

Adding Machine: Musical version of a 1920s play reverberates in the 21st century

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The musical adaptation of an 85-year-old play by American writer Elmer Rice has drawn praise from critics and a strong response from theatergoers in New York City, where it opened in February. “Adding Machine” was produced in Chicago and brought with its cast and creative team to Off-Broadway’s Minetta Lane Theater.

Rice’s “The Adding Machine” tells the story of a lowly white collar worker and his unhappy wife, named, in expressionist fashion, Mr. and Mrs. Zero. Zero is a bookkeeper who has spent 25 years adding numbers by hand in a dark and forbidding office. Fantasizing about a promotion, he is instead informed by his boss that the arrival of an adding machine means he is out of a job. The otherwise meek and Walter Mitty-like Zero murders his employer. Found guilty and executed for his crime, he winds up in heaven, where he is completely unimpressed by his new surroundings and soon agrees to be sent back to earth to begin life over again as a drone, this time an adding machine operator.

As this brief description would indicate, “The Adding Machine” is not a work of realism or naturalism. Mr. Zero is not a dynamic figure. He is a cipher, as his name implies, the human expression of a process, an automaton created by modern capitalist society and its processes of mass production and specialization. Zero has few genuine feelings; for the most part he behaves in a machine-like fashion. This is contrasted to the more human qualities of some of the other characters, including his wife and Daisy, a young woman who assists Zero in his bookkeeping and is so enamored of him that she commits suicide in order to join him in the hereafter.

The influence of German expressionism on “The Adding Machine” has often been noted. Rice later said that he had not read any of the plays of Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller and others when he wrote his work, but he was doubtless influenced by some of the moods and trends then prevalent in artistic, literary and theatrical circles.

In his autobiography, *Minority Report*, published almost 40 years after the play was first staged, Rice quotes his own definition of expressionism from an article he wrote for the *New York Times*: “The author attempts not so much to depict events faithfully as to convey to the spectator what seems to him to be their inner significance. To achieve this end the dramatist often finds it expedient to depart entirely from objective reality and to employ symbols, condensation and a dozen devices which, to the conservative, must seem arbitrarily fantastic.”

“In the realistic play,” Rice wrote elsewhere, “we look at the character from the outside. We see him in terms of action and of actuality. But in the expressionistic play we subordinate and even discard objective reality and seek to express the character in terms of his own inner life.”

In Germany expressionism briefly became one of the dominant aesthetics in the fields of art and the theatre, especially in the Weimar period (1919-33), influencing many figures, including Bertolt Brecht and filmmakers such as Fritz Lang. In the atmosphere of social and political upheaval ushered in by the First World War, both right- and left-wing views found their articulation through expressionism.

The term expressionism was apparently first used around 1910 by Czech art historian Antonín Matejcek, but it was popularized by the German art critic Herwarth Walden, publisher of the magazine *Der Sturm* (*The Storm*, 1910-32) and eventually a victim of Stalin’s purges in the USSR—where he had fled Hitler’s regime—in 1940. “Expressionism” was meant to stand in opposition to “impressionism” and the latter’s reliance on immediate perceptions.

In expressionist painting, for example, according to one commentator, “the forms arise, not directly from observed reality, but from subjective reactions to reality.” The expressionist was concerned with “more complex psychic structures,” and, importantly, communication through intense emotion and even a deliberate mental disordering. For the European adherents of this very loosely-affiliated movement at the turn of the century and beyond, the views of Friedrich Nietzsche were a strong influence.

Expressionism also had its impact in the U.S. in the first few decades of the 20th century, not only in the form of “The Adding Machine,” but in works of Eugene O’Neill dating from this period, including “The Emperor Jones” (1920) and “The Hairy Ape” (1922).

The musical version of Rice’s play is performed in 90 minutes without an intermission, and is quite faithful to the original. With music by Joshua Schmidt and libretto by Schmidt and Jason Loewith, “Adding Machine” effectively presents the themes of Rice’s work, above all the alienation and grim existence that is the fate of the worker. The eclectic score, influenced by ragtime, popular song and gospel, successfully depicts the misery of the characters and their situation.

At times “Adding Machine” calls to mind the music of “Spring Awakening,” the rock musical adaptation of another expressionist play, the 1891 work of the same name by the German dramatist Frank Wedekind, which has been enjoying a successful Broadway run for nearly 18 months. There are touches of Kurt Weill and George Gershwin in “Adding Machine,” and more modernist influences as well. The score avoids conventional melody, but strikes the right note and meshes well with lyrics that express the tediousness of the characters’ lives and voice their anger and also their resignation in the face of their condition. This is all a far cry from the treacly words and music of the typical contemporary musical.

The very first scene sets the stage, with Mrs. Zero, in “Something to

be Proud Of,” bitterly complaining about her life and her husband, who is only a physical and not an emotional presence. This monologue aria is among the most effective numbers in the show.

