

Believing in the Impossible

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

Harold Clurman was not one to walk out of the theatre and he disapproved of fellow critics who would leave at intermission. No matter how unremarkable the production he would stay, the thought being that something interesting could always happen that mustn't be missed. That's a powerful reason for going to the theatre: to experience a moment that mustn't be missed. A history of theatre-going, such as defined in part

the life of Harold Clurman, may be remembered not so much as productions attended but as rare moments happily not missed. It seems to me what makes a moment memorable is that it's revelatory – revealing something essential about the nature of being human – and that it moves us, greatly. We are affected, even changed, and the affect is what we are happy not to have missed.

Jerzy Grotowski wrote that the actor is someone about whose work the spectator says, I could never do that. Grotowski's actors could move their ribs individually through breath control – a phenomenon I saw and haven't forgotten. But I don't think Grotowski meant technique only, though mastering technique is crucial in setting the actor apart. I think he meant the actor is there to make something awesome happen. There are, perhaps, three kinds of such not-to-be-missed moments and all three startle an audience, making them think, I could never do or be that!

The first kind occurs when something profoundly dramatic transpires, whether comic or serious. It may be simply an image created and is the result of someone's (or more than one's) artistic skill. I'd like to submit three examples from recent experience.

Philadelphia is fortunate to be home to the Academy of Vocal Arts, a conservatory for opera singers that accepts approximately 25 students from around the world each year for four years of tuition-free opera training. Over the course of an academic year, the AVA produces vocal recitals and four operas, one of which, this season, was Tchaikovsky's scarcely performed "Iolanta," the romantic tale of a princess who has suffered blindness from the age of one and whose father, to protect her from knowledge of her disability, has kept her cloistered and unaware of

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 "The Visit," "By the Bog of Cats..." and directed "Summer and Smoke" at the Villanova Theatre. Ms. Rotté directs for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, recently 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

the sense of sight. The opera opens on Iolanta's sixteenth birthday when she is beginning to sense there is something amiss with her. During the Introduction (written for winds only but at the AVA played solely on piano by music director Ghenady Meirson), Iolanta, performed by Manon Strauss Evard, was seated on a hobbyhorse, in a girlish dress, eyes closed, alone on stage. As the chromatic music became more and more ominous her rocking on the hobbyhorse became more and more intense, pitching toward paroxysm, until it seemed she would rock herself out of blindness and into seeing if only she knew what blindness and seeing were. The moment was jarring and unsettling and it persisted, mimicking the jarred mind of Iolanta. It's heartening when a director (in this case, Peter Kazaras) helps an opera singer inhabit and not just emote a role.

While opera singers likewise study at the renowned Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Curtis also trains musicians. The Curtis Symphony Orchestra in any given year is comprised of 100+ players aged fourteen to twenty-six. The culminating piece of the season, played in April in Philadelphia's acoustically superior Verizon Hall, was Sibelius: "Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43," conducted by Michael Stern. It was the musicianship combined with the innocent vigor and energy of these young players that melted me, most especially in the last two movements. As the program explained, "From the ashes of the collapsed second movement spring the manic strings of the third," whose momentum brought on the Finale movement, where a line in the strings, "a swirling storm," sounding both melancholic and uplifting, made me cry, just weep. In an instant the players ceased being a collection of musicians and became one existence, which, I'll venture, is the ultimate desire of an orchestra: utter attunement. At the end the youthful musicians looked exhausted, just depleted, and then they stood to the applause and their faces beamed.

In John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt," now on Broadway Cherry Jones brings a statuesque way of moving to the role of Sister Aloysius – a stern, determined and courageous traditionalist. To get up from a chair, she crosses her arms across her chest underneath the upper flap of her 1960's nun's costume, leans forward from the waist as if executing a jackknife, and keeping a straight

upper back, rises to full height. In my years of Catholic school with nuns galore, I doubt that I ever saw the precise movement created by Ms. Jones (though nuns would cross their arms under the flap); but through the body of Cherry Jones, the movement seemed universal (as if, but of course, all people in authority since time immemorial have monumentally risen to the occasion) and it seemed inevitable (as if: but of course, Sister Aloysius with her angular disposition must rise that way).

