

## **SUBJECTIVE NOTES ON THEATRE GENESIS AND THE PADUA HILLS PLAYWRIGHTS' WORKSHOP/FESTIVAL.**

**By**

**Murray Mednick**

In 1969, I was invited by a theatre company in San Diego to write and direct a new play made from scratch, experimentally, improvisationally, as it were, based on some poetry of mine, now lost. It was to be called *THE SHADOW RIPENS* and ended up eventually, in different form, as part of *THE COYOTE CYCLE*. We pulled it off, I have to say, though I have since lost the entire script due to a computer failure. I bring it up now, because the event was a continuation of work done earlier by Tony Barsha and myself on *THE HAWK*, in New York – an improvisation experiment with actors.

We thought, at the time (it was part of the scene in those days), that anyone could work on stage, i.e., be an actor in a play, with the right training and attitude and something of a real text. This turned out not to be true, though we did come up with a performable play in San Diego that had certain good, even interesting qualities. It was a mixed group, mainly amateur or regional, but with some people of talent who could carry the play and deal with the challenges of the text and its ideas.

We first wanted to be honest and tell the truth about our lives, and so there was a personal and social emphasis for each character, upon which we could build in making the play, and a certain overall warning (gotten from Artaud) giving us a Theme: about a coming Moral Plague, which has come true, morally and otherwise.

There was one actor in the company who had a very difficult relationship with his mother, and the community of actors with whom we worked was a huge support for him. I didn't know him well and regret very much that nobody in the company could do much for him and his psychological problems. There is a certain terror, common to many, in performing in front of an audience, especially if one is untrained and/or unsuited for it, and one day the kid hanged himself in the theater.

I regret it to this day. The lesson, there, for me, was not to mess around experimentally with the inside of people's lives in the process of theatre-making, and from then on to write my own characters. Keeping things as professional as possible in the Theatre was one of the many principles learned in San Diego by us all. But, aside from that unfortunate incident, we did learn a lot, and were able to successfully perform the play. I'm grateful to the dedicated group of willing actors with whom I worked for those four months I spent there.

It seemed like it rained for the entire time. Hallucinogens, of course, were ubiquitous and affected everything, including our ways of working – experiments with awareness, improvisation, our somewhat mystical aims. I was using quality Mexican Red at the time and enjoying my relationships with the cast, but it was very hard work building a play from scratch.

Amazingly, we were able to bring it back to Theater Genesis in NY for a well-received run. The play was a hundred pages long and disappeared without a trace into a computer void.

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Back in New York, especially on the Lower East Side -- in the late Fifties, early Sixties -- poetry readings were important occasions in coffee shops and night spots. Readings were given all over downtown, at the Judson Church in the Village, at the St. Mark's Church on Second Avenue, La Mama, and at a few bars or taverns like the Cedar Tavern, on Broadway, and the Café Chino.

I was working lunches as a waiter at the time -- Mayhew's Country Kitchen on East Broadway – little red jackets, black bowtie, thick hamburgers with a nice pickle relish – and then nights as a server at the Five Spot or the Village Vanguard, the Village Gate. Sometimes I still worked as a waiter at hotels in the Catskills on weekends and holidays.

I was also retailing Marijuana and hashish at the time, running around with ounces of grass and squares of hash in a briefcase. My connection was a guy on Jefferson Street who was a distant relative of my roommate's. Jack H. Klein had been a quartermaster corps Army officer stationed in Germany, where he'd been able to organize a successful smuggling operation, buying and selling illegal products from the middle East, mainly Turkey. The stuff would come packed in drums or antiques, etc. Jack was also the first entrepreneur to start buying up lofts downtown. My own clientele was mainly the community of actors and artists and poets who lived in the neighborhood. I bought kilos from Jack and distributed ounces.

Reading one's poems was a way to get your work heard and to get around and meet people, to start making a literary reputation in New York, and living a literary life. Everybody read – young and old, the known and the unknown – the readings were social, political and artistic events, and it became crucial to learn *how* to read – in essence, how to perform one's poetry. Your style counted for something and was critically observed. Reading styles were manifesting the whole gamut -- from the bombastic to the utterly quiet. Some poets murmured, some yelled, some chanted, others enunciated the meter – styles were continually evolving. I was young and wrote short, street-oriented poems and was a shy reader, but I began to do readings a little bit, and did get to know many of the East Village community of poets and painters and anarchists (like the Motherfuckers) living in the cheap apartments of that community in those days.