The scene then shifts to Zero’s office, with “In Numbers” using repetition in both words and music to portray the dreariness, monotony and exploitation that is the daily life of the office workers. Zero’s bitterness and spiritual emptiness is contrasted to the reaction of his adoring assistant Daisy, who sings “I’d Rather Watch You.”

Joel Hatch as Zero, Cyrilla Baer as his wife and Amy Warren as Daisy are all effective in their roles. “Adding Machine” deserves most of the compliments it has received. The weaknesses of the adaptation are really those of the original play itself. These are connected to the rather limited understanding and outlook of the playwright himself.

Elmer Rice, born Elmer Reizenstein in New York City in 1892, is an important figure whose work, dating especially from the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, largely disappeared from view in recent years but has lately been reappearing with some regularity.

Rice adopted his pen name for reasons of simplification and not to hide his Jewish ancestry. He was somewhat unusual among Jewish writers, actors and other cultural figures, in that his family’s roots in America went back to the 1850s, long before the beginning of the mass immigration of 1880-1920. Rice’s paternal grandfather had come to the U.S. in 1850 to escape political repression following the 1848 Revolution. Both of Rice’s parents were born in this country.

Rice’s father was disabled, and the family had very few resources. The future playwright was shaped by the Gilded Age, the growing class struggle and the rise of the socialist movement. He studied law but left the profession in disgust weeks after his admission to the New York State bar in 1913. By 1914, weeks before his 22nd birthday, Rice’s very first play, “On Trial,” launched his career as a playwright.

The next decades were not without their share of failures for Rice. He gave up writing plays for some years in the 1930s after a number of flops, and his productivity generally fell off in the post-World War II period, a fact that can probably be attributed in part to the climate of the Cold War, inhospitable to the social reformism he espoused. Today he is best known for “The Adding Machine” and especially for “Street Scene,” the 1929 play that won the Pulitzer Prize and was turned into an opera in 1947 by Kurt Weill, with the collaboration of the renowned African-American poet Langston Hughes on the libretto as well as of the playwright himself in adapting his own work.

Rice’s socialism, which he describes in some detail in his 1962 autobiography, a few years before he died at the age of 74, was explicitly reformist. As he writes in his memoir, he was never a Marxist: “While I believe there is much validity in the theory of the economic interpretation of history, my socialism has always been of the utopian variety.” As a young man, Rice devoured the work of George Bernard Shaw and was won over to Fabianism. What makes Rice’s work interesting is not so much his own timid views, but his use of various experimental and fresh techniques to expose certain truths about contemporary society.

The playwright’s outlook is bluntly spelled out in “The Adding Machine,” in dialogue which is largely retained in the musical version. Mr. Zero discovers in heaven that he has made the trip before, that his “soul” has traveled back and forth countless times. His overseer, preparing him for his next trip back to earth, lectures him as follows: “All I know is you’ve been getting worse—worse each time. Why, even six thousand years ago you weren’t so bad. That was the time you were hauling stones for one of those big pyramids in a place

they call Africa ... Two thousand years ago you were a Roman galley-slave ... And then another thousand years and you were a serf—a lump of clay digging up other lumps of clay. You wore an iron collar then—white ones hadn’t been invented yet...

“You’re a failure, Zero, a failure. A waste product. A slave to a contraption of steel and iron. The animal’s instincts, but not his strength and skill. The animal’s appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them ... Well, time’s up! Back you go—back to your sunless groove—the raw material of slums and wars—the ready prey of the first jingo or demagogue or political adventurer who takes the trouble to play upon your ignorance and credulity and provincialism...”

This diatribe suggests that history is meaningless and nothing has changed, except perhaps for the worse. Today’s worker is only a victim and a slave (a “poor, spineless, brainless boob,” as one character in the play describes Zero), and he has mostly himself to blame for his fate. It is certainly interesting to note that the play was written at a time when millions looked to the Russian Revolution, only six years old. Rice’s attitude appears to have been one of some sympathy but even greater skepticism. He visited the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and, according to his autobiography, was repelled by Stalinism, but saw it only as confirmation that revolution was not the answer.

Rice’s political views did not mean that he was incapable of articulating some of the key issues of the 20th century, however. While he was not one of the greatest dramatists of the century, he certainly deserves the attention he has lately been receiving.

A number of critics have made the somewhat obvious connection between “Adding Machine’s” exposure of the myth of 1920s prosperity and conditions eight decades later. There is no doubt that Rice’s themes of alienation, corruption and exploitation resonate today. “The Adding Machine” has been revived on numerous occasions, most recently in a London production in 2004. In the same year “Counsellor-at-Law,” his 1931 play on corruption in the legal profession, was revived in New York. It surely was no accident that Weill turned to “Street Scene” to fashion the masterpiece that he called a “Broadway opera.” For these three works alone, Rice is worthy of a definite place in the history of American theatre.

It may well be that some of the young writers and musicians attracted to “Adding Machine” also find themselves agreeing with Rice’s unrelievedly grim and pessimistic view of contemporary society. Whatever their own understanding, however, the renewed interest in this work also reflects the fact that the social order has resolved none of its own fundamental contradictions.



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