



Murray Mednick on the Primacy of Words and Language in the Theater

FEATURED COLUMN /

May 19, 2017

Murray Mednick: The Primacy of Language and Menu

HOME

2019 THEATER AWARDS

REVIEWS

FEATURES

EVENT LISTI



Playwright Murray Mednick as "Old Nana" in Coyote V: Listening to Old Nana at Padua Playwrights Workshop (circa 1980) (Photo by Margaret Von Biesen)

On a hot day in October, I visited Murray Mednick at his new house, just as Open Fist Theater Company was preparing its ambitious production of *The Gary Plays*, being directed by Guy Zimmerman, presented at Atwater Village Theater through June 2. (They're doing material from six out of the eight plays.)

Mednick is perhaps L.A.'s most entrenched playwright, having resided in Southern California since 1975 and writing singularly poetical-spiritual works saturated in wry, Beckett-existential and sometimes morbid wit. Mednick was the driving force behind the Padua Playwrights Workshop, founded in 1978 and home to the likes of Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes – a festival performed outdoors in the foothills of Claremont. It was at this festival the Mednick premiered his epic *The Coyote Cycle*.

Mednick's first play *The Box*, a monologue, was directed at New York's Theatre Genesis by Lee Kissman in 1965. Mednick had brought the pages to one of the Monday Night readings at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. Many plays quickly followed.

In April 1968, *The Hawk* moved from Theatre Genesis to the Actors' Playhouse— and closed after 15 performances. In the *Times*, Clive Barnes wrote that “[it must signify] an awful lot that I could only dimly begin to understand...”

We can take *that* as a critic's confession. Barnes was unable, in time for deadline, to articulate a message “fit-to-print” from the play. Other critics were “angry and bewildered.” This is a pattern that continues to the present. And the methods used to devise *The Hawk* were not so different from methods used much later for portions of *The Coyote Cycle* — as Mednick relates in the following interview.)

Did St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, where he discovered his vocation, have something like a secret door that connected poets and playwrights? Maybe. Aspects of Mednick's theater can be thought of as something like animated *calligrammes*, Apollinaire's delightful late inventions. And the Poetry Project started at St. Mark's in 1966. Alice Notley said that for a long time she wrote for the poets in that room — Mednick was present.

In 1970, he received an Obie for his three-act play, *The Deer Kill*.

Prizes are all right if you get one, though it's always good to bear in mind who gives them. Jack Kroll, John Lahr, and the wicked John Simon were on the awards committee that year. Mednick was recognized along with the playwrights Joe Orton, Paul Zindel, Megan Terry, and Vaclav Havel. (Genesis-based actor Lee Kissman also received a 1970 Obie — for his performance in Sam Shepard's *The Unseen Hand*).

What happened in Mednick's work between 1965 and 1970? A compass-setting, I think.

Mednick has said, “[We found that] you could use a certain kind of visual symbology... to great effect in a small space. We were really interested in discovering iconographic usages: what would have the resonance of an icon, a newly discovered icon, so that you could communicate directly to the audience's subconscious?”

Spare visual presentation, and focus on the sequence of language.

We sat in his living-room; beyond a glass door was his bright swimming-pool — the light and composition was like a painting by David Hockney. Mednick spoke quietly.



Norbert Weisser, Carl J. Johnson and Darrell Larson in The Gary Plays, Part 3, Charles Story, The Open Fist Theatre Company at the Atwater Village Theatre (Photo by Darrett Sanders)

STAGE RAW: *At Theatre Genesis you worked with Ralph Cook.*

MURRAY MEDNICK: I'd love to tell you about him. I've been thinking about him lately. For example, all [my] emphasis [on] text, and the text being the important way into a play — I learned that from Ralph... I was a poet on the Lower East Side. I was also a waiter — and other things. One of my friends at the time was an actor named Warren Finnerty, a very good actor. He was in *Easy Rider* — the guy at the gas station. He since has gone, of blessed memory. He took me over to Theatre Genesis one night and I saw a couple of plays there. That's how I got into the theatre. I saw a play called *The Inspector in Baggy Pants* by Lawrence

Ferlinghetti. That was Ralph's idea — Ralph was very interested in poetry for the theater, in poets writing for the theater. And so, he got poets like me interested. He said to me, "Just write something for the stage and I'll do it." So. He really would do it. He had made a program on Monday nights of readings of new plays. And you'd get these good actors down there. It became a thing, these Genesis Monday night readings, so you'd get to hear your work read by good actors. That's how I learned. Because I never went to school about theater — or anything like that. But I learned at Genesis. I learned about how it sounded, how things worked. But I was still a poet. And you start writing for the stage space and for live speech... That's a thing in its own right. So, that by the time I got to Padua and started doing the Padua Festival here, I had enough background to be able to teach what I had learned — In other words, you see the stage and you hear the dialogue from the stage, which is very different than television or movie dialogue. And certain things can only be heard onstage. They can only be heard onstage. There's a certain kind of thought that can only be heard through that medium... There's another level, above, that's invoked, or evoked, by the appearance of the stage as a medium, or vehicle, for a certain kind of experience... That's a special kind of thought. It's thought that has more than one resonance. This idea of levels of meaning is very important...

