and seemingly incoherent collections of hopes, wishes and worries of all kinds of individuals, but especially those exploited by necropolitical structures. Before I turn to these two plays in the third section, I suggest a framework of temporal hinges, failures and postponed endings to think about performance in the present moment.

HINGES AND FAILURES: QUEERING FORM

What is the beginner's mind? One of the maxims

of Japanese Noh theatre is to never forget it, that is, never forget a mind that is curious, unprepared, not set. As (a) form, performance tries to perpetually mimic such a beginner's mind, running also against the grain of a temporal continuity, a one-way-road towards closure. Performance and time indeed have a fraught and fragile relationship. Peggy Phelan's (1993) categorical definition of performance as being only in the present seems to exclude the possibility of an afterlife – something convincingly dismantled by Schneider (2011, 2012). Regarding form, despite limiting assessments to the contrary (see Fludernik 2008 for an astute rebuttal of them), drama is not lacking the diegetic as opposed to narrative, but rather combining the diegetic and the mimetic (or rather: the gestural) to a unique effect, making it distinct from other genres. In addition to inviting considerations of the circular relation between past and future via the archive, Schneider also thinks about gestures as, as I understand it, non-functional hinges. Considering the wave (the hand gesture to say 'hello'), she writes:

A gesture, like a wave, is at once an act composed in and capable of reiteration, but also an action extended, opening the possibility of future alteration. The cut of repetition suggests that it is in the future that our pasts await us: awaiting our response, awaiting our revisions, or even awaiting our refusal – waiting for the rebound or the redress. But also, and concentrically, it is in the past that our futures can be found, nodding their greetings to try again to try again. Greeting and greeting recombine at the site of potentials for difference, and though every greeting drags a specific and situated history with it, it simultaneously offers a possibility that response may bring difference, provoking change in multiple directions. (Schneider 2018: 286)

A wave 'hello' (even in the moment of being executed) repeats itself; it is already being awaited in the future as that which signalled a hinge. Similarly, the wave of the past holds the potential – as part of the collective 'sphere of gestures' (Agamben 2000: 50) – to provide access to future encounters. A wave, in its fluidity, serves as a first crucial image to think about ways in which plays such as those by Svich may recur to less definite or even completely indefinite forms of interrupting – not ending – a

narrative. By waving, the future is withheld as much as the past is inviting a return. By opting for an interruption rather than an – already arbitrary – ending, a play can 'nod ... their greetings to try again to try again' (Schneider 2018: 286) both on the level of deixis and mimesis.

Apart from being pigeonholed as being primarily mimetic, drama has also not sufficiently been explored within literary studies as offering manifold strategies to signal (an) ending(s) – that is, still supposing that this structural aim must be met. Entertaining this characteristic for a moment, it is enlightening to turn to narratologist Brian Richardson who comes up with a grid to encompass different kinds of endings in drama, based on questions that can be asked about the (stories of) plays, and that help determine where a play lies on the spectrum between 'open' and 'closed', 'single' or 'multiple', 'mimetic' or 'non-mimetic' and in what relation performance and story stand to one another. Regarding the two plays by Svich that this article engages with, a category that seems apt at first glance is that of the 'open ending' that Virginia Woolf describes – with admiration – in relation to Russian fiction and drama. About those examples, she says that '[p]robably we have to read a great many stories before we feel, and the feeling is essential to our satisfaction, that we hold the parts together, and that Chekov is not merely rambling disconnectedly' (Chekhov 1984: 176). In other words, the plays seem to be 'baggy monsters' in the most dissatisfying way, incoherent jumbles, before it becomes obvious that it lies in the reader/spectator to create coherence.

Richardson in his analysis of drama as narrative or drama *through* narrative terminology uses the terms introduced by Russian formalists Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp, *fabula* (for story) and *syuzhet* (for plot) (Richardson 2011: 183). Such terms fall short, however, in accounting for the messiness of plays such as those by Svich. I would say that in her plays, there is only a rough *fabula*, which is simultaneously a meta*fabula*, namely that of people living in a world that is characterized by a polycrisis. The *syuzhet* plays a more prominent role, foregrounding itself, in the shape of cues,

for instance, presented on cards that hail spectators one by one onto the stage or screen. This grid of hailing, answer, coming together, dissolution, is repeated throughout the plays.