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I also learned a lot listening to the Jazz in the clubs where I worked – Mingus, Coltrane, Monk, many of the great players of the time – like the structure of a piece: proposing a theme, elaborating on it, improvised solos. A certain defiance and daring. And I had learned to perform that special little act/dance called “waiting on tables,” at an early age (I was a 14-year-old busboy at a *Cuchulain* in the Catskills) and had even begun to perfect certain aspects of the profession: quickness, stoical equanimity, memory, and the ability to vanish and re-appear on time. That, too, was a performance, a dance. For me and a few of my friends, in any event, the listening to jazz and waiting on tables, and going to poetry readings -- and yes, experimenting with drugs –all these contributed to the development of what is now called “The Off-Off Broadway Movement,” so decisive for the creation of a new genre of American Theatre. It began with those poetry readings, because increasingly the readings had become identified as, and were referred to, as *Performances*. Gradually, props started being used, music was added, skills were even planted in the audience. And that’s how some of us got into playwriting, by observing directly the effects of language on an audience, and by sensing the special meaning of live performance. The next logical steps were a stage, a play, real actors, and cues. There was a *direct relationship* between the techniques and social milieu of the East Village poetry readings and the beginnings of Off-Off Broadway – especially as an experimental approach to language and a real anarchical willingness to try new forms. We skipped learning the formats for comedy and tragedy and American melodrama etc. and brought our experimental approach to language directly to the stage.

We didn’t go to Yale or NYU or go to plays Uptown. We took our talent and instincts and intuition about the uses of speech and performance and began to apply them to the stage by experimenting – a completely natural, trial and error expansion of the medium -- the *sounds* of organized language and ideas rehearsed into the coherence and complexity and dimensions of a play for the stage. After a while, we began to think of ourselves as “Playwrights.” And that’s how new forms and new concepts and innovative approaches to theatre began appearing at Theatre Genesis (at the St. Mark’s Church), and the Judson and Café Chino, and La Mama. These were all places that had begun by presenting poetry readings and, after a while, they started presenting our plays, plays more connected to the local poets and artists, the people of the neighborhood. It was also forming a new approach to acting, independent of all the usual methods of the day, the naturalism and psychologizing of the Actor’s Studio and other institutions that were teaching actors uptown how to make it in the Theater or the Movies or on TV. Those of us “downtown” wanted to find new ways to present the material, independent of the so-called Dramatic Arts. It was important, at least in my case, to understand the premise that what was happening on stage was *what was happening* and was not representative of some other reality. It

was a different way of understanding what Aristotle meant by *Catharsis* – the connection to another level of meaning – a connection only attainable through the live theatrical experience. Of course, all the approaches to this way of thinking were not the same, but one consequence, for those of us at Theatre Genesis was an approach to acting that was much more oriented to the text than to the interpretations or demonstrations of the actors.

I had a friend named Warren Finnerty, a customer of mine, an Off-Broadway actor, who was performing in a play at Theatre Genesis by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a “beat” poet from San Francisco -- a play called *The Inspector with Baggy Pants*. I was very attracted to the idea of using the techniques of modern poetry (free verse, New York street rhythms) on the stage, with experienced actors performing the lines in contemporary language, contemporary slang, street-talk. Warren (who later went on to play the guy at the gas station in EASY RIDER) introduced me to the new Artistic Director at Genesis, a tall, bearded, Midwesterner named Ralph Cook. Ralph’s position at the church was “Minister to the Arts”: The church already had a poetry program and other activities organized for the people of the neighborhood, and they had converted an upstairs storeroom into a “black box” theatre. Ralph asked me for something of mine that he could read. I gave him some poems, and when we met again, he suggested that I might want to write for the stage, as he was looking for young men like me to develop a new approach to theater – producing plays that were organically related to the people already involved with the Church, especially the young people of the Lower East Side. He said he would produce (and ultimately direct) whatever I wrote, and, at the very least, I would be heard at the special, open, Monday night readings he was introducing, at Genesis -- professional actors reading new material by young writers.

And so, the St. Mark’s Church, on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 9<sup>th</sup> street, became my second home. I began to learn that I didn’t have to be a lonely pot-smoking Poet on the Lower East Side – I could be a lonely, pot smoking LSD eating Playwright on the Lower East Side -- which I thought at the time was reaching a higher level of identity and status as an Artist. I liked Ralph’s approach – he always emphasized the text, good or bad, or, he liked to say, what was “underneath” the text, and he had a kind of Zen approach to finding the character and making choices -- mainly, that by listening to and adhering to the text, the essence of character and the “meaning” of the play would be ultimately revealed -- not by the personalities of the actors on stage, but by an adherence to the text, a process whereby patience was required and a certain non-interference. Ralph believed that there was a true Inner World in the writing, something integral and true, and that it was the actors’ task to help it to be revealed to an audience. Ralph once asked us how we wrote our lines, and someone said something like “one line creates the next” which was very helpful to Ralph in terms of directing. He had a mystical sort of faith that there was meaning created in language for the stage

that could only be found by listening hard, one line at a time, and he would restrain various choices -- of the light and sound cues and the staging, and the actors' performances, until there was a real understanding of the invisible undercurrent of the play. It was "mystical" also in the sense that meaning was associated somehow with his personal understanding of Christianity.

