

On writing for the Stage

I knew pretty early that the Stage was a special place whereupon the play was heard, where movement (not necessarily behaviour) and speech were, so to speak, sanctified by a special attention. I knew this by virtue of the great texts I was taught, (not only the religious ones), and by my own instinctive observations. This also had to do with a reverential attitude towards intentional speech, i.e. words that were listened to – by the actors and an audience. Everything flows from that. When writing, See the stage, listen to the speech from the stage. Language on stage is ACTION. There'll come a moment when you will know what the play is about, is concerned with, and you'll see, or sense, where it's going, and therefore begin to understand its structure.

Seven rules for actors (after **Mayakovsky and Stalin.**)

1. Don't rush out of a scene the way you run from the camera. Hold half a second where you are.
2. Play in Profile at a minimum. Play out.
3. Do not speak while moving. Wait till you get there.
4. Every audience is different. Play what's happening. Timing will change with every performance.
5. The Text comes first. Do not get in the way of the Text.
6. Hide little behind doing things (behaviour).
7. Every gesture is more than itself. Minimalize. Everything counts.

On "Dramatic Conflict"

This is the way writing for the stage is usually taught – conflicting forces, a resolution, tragic or comedic, providing an "arc" for the actors, i.e. characters getting what they want or not getting it, thus giving the audience something to hook onto and identify with emotionally. And so now, at 80 years old and after writing and directing more than 50 or 60 plays, or more, I'd like to say something in my own defence, for whatever it's worth.

As a theatre poet, I am much more interested in the rhythms and sound and the movement of the dialogue, than in the "plot." But there is an underlying logic, a linguistic and poetic one, which drives the play. Often there is an exploration of an idea, or a premise, or a technical device (like the *Chorus*, entrances and exits, etc.) that catches my theatrical attention. It's the poet's way, or, as I've said, the *Way of the Harlequin*, who is himself the "Plot." In my case, the so-called "conflict" is something in me, personal, often autobiographical, that needs to be expressed or explored, or transposed (or transformed) as a living organism on a stage. The bones of this organism is a kind of longing for what Aristotle called Catharsis, i.e. the evocation of another level of existence. Something happens in the room that is

connected directly to what happens on the stage, and which is higher than ordinary life. I think, in other words, that dramatic conflict is not the only essential ingredient in a good play. One can start, for example, with a deepening feeling of loss, or sorrow, or regret, and see where it takes you.

It's taken me many years to realize this: I write plays the way I used to write poems, one line leading to the next, a theme or characterization or "story" is discovered in the writing, and then followed to its irrevocable end, tragic or ambiguous or merely beautiful and well-timed, knowing, all the while, that what is occurring is occurring on a stage, is made possible by the stage, and is spoken on a stage. It is the stage, and the building of the force of purposeful speech upon it, that makes possible the cathartic contact with another level. That is the "Action" of a play. The audience senses and realizes this force and there is a collective sigh made by it at the end. For the actors, it is a magic carpet. You work, through repetition and discovery, until you can get on it and fly.

3/3/20

I've been realizing lately -- post **BLACKOUTS** -- that pretty much all that I've done working with writing and directing for the stage (for more than fifty years now) has been mainly for myself. I don't worry so much about the audience or critics, or even friends -- I want to satisfy something in myself that has to do with the satisfaction that comes with artistic discovery. I know it when I find it. Finding the right words when speaking with an actor, finding the "look", the presentation, the pace, the timing, the "sound," the "blocking" -- all these are qualities or discoveries that give me great pleasure and I'd even say *Happiness*. It's great fun to stage a play, my own play, and it's also the finishing touches of the thing itself. That's why I believe playwrights should direct their own plays -- especially the first performances -- and know everything there is to know about the mechanics of the stage: acting, lighting, sound, projection, the whole deal. Theatre is a fine art; it has nothing to do necessarily with entertainment, and there is no pleasure greater than achieving it at a high level.

Sometime in the seventies, when I moved to California, and especially after I started the Padua Hills Festival and Workshop, I abandoned the business, so to speak, of the Theatre World. I stopped submitting my plays around, gave up trying to find an agent, was tired of "competing" with other playwrights, and figured I'd be on my own. Luckily, I've been able to produce and direct many of my plays, mainly through Padua, and with the essential help of friends and family. I used to think that this abdication represented a weakness, a lack of enough ego, or confidence, or a personality defect coming from an inferiority complex. I don't think so anymore. Now I realize that I am a Theatre artist in search of a certain sublime perfection that can only happen on stage. That experience, called by Aristotle *Catharsis*, the experience of a higher level of Intelligence coming into the room via the action of the play, is what we are in search of; it doesn't have to be Tragedy, everything on stage, in my opinion, is tragic, because it is alive and will therefore be gone in a few

minutes. As Artaud tried to say, the heightened, prisms, sense of being on stage, is meant to awaken some yearning for meaning, some shared experience of human suffering in the world. That higher level I speak of, as Peter Brook indicates, is experienced by the actors, surfing the condensed attention of the audience, as a kind of freedom of spirit -- and it's made possible by the enhanced power of language, language itself, its music and its thought, its ideas.

Thinking about all this just now, I realize that the language I use on stage is directly related to the New York Poets Movement in the late fifties and on into the sixties, a poetic language based on street-wise rhythms of speech. I've probably said all this before, but it's striking how that influence, in my early adulthood on the Lower East Side, remains until now, more than fifty years later, as a force in me. It's what we call, or used to call, the "ear." The Sound. When to pause, when to stop, thematic rhyming.

Certain themes and ideas can only be expressed on stage, because of the stage, the ritualized format of the stage. Ideas are of the essence of a play. Actors need to be thoughtful and restrained. Not wildly emotional. It's not about that. They need to find the exact balance -- so much thought, so much feeling, precise movement isolated from speech (not reliant on behavioural crutches). Plays are also poems.

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