Svich also seems to engage with the idea of a beginner's mind in the sense that she does not privilege specific forms of knowledge; what is privileged are mindful forms of care, both towards one another and towards the environment. On a theoretical level, one could argue that performance in gesturing itself forth runs away from the present, as if constantly being located in a not-yet or not-quite. While Richardson speaks of modern and postmodern plays being resistant to closure, Svich goes even further and resists endings altogether. Schneider's aforementioned thoughts on gesture(s) have informed my own thought, but also Halberstam's discussions of queer time and queer failure. A turn to queer studies is particularly fruitful in connection with Svich's work as they represent a method that equips individuals with the tools to imagine turns away from existing hegemonic systems – an approach, as I develop in this article, that is characteristic for Svich's plays that always seem to fall outside of preset grids, both on a systemic and societal dimension but also in terms of genre.

There is a first connection to what Halberstam has termed 'queer temporality': he argues that the concept of queer time can 'make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality' (2005: 4). Longevity, maturation and stability are privileged over brevity, adolescence and chaos or the erratic. The unfinished, imperfect or improvised in this context endanger this conceptualization of progress and linearity; the circular in particular – the mind-not-yet-made up – is considered weak.

In a related manner, in his *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam develops failing – not only as the status quo of being queer – as a rejection of 'advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope' and a way of being associated with 'nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique' (2011: 89). Halberstam sets out to present an account not of winners, but losers,

not of optimism but of pessimism. For him, this story or this kind of history linked to failure is

a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story of art without markets, *drama without a script, narrative without progress*. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines *other goals* for life, for love, for art, and for being. (Halberstam 2011: 88, my emphases)

He further elaborates: 'We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique' (88). Failure, thus, hinges on the notion of withoutness; it refuses, it struggles, it imagines something other than that what it finds. It also critiques a culture that privileges becoming. Where I disagree with Halberstam is in his inclusion of 'hope' in the list of practices or desirable actions that are associated with success. Of course, this list is written in line with the positions represented by scholars such as Leo Bersani (1996), Lee Edelman (2005) and Heather Love (2009) with regards to negativity within the queer existence. For Bersani, there exists the danger of gays and lesbians – in downplaying their sexuality, for instance – vanishing into the very culture that has been stifling them, that is, this way avoiding visibly failing. Edelman calls for the choice not to choose a Child among queers; Love, similarly, reacts against a cheerful form of forgetting the pains of the queer past in favour of a politics of assimilation. Instead, she opts for an archive of loss and longing in order to acknowledge – and perhaps even embrace – the fact that against the background of a heteronormative dominant, queer desire is in itself misplaced and a failure. For Halberstam negativity in this context 'might refer to a project within which one remains committed to not only scrambling dominant logics of desire but also to contesting homogenous models of gay identity within which a queer victim stands up to his or her oppressors and emerges as a hero' (2011: 149).

So there does not seem to be a place for hope, understood as a synonym of optimism, when you are embracing negativity or equating any form of hope with progress and – in the US context at

least – what Barbara Ehrenreich calls ‘bright-sidedness’ (2009). But, as I have started to suggest (Liedke 2024, 2025), ‘hope’, too, needs to be freed from its neoliberal – Americanized? – shackles; it needs to be complicated, not as the bright-faced, boastful mode of the victorious, but as the painful, reluctant, curious – queer? – mode of the oppressed and marginalized. This is where Svich’s perspective, I would argue, comes in as a quiet yet stern burning glass: her plays do not say that their players found ‘love in a hopeless place’, as Rihanna would have it (Harris 2011)¹; they *want* to look for love and understanding, all the while acknowledging that their capacity to hope may be dwindling.