Rightly or wrongly, Ralph believed that there was something true in the hearts of the kids he was working with, truths that could be articulated on the stage as *revelation*. It was a different, more searching, way of working at the process of text to the stage, and toward the development of a new audience. Ralph was able to encourage that search in the writing and then demand attention to it from the very good actors we were able to attract and congregate in the black room upstairs at the St. Mark's church. The resulting style was hard-edged and crisp, and dark, reflecting the social and political turmoil of the times. I always felt, even in rehearsal, that what was happening in this process was an uncovering of something essential, not necessarily topical or political, or reformist or instructive, or representative, but a way of touching upon another level of reality. It was different, say, than thinking of playwriting as a career, or of performance as entertainment. The idea of a "career" was antithetical to the integrity of one's work. Or so most of us thought at the time. Truth is, I've come late to that requirement, i.e., of *career*, and I'm not sure I know how to handle it, even now, or how to even be interested in it, aside from the endless struggle to make money and survive.

The Author knows best about his own work. My favorite directors have been playwrights -- John Stepling, John O Keefe, Maria Irene Fornes, all of whom were stalwarts and friends of mine in the early days of Off-Off Broadway and The Padua Hills Playwrights' Workshop /Festival.

This was not planned: in 1970 I had received a Guggenheim fellowship and a troop of us went off to a compound in Progreso, a town on the northern coast of Yucatan. We lived there for five months, a time I remember now as a sensational interlude, a miraculous gift from the gods. Mayan people, my size, quiet and stoical with an aura about them of ancient knowledge they were keeping to themselves. Nearby were the archeological Mayan cities of *Chichen Itza* and *Tulum*. We had a contact in a cafe in town -- Moyo, a Lebanese Christian, semi-gangster who kept us supplied with cigarettes and booze and whatever else we wanted. The atmosphere there, in memory, is bright with wonder.

I had brought with me a stash of methadone discs and had begun gradually to cut down on using it. Not hard to do, but on the ferry from Campeche to Miami, on our way home, I flushed the whole stash down the toilet. I didn't feel the consequences until a few days later, back in New York -- you're

not “kicking” until you’re down to zero and then the shit hits the fan. And then we learned that we’d been evicted from our apt. in Brooklyn and that all our goods were in storage. And I was kicking. I don’t think I got a real night’s sleep for another year and a half. It is nearly impossible to kick methadone, so most people stay on it for life. But I wanted very much to become a part of the Gurdjieff Foundation of California, so I wished to be clean of foreign substances in the body – one that bloated the flesh and muddied the mind. Like I say, it took a year and a half, finally. It’s been fifty years since.

Arriving back from Mexico, we had no place to live. So my good friend at the time Sam (Shepard) said we could live up at his old farm that he’d bought in Nova Scotia, a forlorn place on the Bay of Fundy, where the tide is fastest in the world. We spent months in isolation up there. I remember using Navy Rum at night to deal with withdrawal anguish. The nearest grocery store was many miles away. One odd manifestation there in the Canadian wilderness was that the locals drew in breath to say, *Yes* -- startling, like a gasp. I don’t remember much else – rocky shore, cold rainy nights, rushing tide. We had no idea what would happen next. This was around 1972. Though I wanted to get back to the city and the theatre world, Theatre Genesis’ heyday was over. I hadn’t made many other connections. As it happened, my girlfriend’s grandmother died and we were invited to caretake her bungalow house in Laverne, California. A wonderful old house, porch all around, sheds, persimmon trees. A park across the street. I was in culture shock. Mexican country. Oakie country. The San Gabriel’s were yards away, but smog obscured them. I had no idea they were there at first. I kept thinking we’d be going back to NY soon as we could, but we got involved with the Gurdjieff Foundation (I liked the people) and we stayed on. I was able to find part-time teaching gigs around the area, including at Laverne University, down the street from where we lived. We made due with the help of food stamps.

