

# Acting With Abandon

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



**W**HAT IS MUSIC TO MY EARS? The string section of the student orchestra of the Curtis Institute of Music rhapsodizing on Ravel's arrangement of Mussorgsky's "Pictures from an Exhibition." There was no question of the burgeoning musicianship of all the orchestral students -- brass, woodwind and

percussion sections included. Their talent rose, in Verizon Hall on a recent fall evening, to meet the variety of sound and scope of instrumentation that Mussorgsky/Ravel requires. But what was thrilling in the performance was their unstudied abandon. Because of their youthfulness, one imagines, because of their freshness and relative inexperience, because they are at entry level in the public performance arena, their playing is in no formulaic. They are barely formed as performers: there is nothing automatic in their delivery; their responses to the performance situation are un-habitual; they genuinely exhibit "Beginner's Mind." One hopes they shall never outgrow the will to play with abandon! To evoke "Beginner's Mind" may be the worthiest of intentions for a seasoned performer. To reach a state of abandon may be to live onstage in a state of grace.

In the Wilma Theatre's Philadelphia premiere of Tom Stoppard's "Rock and Roll," there emerged two contrasting acting styles: minimal and overly theatrical. The minimal style is characterized by an attempt to look natural on stage, like a real person. In Philadelphia, I often have the impression that actors either feel held back by the director or are holding themselves back. It can seem as if the director as Big Brother is sitting on the shoulders of an actor, if not actually giving notes in his or her ear, then just weighing him down, being a drag on his flow of spontaneous imagination. Or the actor is imposing limits on himself, so that the inner critic of Big Me is short-circuiting his imaginative impulses. The upshot is, what Stella Adler used to call, a repeat of yesterday's performance; that is, a situation of not breaking free of emotional inhibition, not surrendering to the given circumstances, not letting go of muscle restraint, not playing with abandon.

The tendency to hold back was in evidence in the world premiere of Terrence McNally's new play, "Unusual Acts of Devotion," produced by the Philadelphia Theatre Company. I truly believe that reduced rehearsal time is harming the theatre. Fewer and fewer hours are spent around the table in an effort deeply to understand the play; and more and more expectation is placed on preview performances, rather than rehearsals, for actors to develop their roles.

Then there is the overly theatrical style of acting, which recalls the cliché "chewing the scenery." (Which is, by the way, a phrase attributed to the 1920's Algonquin humorist

Dorothy Parker, who wrote in a review: "more glutton than artist . . . he commences to chew up the scenery;" while in fact, the phrase apparently appeared in print in the 19th century in an Idaho novel, a distinctly pre-cinema era, used in reference to a young fellow of extravagant and affected personality: "Lads, did ye hear him chewin' the scenery, giving himself away like a play-actor?").

While both extremes, minimal and overly theatrical, look utterly different on the outside, they are just about the same on the inside. Both are the result of the actor's not actually experiencing the emotional life of the role he's portraying.

I recently played Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night," under the direction of Robert Hedley. Bob has enjoyed an extensive directorial career, including New York credits among a slew of distinguished regional and university productions. He knew we couldn't play O'Neill by revving up to yell and wave our arms, or reigning in to make our lips quiver. He knew our master playwright wouldn't tolerate over- or under-playing. Stella Adler averred, "You have to be a star to perform "Long Day's Journey." Surely, you have to open all the channels of emotion and let the inside fully out, on a grand scale. There's no tin piano, player piano or toy piano in O'Neill. Maybe it's a baby grand, but its sound is rich and varied. It's genuinely theatrical, like an orchestra."

O'Neill attested to have written "Long Day's Journey" in "tears and blood," for the sake of "understanding and forgiveness" of his own forsaken family. His wife Carlotta reported that when he emerged from his study at the end of a day of writing, he would be bleeding through the pores of his skin. I mentioned this to someone who said, "Maybe he scratched himself," but after doing the play, I don't think so. The play is enormous. Right upfront, my director said the role of Mary is nearly impossible to embody. (Somewhere O'Neill confided he never meant the play actually to be played!) Her range of emotions is an ever-transposing musical scale filled with suffering. Her movement from one contrasting action to another -- from lifting up to tearing down, from owning to disclaiming, from blaming to confessing, from embracing to rejecting -- is staggeringly quick. Her anxiety and pain propel the long day's journey. She's filled with love for the men in her life and depleted by disappointment in these same men. Reminiscence restores her. Morphine destroys her. She's

an angel and a killer. I think the discipline and exertion that O'Neill put into creating Mary, and the entire play, was so colossal that he couldn't help but bleed. I can swear that I tried to put everything I had, known and unknown, into every crevice of the role -- all my heartbreak, mothering, craving and desire, disillusionment, condemnation, insight, forgiveness, childhood sorrow, and love. Then I gave it all away.

From an early age, O'Neill asserted his interest in the big themes, the spiritual dimension of human existence, man's relationship to ("for want of a better word") God; and he said that any writer who wasn't interested in the spiritual dimension was a parlor entertainer. You can't play O'Neill like a parlor entertainer. And you can't play O'Neill for very long or you too will bleed through your pores. I played Mary Tyrone every day but one, for a period of two weeks, and then when the playing was over, I became sick for three weeks. The actor who played James Tyrone, who was in fine shape and ate well, suffered a heart attack five days after we closed. He recovered nicely, thank heaven, and I'm quite all right.

The family of Tyrones (who were of course the O'Neills) haunted Eugene O'Neill, especially Mary Tyrone. She is practically a ghost already at the end of the play, so immersed is she in morphine and memory. The spirit of O'Neill's real mother continues to haunt the spare room of the actual O'Neill summerhouse in New London Connecticut (now a museum or, I should think, a pilgrimage place for all American actors). She haunted me for three months of rehearsal and performance. Letting her haunt me, letting her disturb and pervade me, letting her take over my life (and having a trustworthy director who believed in me) was what allowed not overplaying and not underplaying, but acting with abandon. ♦2008

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**JOANNA ROTTÉ** is a director, actor, writer and teacher. Her books include *Scene Change* and *Acting With Adler*. Professor of Theatre in the graduate program of Villanova University in Pennsylvania, she specializes in Script Analysis. She appeared in "Prayers of Sherkin," "The Visit," "By the Bog of Cats..." and directed "Summer and Smoke" at the Villanova Theatre. Ms. Rotté directs for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, a music adaptation of *Prajna* by the late Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and "True West" at Villanova University. Her Comments on Acting are available at: [www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte](http://www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte)

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