SR: What is theater poetry?

MM:: Yes. Well, first of all, it's rhythmic. And one's rhythms are of course one's own. Like Beckett's rhythms are a little different than Pinter's. But they're basically coming from the idea that the text is what's important. That's the unifying idea about poetry in the theater. The text comes first. Because all the actor's choices should derive from the sound and the movement and the rhythm and the textual implications, you know, the meaning of the text. Usually what happens is actors make interpretive and performative choices *before* they learn the text, *before* they know the text, *before* they've *heard* the text. So, that's a really important point... And then, poetry is, in a sense, it's a valuation of language. So, you can have what we call prose, it can be in that category, as long as it's carefully written and the writing is what's important and foremost. Not prosaic, let's say. Not necessarily realistic, even. That's what happens so often in the business and in entertainment. People are talking naturalistically, and the acting is naturalistic, the behavior is naturalistic, and the writing is naturalistic. And if you have a very good ear, you can get away with it and call it "poetic." But what makes it really poetic is that you're not stuck with trying to be realistic with the language, with character and plot — trying to catch the way people talk — then discoveries can be made. The aim is not just to catch the way people talk. It's what comes before, what comes after, where it's going. There's a kind of inner rhyming. And there's rhyming in the text — unexpectedly. And then there's the sheer enjoyment of language and wit.

SR: By "rhyme" you mean something other than the repetition of terminal sound — The rhyme of event?

MM: Yes. And the rhyming of theme. Of phrases and ideas.

SR: What about the rhyme of behavior?

MM: I tend to suppress behavior as much as possible in favor of the text. Because actors have come to depend too much on behavior. Because in television, behavior is the thing that carries the performance. Everything is according to, or dependent on, behavior. In a good actor, it's ok, I mean one doesn't mind that. But in the theater it's not that important. Language, speaking, is what's important. So, behavior tends to interfere. And I tend to discourage or minimize behavior when I direct.

SR: *I know.*

MM: You should know. But I like the movement to be crisp and choreographed.

SR: *A picture that changes when the units of the play change.*

MM: That's right, and it has to be coherent and precise. But that's me. Some people don't get into that too much. To me that's part of the poetry of the text, the corresponding movement, the transitions... They're just hard to do. Takes lots of repetition.

SR: *The transitions are where you get the most arresting visual experience.*

MM: Yes. They are visual moments. And there shouldn't be too much visual, besides that, going on. Except we've learned to use screens very well in my plays, just learned it almost by accident. But there's a place when you have — the kind of language I use — there's a natural place for imagery, if it's intentional. I mean projections. . . And they work really well in my plays. I'm not sure why, exactly. It has to do with the kind of writing it is. The writing doesn't demand a lot of visual aid. So, there's room for, if someone's really good at it, for corresponding projections that can be thematic and engaging. But indirectly. And that's interesting... Because the emphasis in my work is on the sound, there's room for an indirect, thematic progression of images... Of course, you don't think about that when you're writing... It's very interesting to me technically, and that's what gets me going, usually, to see if something will work. Like with the chorus idea, using the chorus as part of the text.

SR: *What does a chorus mean?*

MM: I was experimenting with what it means. The impulse came from wanting more voice, as the writer, to somehow be heard. So, it was kind of an inner chorus. So, that the text would be going along and at certain points you'd hear an interjection... An inner voice. And the voice is authorial, in some cases. It's commentary. And that led to experimenting with the idea of the chorus in other ways.

SR: You wrote *Tirade for Three*, the first of *The Gary Plays*, without attribution of voices.

MM: Yeah, the first version... Because it was so voice-oriented, I thought at the time that it would be interesting, in rehearsal, for the actors to find which lines they wanted to say. I thought it didn't matter, in a way. Because it was one whole, in a way, poetically. Except, when there was attribution, in the play, then they would step out of that mode and into a more usual dialogue format. More formal. But I thought when it was not in that format, it didn't matter, because the voices would speak for themselves. In the end the entire thing would find its own *metier*, you know, its own format. And I think it can still be done that way. It would depend a lot on the director. That's one way to go. Ultimately, I decided to attribute.

SR: You're making gestures that indicate a horizontal axis and a vertical axis.

MM: That's what should happen in a good play. Where both are going... It's the actor who is the — this was what Artaud was trying to say — it's the actor who does that transmutation. It goes through him. In doing so, as you know, being an actor, you can accomplish a certain freedom inside, that is hard to get anywhere else, in any other way... It's a state of grace.

SR: Like grace in sports.

MM: When you're hot. I agree. Except there's a little more... It has mind... And the audience shares it, they can share in it, if the actors get there and the play is good... They share the tension — the intention — which becomes almost a physical force. Which is irreplaceable and live... That's what makes it more interesting, for me, than movies.

SR: Watching TV or watching movies is an act of private consumption. But in the theater a group subjectivity may be formed.

MM: That's right. There's a unity. That's a real unity. And that is part of the ritual — in that sense. Because there's only one thing happening. There's a focus of attention. We're lucky to be in the theater for that reason.

Read [Part 2 here](#).