One day the Chairman of the Theatre Dept. at Laverne, a man named Jack Woodruff, appeared at my door with a proposition. There was a place he knew up in the hills above Claremont that was ideal for some kind of resident theatre company, or workshop, if I would agree to organize it, invite my friends, install a group of actors, and we would invite students of playwriting and theatre generally to come from around the country. Laverne University offered limited housing for students and some actors and provide an 11,000 dollars budget or the first year. Mr. Woodruff, who’d been chairman of the theatre Dept at Tufts University, now semi-retired, took me up to the beautiful Padua Hills complex. It contained a theatre, a dining center, a kitchen, outbuildings and wonderfully theatrical outdoor sites. We couldn’t use the theatre because of fire laws, but the rest of the place was available for teaching and rehearsal and performance. We held workshops in the mornings, rehearsed in the evenings, had a rotating crew for dinners and clean-up. That year, 1978, we got started with a brochure, etc.

and I began teaching at Pomona College, then owners of the Padua Hills property. That first workshop went so well that we decided to prepare some of the work for the public and held a weekend of performances – that weekend went very well, and so we continued as a workshop/festival, including fully rehearsed plays by students and ourselves.

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In retrospect, I realize that what we had done was to continue the experimental ways of Off-off Broadway in the San Gabriel mountains of Southern California. We benefited greatly from our experiences in NY of organizing workshops and articulating our thoughts about writing for the stage at a high level of competence and lucidity. An example, aside from Theater Genesis, was The New York Theatre Strategy, which was an attempt at organizing Off-off playwrights led by Irene Fornes and Julie Bovasso, Megan Kelly and I. We understood from experience how to workshop and fill out forms and attract students and to produce and direct our own work. Most important, we could speak well about what we saw and heard of the students.

### **ON WORKING WITH ACTORS**

My own personal method is to stop and go, stop and go. And then to run it, over and over and over, until I get it right. You need to catch moments and work them on the spot. Gradually, the play begins to take shape by itself. After all, it has already been written. We don't need any added "stuff." As Ralph Cook, at Theater Genesis, used to say to actors, years ago, "stay out of the way of it." But putting the text first seems to have an orienting influence on the staging – i.e. not putting anything "on" it but letting the "character" emerge organically from the text. It's a Poet's way of approaching the problem of performance. Of course, the premise of "letting the text be first" must be accompanied by carefully choreographed transitional movements and a minimized use of behavioral crutches and/or props, stripped-down sets, and an absolute adherence to the principle of not speaking while moving, i.e. not upstaging one's words while traveling from one place to another on stage, but waiting, as I say, "until you get there." Another principle I insist on, for myself, especially given the so-called "vaudevillian" influence on much of my work, is to face front and, as much as possible, avoid playing scenes in profile to the audience.

This approach is also meant to avoid the emphasis on naturalism in performance – what Aristotle called *imitation* -- in most of the media that we watch. Acting in film and television and most theatre is, for lack of a better word, a form of naturalism for CAMERAS, where people are always doing something,

like riding a horse or drinking a cup of coffee or lighting a cigarette. Acting is NOT (and should be independent of) *behavior*.

When I was a kid, in the Catskill years (1946 – 1957), my father was the projectionist in the little movie theater we had in town, the Lyceum. It was only open on weekends – the program was the A picture Friday night – whatever was popular at the time, with a Star -- a Saturday double bill matinee with a Cowboy picture always one of the features, plus cartoons, something funny or silly, and then a repeat of the Friday night show in the evening. Sunday night was for adults and “serious” pictures. Since I could get in for free, I saw at least two movies a week. I’d walk right in, proudly waive up to my father in the booth, who would usually waive back. Then I would help clean up after the show and look for nickels and dimes under the seats.

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I’ve noticed over many years of trying to produce and direct my own plays, especially during the audition process, that actors generally are taught to overcome bad writing. Dialogue is often cliché-ridden and second-hand, and the difficulty is compounded by all those endlessly familiar story lines and talking runs.

Cover-up acting is making bad writing look good, or at least plausible. And the business being what it is, for the most part, that is what actors are taught in acting classes. There is a whole minor industry in the United States, especially in New York and Los Angeles, devoted to this axiom. And an entire audience has been developed that has become accustomed to this level of performance – that finds it acceptable and is put off if you don’t give it to them -- poor writing, easily understood storylines, basic premises, naturalistic acting, followed by a commercial – nothing too taxing. Entertaining. So, you have an audition and the first thing the actor wants is to do something that he thinks has *meaning* -- the real *meaning* of the piece is coming from him, from his so-called “acting,” because the writing can’t possibly do it by itself, even if the actor says the lines honestly and directly and on time.

Mercifully, at auditions, one wants to disturb this approach as fast as one can. It gets in the way. Actors don’t seem to have the time anymore in modern America to do the proper, more exacting, relentless and honest training regarding the simple saying of lines. How to speak onstage, as they learn in England along with the study of Shakespeare. “Stand and deliver.” Theater is first and foremost, in my opinion, a *literary* art which finds its life in performance on stage. Therefore, one ought to be well-read, and be knowledgeable about words and ideas. One must memorize. One must rehearse. Plays evolve inside out. Repetition. Research. Trial and error. Teamwork. Listening. *Thought*.



