

On Behaviour

Onstage is a place where behaviour is restricted. All that happens is rehearsed and intentional. That's the point. Ordinary life is a blur, ruled, more or less, by accident and happenstance. In the *art of theatre*, we get to actually mean what we say, and be where we are. It's a search, dare I say, for the *sublime*.

Speaking on stage is action and more than action. One of its functions is the placing of intentional musical language, ideas and thought into the real world. To say this in another way – like the Ancient Greeks -- it is the Word (*Logos*) made manifest. This fact has huge consequences for us. We rarely succeed as we try to live our lives with at least the semblance of intention.

As Aristotle implied, another level of reality can be evoked, or contacted, by way of the stage, by opening our usual automatic perspective to the level of the Gods – Consequence and Fate. The feeling of Tragedy arises in us. Awe, Pity, and Terror. It is an intelligence akin to the feeling of grief, mixed with the joy of recognition -- which is what I think Aristotle meant – at least partially -- by *Catharthis*.

So, on stage, if you walk and talk at the same time, following the myriad imitations of Naturalism, you lose the opportunity to mean anything at all. Theatre is NOT a naturalistic art. Not necessarily. On the other hand, if you wave your arms around pointlessly, or jump up and down, or do the old song and dance, you will be seen, justly, as any ordinary idiot in ordinary life, however entertaining.

But, once we get on stage in a “serious play,” i.e. a play which in itself understands the requirements presented by the conditions: living performance in front of a living audience, you must pull yourself together and not move anywhere unless it counts, because it does. Movement counts. It doesn't count for much going to the store, or ruminating in your kitchen, but on stage – it counts, as all of us who try for something extraordinary know – a moment of connection with the *Sublime*.

So if you have a speech, don't say anything until you get to where you're going. Don't even start. Or -- stay where you are. Still. You don't need to be doing anything and you probably don't need props. The text should give you everything you need in the way of establishing your performance.

As you can probably tell, this little exercise is meant as an argument against naturalistic behavior as a foundational element in the so-called Art of Acting, and, those of you who know me, will know that I am making it in my own defense -- i.e., insisting, as I usually do, that actors do not walk and talk at the same time, and, furthermore, that they face front, Vaudeville style, avoiding profile, and that transitional choreography between scenes be absolutely precise and timed to the millisecond.

I'll do it over and over and over again until we get it right: These are not "takes." This is Rehearsal. A benefit here is, if you make a mistake, you can, like any professional vaudevillian, adjust to the situation without missing a beat. This also has to do with what we call "timing," an invisible vibration which changes, naturally, with every audience.

Plays are meant to be *Heard*. Sound and rhythm and pauses and timing – all potentially "magical" qualities – are distracted away by too much movement, especially by the so-called naturalism of American movies and television, with phones and doors, and everything else which aids the dependence on behavior. Jaws are working, eyes are glancing, faces mugging, artifacts are selling, meanings are interpreted, and so on.

A good-looking blonde with nice legs will attract my interest no matter what, and that's okay, but has its limits. As far as I can tell from the ancient texts (the Bible, The Greeks) one of the highest of all expressions for Man was lamentation. He could dispute neither his nature nor his fate.

All stories are the same. In the great Tragedies, we already know the plot, and we know how it will end. It's the getting there with a sense of dignity and honor that counts. The beauty of the language. With reverence for the Word. A Carthartic verticality, as Aristotle suggests.

I love the Vaudevillean Era because the guys and girls stood up there and looked you in the eye and delivered the goods. No fucking around and I imagine that they knew the consequences and the moral depth of what they were doing. They knew it was about the Words, the Talk. Not so much about them, more about what they were *saying*.

Doors are a drag.

You have all these fucking doors in television and in plays. Just imagine what we could do without the doors? And they're fake. In Shakespeare, the actor walked on stage, stayed as long as he had to, and then left. No doors.

And the same with entrances and exits. I'd just as soon have all the actors in the room all the time. It doesn't take much to know when one is on or off. On the other hand, the line between performance and audience stays absolute. It's a question of state of mind.