The second kind of memorable moment derives from the presence of the performer rather than from his or her work. This sort of moment accounts for the phenomenon of celebrity; that is, people whom audiences like to look at and want to see more of. Celebrity actors are not necessarily skilful actors. What they are is inordinately attractive people, and in our culture they function somewhat like public sculpture – to be beheld and appreciated as visual objects. Of course they are not sculpture, they stand in for sculpture, and they are not art, as they do not communicate by metaphor. They are themselves. They are beings of beauty and beauty is sufficient unto itself and not particularly revelatory, which is much the case with the beauty of Yelena in Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya," wherein she does nothing but move among the other characters and whereby Astrov and Vanya cannot stop looking at her move among them. Naturally, 'sculpture people' populate the media and movies but instances of actors as sculpture may occur on stage as well. Richard Greenberg's "Take Me Out" is replete with opportunities for memorable moments of actors as sculpture. After all, the majority of the cast is young, athletic and appears naked. The Philadelphia premiere of the play at the Philadelphia Theatre Company in May took seriously the opportunity for sculpture when casting actor Jacques Cowart II in the role of Darren, the leading man baseball star who comes out as gay. The audience was treated to various visions of Mr. Cowart's Greek-like body, which altogether left me without compulsion to attend to his performance. The charisma of his attributes was plenty to pay attention to.

In the third kind of memorable moment the performer links together the previous two, so that inordinate beauty melds with artistic skill. Maybe this third kind is the truly

continued on page 17



EUGENIA MACER - STORY

MAGICK MIRROR COMMUNICATIONS

NATURAL MASKS
USING INNER IMAGE TO
CREATE VISIBLE PERSONAE

CLASSES AND COACHING

EUGENIA MACER-STORY
POET/PLAYWRIGHT* & DIRECTOR



HONKY TONK TORNADO WARNINGS

by E. Macer-Story, AEA Showcase
Feb. Theater for the New City
Optioned for future 2005 production



JUST 45 MINUTES FROM PARADISE

by E. Macer-Story, Fall 2005
Midtown venue. Around The Town Productions.



CLASSES BEGIN MID-SEPTEMBER OR AS NEEDED

COACHING AND AUDITIONS:

212-727-0002 FAX 212-982-1148
315 WEST 39TH STREET, STUDIO 710
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10018

WWW.MAGICKMIRROR.COM
INFO@MAGICKMIRROR.COM
MINDSTYLES@AOL.COM

*MEMBER: DRAMATISTS GUILD
Inquire for specific dates and venues



MAGGIE FLANIGAN STUDIO

917-606.0982 studio
917-606.0983 fax

153 WEST 27th STREET
SUITE 803 NYC 10001

www.maggielflaniganstudio.com

INTERVIEWING NOW FOR FALL CLASSES

2 YEAR PROFESSIONAL ACTOR TRAINING PROGRAM - Meisner Technique

- Master Class - Contemporary Text
- Cold Reading/Audition Class
- Monologue Class
- Private Professional Coaching

Formerly of: The William Esper Studio, Inc. and Mason Gross School of the Arts, Professional Acting Program, Rutgers University

Believing in the Impossible

continued from page 7

enduring mustn't-be-missed moment. A quintessential example could be Marlon Brando taking off his shirt as Stanley Kowalski in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Somewhere Arthur Miller noted that no one before Tennessee Williams had written a male character for the stage quite like Stanley, someone sexual and not a gentlemen; and certainly no one before Brando had brought unvarnished male sexuality to the stage, moreover sexuality partially undressed. Arthur Miller was there in the audience of "Streetcar" and he said that when Brando took off his shirt women fainted. They fainted not just because he was beautiful but also because he was downright astonishing as a presence and as an actor. Seeing the movie of "Streetcar" many times over, I can unwaveringly understand how it could have happened that women fainted. I wish I had been there to faint as well.

This year the Academy of Vocal Arts graduated a tenor who if the world is fair will become a star capable of generating moments of the third kind: stunning talent plus stunning presence. He is Dongwon Shin, Korean born, and while still a student, he subbed as Radames in the Opera Company of Philadelphia's rich production of "Aida," when the lead tenor fell ill. I heard him sing an aria from "I Pagliacci" in an AVA concert in April at Verizon Hall and I heard his graduation recital in May. No mistaking, he has not the looks of a young Brando. He's not at all tall but is rather square and earthbound-looking, yet when he sings he is altogether connected – voice and body, heart and mind, self and song – and his being soars on the wings of a beautiful, powerful voice. Mr. Shin's unforgettable moment is the crescendo and it causes one's heart to leap. He seems to reach the rafters of the universe.