Plays, like airplanes, have a certain speed. To slow up to feature an actor's "moment" is to encounter turbulence and/or, worse yet, a crash. It's not good to slow things down too much so that "moments" can be found and deepened. Too much depends on timing. The lines are more important than the actor, and may live, one hopes, on the page long after he or she is gone. As the old-timers used to say: "*Louder and faster.*" Anyway, there is a proper rhythm to be found in a play that signals an understanding of the piece and how to stage (or "Block") it.

Meaning, interpretation, character, intention, motive, all that study common to acting classes, psychological and emotional, is, or should be, found in the text. Start with the text, the rest will follow. Don't do anything to get in the way of it, as Ralph Cook used to say. Rehearsal will get you where you need to be, eventually, and will reveal the true worth of a play, good or bad, for better or worse. Bad acting and/or over-acting can make a good play bad and a bad play worse. But the text will lead the way. The TEXT first, the text reveals what's necessary for the actor.

Life, after all, according to most people in America, is about money and glamour, or celebrity, not art, especially not the art of acting. My father worshipped Douglas Fairbanks and John Garfield, not the characters they played, which was incidental to the real event, which were the images of Garfield and Fairbanks on the big screen. (Actually, he did admire the character, *Zorro*.) Movie actors just walk in with it because they're usually playing themselves. Furthermore, it is a one-time shot. What you see on screen is what you get, forever. With a play, obviously, one encounters living time, in which the play changes – or ought to change -- with the audience. Timing changes, heart attacks occur, drunks fall, actors forget their lines, people walk out, and so on.

The art of theatre is mainly for the ear. Theater, in my opinion, is not made of visual high-jinks, spectacle, or the set. It's about the music of language, about speech. Much depends therefore on the musicality of performance – right tone, pitch, rhythm, pace and timing. Silence. Qualities of VOICE. And I don't mean musicals, no matter how smart they seem to be. It's an exaggeration of the medium. All that singing and dancing. There are exceptions, of course, but Beckett was right. He kept movement on stage at the absolute minimum – actors in ashcans or buried in sand -- so that the language and its silences could be *heard*. And not be distracted by hugging and dancing, and kissing, etc.

*Transitions*, of course, need to be minimal and crisp. No extra movement. No blackouts or dim outs -- I have tried to avoid entrances and exits as much as I can. Characters can enter or exit by standing or sitting or taking a step. On stage, every move counts and is, or should be, intentional. "Stylized." This helps

to get around all the visual and acting cliches that we've become accustomed to in the various media. The naturalistic imitations of "life," such as walking and talking at the same time, or playing in profile, and all the rest of it, are for the camera, not the stage. It's important to me that this distinction – between the "naturalism" induced by *cameras*, and the "presence" of being on stage – can be heard and felt in the quality of performance, in its stylistic integrity.

The movie star James Caan (I had been hired to write a movie about Meyer Lansky) once told me, years ago, in his trailer, that: "Acting **is** behavior." But, on stage, behavioral gestures must be minimal and intentional. As I say, acting, in Theatre, is not about behavior, it is about relating the text to the audience. Theatre is a special Art. It creates its own, specific reality, in which there are no unintentional, naturalistic movements – speaking lines while walking or playing with props, or sitting down or getting up, (think of all those kitchen tables and doors and back-yards). Get where you're going or do what you're doing and then speak. The language is thus emphasized at the expense of behavior. This approach (a Poet's approach, to be sure). is a good old, traditional, classical proposition in theater going back centuries – "stand and deliver."

I find myself wondering: what if I'd learned about play structure, dramatic conflict and all that – what difference might it have made? Hard to say. I did find a way on my own, through teaching and study and experience. I'm thinking now of **THREE TABLES**. No story, no plot – no characters, really, and yet a force is created by the movement of the dialogue going around the tables, sometimes sung, sometimes repeating, and ending with an existential warning. It's structured more like a jazz piece, something like Bud Powell or Thelonius Monk, that kind of tonality.

Play Front. Play **out**. Profile in the theater has become weirdly anathema to me. It's for television and movies. And there are no close-ups. Close-ups in Theatre are in the language as soliloquys or monologues. For those who do them -- always play *out* as much as possible, facing the audience. There's no camera on you. It's the words, the delivery, "the naked truth." And you don't ever have to look at the person you're talking to. You can look away. You can look out. The audience then can be a kind of mirror. Don't jump around in the way of the words. Be still. Be a vehicle for the text. The "character" you're searching for will then emerge.

