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Home, Suitcases, and *Violet*. Domestic Space in Musical Theatre

By Wes Drummond

Abstract

This extended abstract explores the treatment of domestic space in the leaving home musical, *Violet*.

Home, Suitcases, and *Violet*: Domestic Space in Musical Theatre

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As a musical theatre director with roots in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the strands of bluegrass, country, gospel, and rock in Jeanine Tesori's 1997 musical, *Violet*, have always brought me home. The lovably imperfect characters created by Doris Betts in her short story, "The Ugliest Pilgrim" and the honesty and poetry of book writer Brian Crawley, deepen my connection to the piece. In this musical, we join Violet Karl on a 1964 road trip on a Greyhound bus, from her hometown in Spruce Pine, North Carolina to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she will ask a television evangelist to heal the massive scar left on her face from a childhood accident. *Violet* is an emotionally complex story, told as a journey away from home, across the country, toward expectation and uncertainty.

Directing *Violet* as an MFA candidate at the Pennsylvania State University, I continued to explore this piece—its ideas and language, its tone and potential for movement. In this short essay, I focus on the *space* of *Violet*, specifically the domestic spaces that my team and I developed in this play that is about leaving home. Space is transformed or defined by the people or objects who exist inside it. A space can also be defined by its size, smell, temperature, and the existence or lack of walls around it. Space is often perceived as the air between two or more objects. We took all of these ideas of space into consideration in our design choices.

Our production team kept circling back to the ideas of movement and lightness in *Violet*. We discovered that, like Violet Karl's journey across the American south in 1964, we are all continually moving. We are all fluid beings in a constant state of mental, spiritual, emotional growth, carrying along with us past experiences that have shaped our personal truths. We asked: how can the theatre space "house" Violet's journey; in other words,

how can we create a space that allows for a joyous exploration of the process of getting to know yourself, and allowing yourself the gifts of acceptance and change?

Interestingly, our lack of offstage space influenced our design in significant ways. The Downtown Theatre at Penn State is a small proscenium theatre with two feet of wing space stage right and a stage left wing that is almost entirely taken up by the orchestra. In order to realize our ideas while also avoiding blackouts or clunky set changes, we decided on a simple, non-literal set which included a few (Edward Hopper inspired) painted levels underneath a collage of highway signs (Fig. 1). The various locations the piece calls for were constructed by fifteen vintage suitcases that the characters carried with them through their own, personal journeys. The suitcases became the various locations along Violet's journey: bus seats, the rooming house bed, the magazine stand, stools at a diner, everything.

Violet's scene design, then, relies heavily on a lack of onstage domestic space. We meet our lead character the moment she takes her first step toward leaving her home forever. At the top of the show Violet Karl sits on a bench at a bus stop in North Carolina, waiting for the Greyhound bus that will take her on her pilgrimage across the country to fulfill a long awaited healing. Her reason for finally being able to leave after all this time is vaguely based on two things: money and the recent death of her father. Though Violet had been saving for a while to afford this trip, she had ultimately been held back by the idealized manifestation of home which was linked to her father.

Having grown up in a rural, 1960s American household, Violet now leaves the comfort of her childhood home to set out on a journey with no clear destination. She leaves behind the town of Spruce Pine, a place in which the people are thought of as condemning, rude, and not very bright.

Spruce Pine no longer holds worth in Violet's life. From the moment the play (and the bus) takes off, Violet remains on a journey of unsure footing and challenged morals throughout the night. She seeks a miracle, an event; however, she leaves everything that she has known as "home" behind.

In America, home is often defined by the minute daily traditions that occur inside a domestic space. Dinner at the kitchen table each evening gives us ease. We often know when we will arrive home, what order of events will take place: when we will cook dinner, brush our teeth, and ultimately lie down for bed. Inside our own personal domestic space we have expectations for the way things will occur. It provides us with a sense of comfort and safety. In an often chaotic world, domestic space allows us to compartmentalize a certain part of our days and focus on a tiny world in which we are ultimately in control.

It became clear at the beginning of the rehearsal process for *Violet*, that using suitcases to form our set not only helped solve our transitions, but their simple existence in the rehearsal space and on the stage demolished any traditional idea of "domestic space" in the production. With the concept of family and the structure of a household gone, the simple placement of well-worn suitcases in an otherwise empty space created a subconscious anxiety that coexisted with the classic hero's journey inside this folk-rock musical. The suitcases restrained the audience from ever being able to feel one hundred percent comfortable or safe. We have no kitchen. We have no living room. The only bedroom exists inside a motel and is represented by two suitcases formed as a headboard. We are not sure when or where the bus will stop next, and our lead character has no control of either. We, the audience, are quite literally "along for the ride."

This subconscious vulnerability created by the space and the objects inside it allowed the production to stay ahead of the audience. Our hope was that by leaning into the nonexistence of domestic space and creating locations that could easily disappear within seconds, we could create momentum which would propel the story forward, allowing the audience to truly feel they were on a road trip across America in 1964. Since domestic space and its rituals are often the most tangible thing that we can use to define “home,” the lack of scenic domestic space was designed to strip the audience of the power of expectation. Without domestic spaces, our world becomes vulnerable. We are left open, with no expectations, unguarded and slightly nervous. I can’t imagine a better state for an audience to exist in at the top of a show.

This lack of domestic space is no new concept in musical theatre. If you look to the majority of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals, you find that there are very few scenes that are set indoors. A strong example is the settings in the 1943 musical, *Oklahoma!*, which exists entirely outdoors except for Curly’s visit to Jud’s shed at the end of Act 1. For Jud, a hired hand on the Williams’s farm, this space is home. However, for Curly and the audience, this may be the least homelike space in the show. It’s a cold, dark hole in the ground in a settlement that, until now, has seemed sunny and bright. Jud’s “lonely room” is one of isolation, jealousy, and regret. In *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers and Hammerstein use Jud’s lair to define domestic space as more of a trap than a comfort, and most importantly, to propel the plot forward.

If theatre has long represented domestic space as a cage, this transforms the way we interpret Violet Karl’s journey away from home. In this light, the lack of domestic space in *Violet* does not cause loneliness, but instead achieves a feeling of freedom. At the top of the show, we see Violet’s younger self running on the side of the Appalachian Mountains,

collecting wild flowers to an upbeat folk tune from her childhood. This energy is quickly contrasted with the controlled, pondering, internal monologue of Violet as an adult, the moment before she leaves Spruce Pine. The mundane feeling of entrapment that we experience in Spruce Pine is destroyed the moment the bus takes off in Violet's iconic number, "On My Way". The stillness gives way to movement and light that remains, consistently for the rest of the production. From this point on, the open space defined only by suitcases allows for a fluidness and excitement throughout the production, which would be halted by the use of walls or a more literal set design.

As a musical theatre director, I am continuing to discover how conflicting audiences' interactions with, and views of, domestic space are. We see it as safety and restriction simultaneously. For my production of *Violet*, an open stage containing nothing but suitcases and bodies allowed for a production which felt slightly unnerving, yet ultimately free. Perhaps the audience discovered that home and freedom are not natural cohabitants, and that true independence requires risk and abandonment.