INTERRUPTION: THE OPPOSITE OF IMMEDIACY

The performances that I will engage with in the next section work by making do without endings, by withholding an ending. I am using ‘making do’ in Michel de Certeau’s sense here as an agentic practice, a boisterous form of resistance, an artistic trick to break out of the uniformity of a (political, cultural) system (1988: 29). Rather than ending they both describe the fact that they are not ending; one could even say that both scripts in their entirety are obsessed with nothing other than gesturing towards that which they will never be: finished, not even indicating a mere hint of a full stop. This obsession can be read as part of (any) performance’s grappling with temporality, while it at the same time – as a time-bound art form – is unable to escape it. I would therefore classify them as constituting part of what Heather Love in 2010 termed a descriptive approach to texts. Such a descriptive method takes its cue ‘from observation-based social sciences including ethology, kinesics, ethnomethodology, and microsociology’ (375). Approaching texts while appreciating what they describe rather than with a purely interpretative agenda allows one to express through them ‘an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness’ (ibid.). Svich’s *How It Ends* is precisely microsociological, by putting side-by-side very different hypothetical biographical vignettes and at the same time trying to create

something like a connecting human biography; *The Next One Hundred Years* (2023) is the act of documenting, the act of attempting to play out all the directions in which the human experience could be developing. Since it is impossible to empathize with every single one of them, documentation and description may be all there is.

In relying in this almost obsessive manner on fragments, lists and conversational snippets, they also powerfully counter what Anna Kornbluh (2024) has recently critically suggested as the main characteristics of twenty-first-century cultural production and consumption, namely their being defined qua being immediate and allowing for a swift and direct understanding. Svich’s plays counter their existence as being immediate. They cannot be consumed easily; in fact, they complicate matters by offering to be consumed/enacted in seemingly never-ending variations: analogue, digital, hybrid, with or without more than one performer. To decide what to do with them is already engaging with them.

Therefore, already their form is a failure in Halberstam’s sense. The fact that plays are assessed at all in terms of beginning, middle and end in all their variations is the fault of Aristotle’s *Poetics* where it says that ‘[a] whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end’ (1971: 52) and, in a more nuanced manner, Henry James who argues that ‘universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so’ (1972: 5). By looking to a seemingly infinite and individualized list of things in the future (*The Next One Hundred Years*) and saying that it is ‘up to us’ how ‘it’ ends (leaving unspecified just what this ‘it’ is) in *How It Ends* Svich (2024) meanders quite playfully between ‘happily appear[ing]’ to distribute the breadcrumbs that will guide *us* to the conclusion, while at the same time, equally playfully, making sure the breadcrumbs are few and scattered.

WITHHOLDING ENDINGS

Svich reckons with monsters of all kinds in her work and proposes ethically motivated ways to imagine a theatre for the now and the future.

¹ From Rihanna’s 2011 single *We Found Love*, written by Calvin Harris and featuring on her album *Talk That Talk*, New York: Def Jam Recordings.

Svich has produced work for three decades now and is known for her political and ethical concern with racial discrimination in the US, the climate crisis, and both on social media and in her publications, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic both on societies and individual lives. In *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during the pandemic* from 2022, Svich speaks to sixty UK and US theatre makers asking them, for instance, 'how can *theatre be a vector for healing* and heal itself from damages' (2022: 3). Given her vast network, it makes sense to discuss her also as an expert commentator on the connections between the digital and theatre.

new world. About the play, Svich says:

In the performance piece *HOW IT ENDS*, a play cannot begin until the actors arrive. But the actors aren't here ... There is a technician that will help you. They may be an actor, too. But their part hasn't been cast. They are used to being backstage, fixing the world out of sight. Today too they will be on stage. In this play we make together, there is a script. It is a technology that will reveal itself to you. It is a very old technology but people still use it. Its material presence holds the stories of others that have played in its ghostly pages. *HOW IT ENDS* is a play that asks its audience to imagine a world anew while the planet is burning. (Svich 2024b)

In her work as a play-maker/text-builder, her

■ Figure 1: Two audience participants and Micha Espinosa as the Technician in *How It Ends*. Photo Andrew J. Hungerford