The most flexible and open and free of all postures, or pretense, in my opinion, is that of the *Harlequin*. He is inwardly *still*. Silent. He scrunches down or scrambles up, but you will not contact his quiet world. It is distant, on another level. His suffering is expensive and hard-earned. He is aware of his suffering and understands the role he must play. He must wake up every morning in No-

Man's land. His suffering is great (as Artaud tried to suggest). So, you approach him carefully and bow respectfully. *The Harlequin*, to my mind, cannot be pigeon-holed or predicted, and he pops up like an athlete on a trampoline. He winks or smiles or cries. A great contradiction lives in him, and he is only saved by the reconciliation of the play, or the action, which he will present, sooner or later, to the Audience. More power to him -- the Troll, the Trickster, The Fool. He knows how to wait. How to suffer in silence. He is not disconnected to his body. One foot might move and not the other. His hand gestures are well thought-out and precise. He never compromises his inner life. His voice is a treasure house, his face is an open secret. He is suffering this life. He suffers you. He knows you are watching him. A higher power protects him. He serves this power when he speaks. He never laughs.

No performance is ever the same, because the audience is THERE, of course, and LIVE. Trying to pay attention. Basically, a LISTENING attention. You must know you are on stage in front of a new, live audience in real time. Sighing, sleeping, nose-running, coughing, noisy teenagers, grumpy old men, the blue-haired wife asking her deaf white-haired husband what the whole thing means, etc. But, as Peter Brook suggested, every performance depends on the living attention of the audience. The proscenium, the so-called fourth wall, is an inner phenomenon, a quality of inner concentration.

I have found, for myself, that Direct Address and eye contact with the audience, judicious and well timed, are sometimes affective, and can be powerful and helpful. The perennial Fourth Wall, in this case, is inside the actor.

*Projections* work very well in my plays, generally, so long as they serve and don't upstage the language. Why this is, I don't know, or can't explain. It may have to do with the nature, or quality of thought and imagery expressed in the text, which allow for the projection of corresponding, or enabling images.

Acting talent is a real phenomenon. It has to do with an innate understanding of what it means to be on stage. In the old days, I thought you could teach it. (As in San Diego in '69.) You can't. It's there or it isn't. In addition, an active intellect in the actor is a boon, as is the ability to memorize, "get off book," quickly, and to show up on time for rehearsal. Also, a vision of how one is on stage from the audience point of view.

All these principles, in my opinion, enhance the pre-eminence of the text and the stylization of performance.

Of course, "Who give a rat's ass?" Something to consider right there. Conscience nags me to get some of these ideas on the page and available on my website should anyone wander over there.

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Because the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival was produced outdoors and site-specifically,, an acting style began to develop in the company which had certain attributes: a physical sense of the space, an extra effort to be heard (an intonation not necessarily connected to volume), causing an enlargement of the non-sentimental approach to character and motivation, and a special emphasis on speech, language that could compete with the environment for attention, and direct awareness of the audience as part of that environment -- the sky, the horizon, the woods, or the buildings, and so on. The audience needed to be singled out, as it were, and held to the text. The set was the site, which was open to the environment. Over the years, an acting style -- one could say that a certain ironic attitude and stance on stage -- a certain distance -- evolved, a kind of exuberant ironic awareness of the situation. Courageous, as well.

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I was very influenced in all this by the Chinese and Balinese approach, with their small, precise movements, such as a raised eyebrow, a pointed tongue, a glance, a step, etc. -- staging that was choreographed by exact and quick transitions -- plus a vision of a simple stage "look", limited sets, and avoidance of cliché. No "acting." Avoidance of too much profile to the audience (actors don't need to look at each other all the time). Play "out." No movement or behavior while speaking.

As I said above, much of this approach was learned at the Padua Festival, performed outside, where holding the audience's attention meant no upstaging of any kind, including the walking and talking routine -- i.e. upstaging one's own text with various activities. Wait till you get there and then say what you have to say. Don't speak while traveling. That's for the movies. On stage, you are meant to be *heard*.

Presence on stage is an attribute of awareness. I know I'm in a body, on a platform, in front of an audience. The platform is like a magic carpet. I ride, or surf, as Peter Brook implies, on the organized attention of the audience. More and more, speaking for myself, I try cautious, judicious eye contact. "I know I'm here with you. Something in me, though, remains intact and in the play. Inviolable. I never leave the play. The play is my inner and outer world." Also, like I said, it helps to have a vision of myself from the audience point of view. It is a form of self-consciousness that brings a certain dimension to the performance, and which can be found in no other way. The question of merely demonstrating the inner emotional life of the character, and being true to it, as is taught these days in acting classes, is nonsense for the sort of theatre that I and some of my friends (now mostly gone) do -- maybe important in a film close-up, not so important on stage.

