

SOUL TALK

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

Actors and Audiences

BEFORE THE STAGE LIGHTS went up on Ingmar Bergman's visually glorious red, black and gray production of Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, a handful of people were seated on the front steps of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, reading the play. How happy to be among an audience preparing for an evening of Schiller! How happy to

surmise that, if there were a handful of readers on the steps, likely several more handfuls had read the play before reaching the theatre! Bergman's *Maria Stuart* featured Swedish-speaking actors and BAM offered simultaneous translation by non-actors on headset. Because I wanted to hear the acting as well as follow the sense of the dialogue, I flipped back and forth from headset to stage. Then I split the difference: right ear to the headset, left ear to the stage. For Act III I dropped the headset altogether to relish the confrontation between Mary and Elizabeth unadulterated. Played by actresses Lena Endre and Pernilla August, the Queens met in an open park under a massive orange-red sky that turned black when Mary, insulted by Elizabeth, abandoned decorum to loose her fury.

The couple sitting in front of me donned headsets at the top of the show and kept them on, except that the woman immediately fell asleep and didn't waken until intermission when an acquaintance stopped at their aisle to ask: "Who was that man in red trying to embrace Mary? Wasn't he supposed to be on Elizabeth's side since she's dressed in red?" To which the woman who had been asleep replied, "Yes, it's very hard to follow." If these folks had read the play, they would have understood that Mortimer, the man in red in question, was, yes, supposed to be on Elizabeth's side, but in reality was a rebel enamored of Mary and scheming for her freedom. In fact, these folks could have understood the plot without having read the play; the events of the production were lucid, especially with a headset. But still, one had to pay attention — this was, after all, Schiller and Bergman — and at least stay awake.

Members of the audience for Christopher Nolan's film *Insomnia*, on the night I viewed it, also seemed to have trouble following the story, although not because

they were asleep. When someone gets confused at a somewhat complex movie, I imagine it is due to a habit of watching television. It's true that the voices of the *Insomnia* actors were sometimes quiet and their diction was not Shakespearean, and it's true that the plot was intricate and required attention. But isn't that the pleasure of viewing a mystery thriller, paying attention, so as to solve the mystery while experiencing the thrills? In the lobby afterwards, people were complaining: "Where did Al Pacino get that bullet and what did he do with it?" Or, "How was I supposed to know whose gun that was in the heating vent?" When I caught the movie, a group of teenage boys, besides talking out loud on a cell phone, paced the aisle to the concession stand and back, singly or in pairs, until leaving up front via the fire exit, singly or in pairs, about half-way through the movie. Surely they had lost interest and why not? What effort had they made to follow the movie?

For Steve Martin's adaptation of *The Underpants* (an early 20th century German ironic masterwork by Carl Sternheim) I was seated in the front row next to a young couple that was reading the program prior to the start of the show, when suddenly the man exclaimed, "You mean Steve Martin isn't in it?" Voicing irritation that they must have been deceived, he wondered if they ought to get up and get their money back. It seems extraordinary to harbor an expectation that a movie star would appear live on stage before one's eyes, practically in one's lap, at a small house on Union Square, which is where the Classic Stage Company (producer of *The Underpants*) resides. The couple had paid no more than \$45 per ticket, and possibly as little as \$20, and yet they were anticipating the appearance of Steve Martin. How fantastic to imagine Steve Martin performing Off-Broadway when Steve Martin doesn't even perform

on Broadway! By all appearances, Steve Martin is a comedian who performs the male lead in comedic movies and is not a stage actor even if he is an author of stage plays. As for the young couple, they stayed for the production and laughed out loud.

Audiences go to the theatre with varying degrees of preparation and cultural sophistication, varying degrees of the capacity to pay attention, and varying expectations. The variegated nature of an audience renders their responses unpredictable and uncontrollable, which is reason enough for an actor to abandon any thought of trying to please an audience. Which member of the audience would the actor try to please? Would the actor aim his performance at the person who had read the play, the sleeping woman, her awake husband, their confused but earnest friend, a busy teenage boy, adults with wandering minds, a couple who wants a different actor, or at me? The conglomerate nature of audience argues against the actor ever playing for the audience. What the actor can do is play for the scene partner in the presence of the audience. ♦2002

Author's Query: For a book about Audiences, I would appreciate any audience stories from the perspective of being an actor on stage or a person in an audience at the theatre. Please kindly send to: joanna.rotte@villanova.edu or J. Rotté, Villanova University Theatre, Villanova, PA 19085.

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