From October 2022 to December 2023/January 2024 Svich wrote a sextet of plays called *The Next One Hundred Years*. *How It Ends* is the fifth in this series of plays, which all focus on the history of stage spaces as conduits for political and spiritual change and the question of what kind of world we will live in in the future. *How It Ends* was performed as part of the Worlds in Play Conference at the Arizona State University (ASU) Media and Immersive eXperience (MIX) Center in Mesa, Arizona, in January 2024 and also streamed online. In the play, there is only one performer who plays a technician and apart from that audience members are invited to read out prompts. This approach aims to encourage people to use their imagination and thus build a

central concerns are to examine the conversation between text and audience through the lens of the climate crisis. She is interested in activating the body politic of spectators during the course of a shared experience (whether it be digital, in person and/or hybrid). Notably, all of the plays in this recent sextet are ecologically sustainable: they require only one performer while the rest is given to volunteers in order to create a poetic for and by the audience (see fig. 1). In *How It Ends* the only props needed are six envelopes of different colours containing notecards; three pieces of cardboard marked with lettering; three bottles of water; two chairs or stools; one or two standing microphones; one black marker; and a simple portable table. As it says in the

playwright's notes, 'only re-purposed scenic elements' should be used. Importantly, the play can be performed both in person or adapted to be played as a remote social (online) or hybrid transmedia experience. Thus, from the outset, this play, as well as the others in the sestet, are conceived of as flexible, adaptable texts that do not distinguish between being performed on a stage or in a digital space.

As she told me in an interview, for Svich, the *Here and Now* is characterized by necropolitics, which is why in her plays she wants to drastically upend dominant hierarchical structures, also in the realm of theatre performance. This is why in *How It Ends* she lets the volunteers read stories that try to capture a certain sentiment of the Now and the immediate future, the anxieties but also hopes of people who have experienced the recent COVID-19 pandemic, who are worried because of the current state of the world and who feel over-saturated by the continuous flow of (mis)information on the Internet. Some of the stories are nostalgic: they are about missing things or states of mind, for instance, missing remembering what it felt like to be born. All stories begin with excuses: the protagonists say they were late to the show because of a bomb scare or a missed train; one person is not even at the performance because they are under house arrest; another took a break because of their mental health (noting, 'Everyone seems to be talking about their mental health, and nobody seems to be doing anything about it' (Svich 2024a)). To stress that you are 'too late' adds a sense of urgency and despair; it also suggests that the person has failed to show up in time. When volunteer 1 (V1) says: 'The subject today is memory. I used to know something about that', this is not only irony, but also a playing out of the momentary and the supposedly all-encompassing archival function of memory. V1 shares with the audience how they were fired from their position at a college; but they do not want anyone to feel pity – all they want is for everyone to remember the day they were born and what that felt like:

When the truth is we don't remember. There is no memory that you can personally retrieve that goes back that far, no matter how many immersion tanks you float in. Instead, what you remember is *wanting*

to remember. *Wanting* to have a pre-sense before sense. (Svich 2024a)

From the beginning, therefore, the play is also concerned with the impossibility of beginnings, or rather the frustrations entailed in trying to reconstruct them. With this insight, as the 'Technician' assures the audience, 'We just need to be patient. And trust each other for a little while. And if/when we are ever in doubt, we can keep thinking about the things that we have loved that we have left behind' (Svich 2024a). In an episode in the middle of the play, a character called T (which could stand for Tiresias, as the script indicates), whose story is introduced as not being part of the 'official script', tells of how one day – they were tired and lost, too tired, in fact, to flee from a horrific slimy beast that was flying fast towards them – the beast came to a halt in front of them to whisper in their ear that they would indeed find their home.

I would characterize the play with its episodic structure as being primarily about pain and regret, not unlike Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (New Angel) staring at what the world has come to full of shock, but at the same time, perhaps irresistibly, stomping on. After stories and stories, debris on debris, piling up on top of one another, there are still no actors present, and it is indeed up to those who *are* (still) there to determine how 'it' ends.