*Motivation:* The prevailing theory seems to be that one wants something and there are obstacles in my way and out of that struggle to get what I want in the play comes the so-called “arc.” The famous “dramatic conflict.” That may be true sometimes, in realistic drama, but for the most part, in plays like mine and others, the aim for the actor is to bring a level of awareness into the theater via the linguistics of rhythm, theme and circumstance – the main circumstance being the heightened awareness made possible by the stage. It is to be an instrument of the text so that “heaven and earth” can be connected. It is Aristotle’s *catharsis* caused by the evocation of another level of reality: Awe, pity, and terror, or, as I think Artaud tried to say, of the frailty and cruelty of the human condition.

Everything counts on stage. Every movement, every hesitation. Clarity of speech follows musically – one can think of it as a kind of chiming. A simple gesture, like raising an arm, is absolutely refined and timed. Timing is absolute. Sense the audience’s attention, and you’ll know how long to wait; sense the audience’s attention, and you’ll know when to move, when to speak. Gestures and spacing should be refined until they are absolute gems in their own rights. Envision in your minds the picture that the audience has of the stage. Transitions between scenes must be pristine and quick and minimal. Get quickly from here to there. It’s a part of what happens onstage, where everything counts. One can say that the perfection of timing and synchronization between light and sound and the movement of actors are an aspect of paradise, i.e., another level of existence, one higher than ordinary life. This precision approach to staging by the way is an aesthetic pleasure for audiences.

Of course, “the play ‘s the thing.” The actor serves the play, not the other way around. I (and others) have been known to assert that the playwright is the owner of the direction of the play, having written it out of the living of his life, and that it is therefore spiritually criminal to deprive this person of the joy of completion, which is about those fundamental choices of light and sound and movement. The life and death of a moment is usually cheapened by “professional” directors, mainly for the sake of a lower level of understanding, i.e., so the audience “gets it.” Playwrights, if they have the chops, in my opinion, should direct their own work. Directing can provide the finishing touches, or the final, or penultimate, draft of a play.

In Ancient Greece, everyone knew how the story went and what would happen in the end. But nothing new happens really, and there’s nothing new in the End. The issue is song, language, elevation of *thought*. Lamentation. For us, there is always the struggle for consciousness and understanding, and the question of *conscience*. In our time (and in the time of the Greek masterpieces), we are in the process of destroying the Earth and each other. And therein lie all plots. Plots can be subtle, thematic, contradictory, irresolvable.

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Plays are certainly not structured solely upon so-called dramatic conflict. Protagonist, Antagonist. Structure can be thematic, or musical, based partly on an “internal rhyming” of phrases and ideas, or based on contrast, contradiction, juxtaposition, stage events that are purely linguistic, not dependent on *plot*. Namely, who gets what in the end. Things do happen in plays and have consequences, but they can’t always be entirely explained. Plays can evoke the ripples of history, an “arc” we arrive at through juxtaposition and sequence and the historical projections of the set as various scenes are played out on stage. We all know what happened to these people, but the stage event is its own reality. The point is *catharsis*.

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Posture and gesture in the theater is part of the grammar of the whole. They can’t be left to chance, like any ordinary meeting in the street. Meetings on the street or in the bathroom or at a policeman’s ball, are automatic – naturalistic, mechanical, familiar. A question of Routine. When actors meet on the stage, a choice appears: shall I step up toward the gods, or do what I always do, i.e. what I did yesterday and tomorrow and what I will do and say again the day after. Because of the stage, and the honest aspirations of the play, another condition appears: one toward having choice within a heightened level of presence, made possible by the play. It’s in the timing. Maybe it’s a pause, or a look right, or a look left, or a look down, or a flood of tears, or a hanging. Myself, I prefer a good line delivered in the right way, body still, and then a timed and well-executed walk away, or look away, or a step back, a raising of an arm, a head turn, a glance at the audience, a trip and a fall. In any event, *not naturalistic, but unexpected, especially in the timing*.

A key insight into this issue is the idea (well known) that *dialogue is action*.

The actor’s so-called inner state is secondary to his mastery of the text, his understanding of, and service to, the text. Turns out, in rehearsal, following the lead of the text, all inner or psychological searches turn out to be useless. The play will find you and help you to know who you are in the play. Of course, all this might be different in the movies, when you have a camera up in your eyes and you must be feeling something or thinking something which shows on your face, having almost nothing to do with the magic of language, which contains the understanding of the use of voice and silence. It is an understanding of the question of what movement is on stage: *Heightened, precise*. Finally, an actor understands his role as an instrument between worlds, as a vehicle for *catharsis*.