Speaking to my fellow playwrights, young and old, if you're not hearing the language from the Stage, when you listen, and write, then I think you're writing for a Screen, which is not close to the reality we are trying to make sense about – living theater -- it's one or two levels back, not the real thing – and frozen there. The kind of speech I'm talking about is more like a Navaho sand painting, it's here for a moment and then it's gone. And it's heard from the stage, which is not exactly your own head.

But this question of behaviour in the theory and teaching of Acting has troubled me from the beginning – fifty years now, and counting – and it hasn't gone away. It's gotten worse. We live in the Era of Screens, big and little, where naturalism, or some version of realism, seem to dominate everywhere, and all actors seem trained to accompany everything they do in front of an audience with various behaviours.

Getting in the way of the Text.

So I think the Actor has to stand on stage and say his lines. Saying is everything. As was said in the Old Testament, in the Prophetic Tradition. A tradition still possible for us.

In the sixties we welcomed the *Theatre of Cruelty* and *The Epic Theater* and the *Living Theatre*, and we were right to do so. And Beckett was absolutely right in burying his actors in sand and putting them in ashcans. That way they couldn't do stuff while they spoke. In the end, he came to almost abandon even language altogether. People couldn't stop fooling around with it and telling you what it all meant. A good actor doesn't do that. He searches and he probes. He tries to understand the situation. He gets the language into his body and he gets his body where his head is and he finishes his gestures. That last moment of the reach of the hand can be the most important of all. Hold there and stop. It counts. Don't rush away as though from a camera take. Hold. Another level is reached, a touch outside time. Well, I don't mean that exactly. I mean, don't throw it away. There's a little bit of extra attention right there, which plays. Such moments, for me, are like a stylistic, grammatical beat, like a period in prose.

Back then, in the sixties, I thought, "Plays are not representative of what's happening, they *are* what's happening." Something true about that. *Catharsis* occurs in the present or not at all. Of course, Artaud was nuts and so were the rest of us. But behaviour took the place of search and voice and study and Standing Still On Stage, and then, somewhere along the line, the actors (or the teachers of the actors) had to show us what it all meant, and so on, as though they were making an explanation, an apology even, for which the text itself was, or should be, responsible.

The consequences of all this are serious. Rather, the seriousness of the Art has been taken away from us, and been replaced by the mindless titillations of fear or sex, commerce, Americana, singing and dancing, lies and pitches.

What would have Artaud thought of all that?

And when we talk about behaviour, as I said, we are talking usually about those automatic manifestations of ordinary life, suitable maybe for the movies and TV -- but I think theatre demands something more, thematically. If there is behaviour onstage, it is in service of a theme, a search, even if it is a search for oneself, or an experiment with language and meaning.

Jokes. I spent a lot of time, growing up, working in Catskill hotels. In those days it was a high-end comedy circuit with well-known Jewish Comedians doing their shtick late on Saturday nights. Among other things, these comedians were audience-hip, by which I mean they played the costumers with expert *panache*, an attribute of which, of course was *Timing*. But jokes are for stand-up or TV shows. or politicians -- they don't stand up well, in my opinion, in a real play on stage.

On the other hand, I believe it is our responsibility, as playwrights, to take note of, and comment on, the political reality in which we live. And we live, at this moment (June, 20/20), in a dangerous situation, one in which language itself is being debauched and devalued, to the point where phrases like "alternative facts" are being publicly accepted. Our Democracy, our Culture, faulty and stupid and corrupt as it is sometimes, is under assault by President Donald J. Trump. We had better stand up and call this guy out for being the shithead that he is – a *Joker* with an all-consuming lust for money and power. Book-burning, the criminalizing of intellectuality and the search for meaning, is not far away if this jerk, this carnival-barker, is allowed to continue in the highest office of the Land.

Finally: **Dialogue is action.**

There are no close-ups in theatre, there are perhaps soliloquys or monologues – demanding a completely different kind of "acting."

M.M.

Early 2,000's

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