In *In the Next Hundred Years*, the sixth in the sestet of Svich's plays about the future, we are confronted not with a play in the first place, but with a 'rehearsal for the future and a reckoning with the past' (Svich 2023). The non-play is therefore also in the present by neither being in the future nor in the past. As the notes to the play indicate, 'The concept of "character" in this piece is not fixed. The "I" at any given moment may shift. ... In this piece, there is silence, and, also, lightness, but there is very little "acting"' (Svich 2023). Regarding setting, it says that

the play takes place ... here ... The staging of the space could be that of a party. Maybe there's a very long table and party hats and balloons. Or the staging could be more austere, like a tribunal. Or it could simply be a circle of chairs. (Svich 2023)

The rest is 779 numerical lines and stanzas that are spoken by any variation of 1 to 779 characters, imagining specific, dreamy or

apocalyptic scenarios, uttering doubts ('6: I don't know if this is appropriate. 7: I have never seen the world be like this. Because I have never lived in the future.'). When I attended a rehearsed reading of the script on 23 March 2024 on Zoom with a group of students from Leeds, I was struck by the atmosphere of agency that seemed to stem from the fact that everyone had an assigned number. The lines were distributed in advance based on the number of people who had signed up and the students picked the song(s) to (sit/dance to, among others Louis Armstrong's 'What A Wonderful World'.

The items in the play grapple with one another and constantly defer (the) ending by queering any notions of linear temporality. The items are delivered from an imagined future via the archived traces of the past, creating the effect of collapsed time. They cover the personal, the abstract and the historically specific (relating a scenario similar to that of the COVID-19 pandemic), as the following examples show:

'8: I am not convinced I am here.'

'13: ... Everything we say from this moment forward will be history.'

'16: Sometimes I can't breathe. Most people can't these days. We walk around with breathing apparatuses and hope to be fine.' (Svich 2023)

They are also meta-theatrical when #38 echoes Aristotle's maxim of the set-up of a play – or chooses not to: 'This is a story, even if you don't think it is a story. This is a story without a beginning, middle and end. Because our lives ended a long time ago. Our lives were always between endings. Take my hand. It's okay. We can live this story together' (Svich 2023). To define human existence not as one striving towards goals, but as being always between endings, is, I would argue, to acknowledge the fragility and randomness of the temporal and to instead foreground the ambiguity of the wave and the potential of failure. With this ambiguity, the performances might not reject the inevitability of endings, but rather – queerly, heroically – take hold of how things end. The future, as it is imagined, is withheld as much as the past is inviting a return. Coherence or linearity is rejected in favour of a withheld ending that interrupts the narrative of progress and longevity. As much as the form of

presentation – no matter if it is on Zoom or in a physical setting – creates a space to hold with each other, the script in item 775 can proclaim: 'We can hold each other, and let our tears make a river. That will carry us across the other side of the universe' and item 779 can only offer a preliminary subchapter heading; namely that 'in the next one hundred years, we'll be alive' (Svich 2023).

COLLAPSE (CONCLUSION)

Both of Svich's plays are episodic in structure, characterized by interweaving references to historical crises, such as the deforestation of the rain forest, the fate of illegal migrants stranded on the shores of Italy and personal biographies such as that of a university lecturer, or people working backstage at a theatre who keep the show going and are 'not listed in the credits of any shows' (Svich 2024a). In addition, the only performer in *How It Ends* – who plays the 'Technician' – is characterized by an extremely mindful attitude towards the volunteers, thanking them for their contributions, asking them if they need water, anything to make them feel at ease, acknowledging that they are doing voluntary but unpaid labour to keep the show going. In *The Next One Hundred Years* the support system is stripped down even further, making it necessary for all readers/volunteer performers to hold with one another. Such a reduction of both the practical and structural is symptomatic for the (post?)Covidian moment, where the traces of performance stripped down to its verbal skeleton, performed, for instance, from home with minimal equipment under both mentally and economically very demanding circumstances, still reverberate with performing artists all around the world. Svich is one of the most outspoken voices on platforms such as X and Bluesky who does not tire of reminding people and the industry that neither the health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic nor the effects on theatre have evaporated. Consequently, her work can indeed be understood as exemplary of also holding with a conscience that serves as a reminder and representative of the imprint the pandemic has left on the soul of theatre. Any ending to such

scripts – either Svich’s or others produced at this time – would be arbitrary; so instead of offering an ending, at this historical moment of multiple crises, it seems like a failure of language is needed to at least be able to hold with the present moment. Instead of an end, there can only be a wave.

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