Awareness of the audience and timing. Facing front and knowing when to speak, when to move. Little movement. Language creates the world, the circumstance, the situation. Sets are not necessary, because the scene is

*spoken more than observed.* I've learned over time to avoid all doors and kitchen tables.

From the point of view of *Catharsis* – i.e. a connection between levels of meaning – plays are ultimately for the actors. In performing as vehicles for the Text, and with support from the attention of the audience, the actors get to freely ride between this world and another world, a world, as the Ancient Greeks thought, of the Gods.

The question arises: does one write for an intelligent audience, or so that everyone, including the dazed and the stupid, can “understand?” In practice, one must be intelligent, or nothing new is discovered; there's no fun working with so demanding an effort, on so high an intellectual level, unless one does one's best, so the question becomes moot. In any case, one can't write like other people, not for long, and if you do, you are lost, and confused, so you must be yourself, as they say, and writing a play is one way to find who that is. (And then you sit there in the dark with the audience and suffer the exposure.)

*The Chorus:* A way to introduce thought, commentary, narrative, poetry. Very appropriate, in my opinion, for the modern stage. There are various ways to do this, and I've tried them all. Not in the old way of a bunch of people walking around on the stage, but as a voice, or voices. On or off-stage.

To be “precise” itself effects everything – timing, especially – when to move, how to move, how far and when – timing in speech: pauses, hesitations, tempo, volume – and, as I said earlier, is intrinsically a pleasure for the audience that is rarely experienced. A highly evolved precision in performance, including transitions, can only be accomplished through a rigorous, repetitive, demanding rehearsal process. There's no way around this requirement for serious theatre artists.

These considerations all have a special meaning now, in these days, politically, as the very meaning or value of the truth is called into question, or completely forgotten or ignored, by powerful phonies and professional, unhinged liars. Somebody must tell the truth and value it's meaning, playwrights and actors. And it's in the language we speak, in its rhythms and music, the sense of truth-telling or lies. We must uphold and re-enforce this sense, or I don't see anything good coming down the road in our seriously fraught times – with a degenerated political system, a criminal history and a whacko creep supported by half the country to be its leader.

**A few more notes on Padua and its influence.**

*In Writing for the Stage: See the stage. Hear the language from the stage. It's the SOUND that counts, not the IMAGE. Remember that the stage is like a flying carpet – for the Actors and the Audience. In a play, listening is more important than watching. While writing, follow as you Lead. The text is Action. At some point, if you have anything going, there'll be a kind of click or connection between levels -- levels of meaning, levels of thought -- and you'll begin to know what it's about and where it's going. A structure appears.*

*In terms of acting, actors get it upside down, they think the point of acting is being interpretive or explanatory -- but that's the writer's job. It's more important to let the play come to you, or through you -- as opposed to showing us what it is. It's important to be impressive or admired, of course, but the real point is what Aristotle, again, called "Catharsis."*

*A connection between levels.*

*Talent. That's what "talent" is – understanding the "meaning," of being on stage. It's not your attitude or your looks, though they do count, it's the service to the play, which confers an inner freedom and actual experience of the present (the magic carpet). It's not the behavior. The audience, of course, makes this possible, as Peter Brook suggests, with "organized attention." What organizes attention best in this regard, in my opinion, is a play written with this kind of intention, one that has real poetry in it, that understands and hears from the stage, the connection between levels of certain truths (like **conscience**) and the opportunity for meaning.*

*A good example of what I mean currently (a few years ago) is Kenneth Branagh, standing on the pier at Dunkirk, in the movie of **Dunkirk**, by Mr. Nolan. I would like to have heard his, the character's, thoughts at that moment . THOUGHT. In words. It's the only way we have of saying what we mean, and their stage for speaking in this case is an IMAGE. This is a sign of our so-called civilization. It's not do-able in a photo. A photo is NOT worth a thousand words.*

*Auditioning. I treat them as part of the rehearsal process. I learn a lot about the play. In a sense, I'm already working on the play, and so are you, the actor. The first thing is to stay out of the way of the text.*

*A little more on Stop and Go. I don't take notes. I like to fix things right away and find choices in the moment and try them immediately. So, I'll stop you and adjust on the spot. Then, when we've found the timing and the text and we know how and where and when to go, we run it. Over and over. Stop and go. I don't take notes until dress rehearsal and previews. Some people object to this, but that's how I work.*

*It's fun, really, and I hope I get to do it again.*

*Thanks.*



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Los Angeles  
Revised  
6/22/20**