There is a theatre moment that was personal to Harold Clurman that did not occur within any of the plays, films, concerts or operas I attended with him. I don't know in what play it occurred, when or where it happened, though it was likely in New York, or who the actor was, but I'll never forget the story or Harold telling it. The actor was onstage alone and he was supposed to commit suicide by shooting himself in the head. He went to the desk drawer and opened it, and apparently the gun wasn't there. He opened all the desk drawers and searched the stage, and still no gun. He began looking for something else on the set with which to kill himself – maybe a knife, a poker, a rope, some pills – but there was nothing. He was beside himself with how to have the character take his own life, when, at the end of his wits, he came center stage, stood still, jumped up and flung his head around, came down, and exclaimed, "Oh, I broke my goddamn neck," and fell on the floor, dead. When Harold Clurman told that story he laughed until tears came and I laughed at his laughing and at the story. It's the description of a truly awesome moment. The actor's situation was terrible and his solution was absurd. But his solution was also ingenuous, and it worked because of his commitment to solving a devastating histrionic problem on his own terms, by believing in the impossible and making it possible and therefore believable to all. What a moment! ♦2005

Written exclusively for "The Soul of the American Actor."

Take a Chance

Be not enslaved by doubt and fears
And waste away the precious years;
Fear makes 'cowards of us all'
Living in fear that we may fall;
Fear leaves unfulfilled goals behind
And regrets for missing our chance;
How sad to leave the years behind
With unfulfilled promises on our mind;
Fear causes us to create dependence
And robs us of our independence;
Our countrymen gave their lives and
fought
For freedom they long for
sought;
One fleeting moment lost in doubt
Leaves a golden opportunity cast away;
Take a chance before it's too late —
The tides of time do not stand in wait.

BEBE DORSON

The School of Intimate Experience

continued from page 1

generated subconsciously, spontaneously, in the process of executing actions directed towards the gratification of a desire. The actor must, therefore, come on the stage not in order to feel or experience emotions, but in order to act. "Don't wait for emotions – act immediately," Stanislavsky said. An actor must not simply stand upon the stage, but act. Every action differs from feeling by the presence of the will element. To persuade, to comfort, to ask, to reproach, to forgive, to wait, to chase away – these are verbs expressing will – action. These verbs denote the task which the actor places before himself when working upon the character, while the verbs: to become irritated, to pity, to weep, to laugh, to be impatient, to hate, to love – express feeling, and therefore cannot and must not figure as a task in the analysis of a role. Feelings denoted by these verbs must be born spontaneously and subconsciously as a result of the actions executed by the first series of verbs.

Desire is the motive for action. Therefore the fundamental thing which an actor must learn is to wish, to wish by order, to wish whatever is given to the character. An actor who is a mere journeyman does the opposite of what nature demands from him and what the school of Stanislavsky teaches. He grasps with bare hands at feelings and tries to give a definite form to their expression. He always begins from the end; that is, from the final ends of his part, Stanislavsky used to say.

In life a man who weeps is concerned about restraining his tears – but the actor journeyman does just the opposite. Having read the stage directions of the writer (He weeps), he tries will all of his might to squeeze out tears, and since nothing comes of it, he is forced to grasp at the straw of the stereotyped theatrical cry. The same is true of laughter. Who does not know the unpleasant, counterfeit laughter of an actor? The same takes place with the expression of other feelings.

Thus we may say that Stanislavsky did not invent anything. He teaches us to follow the road pointed out by nature itself. ♦1920

These notes are from the diary of Vakhtangov and were originally translated for the use of The Group Theatre in its acting classes. Excerpts from *Preparing for the Role: From the Diary of E. Vakhtangov* by Eugene Vakhtangov. This and other influential and important essays on acting can be found in *Actors on Acting* edited by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy. Published by Crown Publishers.

"One must not stand still. The world goes so fast that each decade there is a sort of different note in the air. One must find it."

— John Gielgud

H.T. Chen & Dancers Blurb

H. T. Chen & Dancers celebrated its 25th anniversary two years ago, and has performed and has conducted residencies throughout the United States. They have also performed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Germany, and for the past several years at the LaGuardia High School's Dance Department in a special mentorship project.

The Company also founded in 1980, a performing arts school that provides training in dance and music classes to over 250 students each week. In 1988, they founded the Mulberry Street Theatre, a professional performing arts complex that supports the work of emerging artists.

Mr. Chen was born in Shanghai, China and he was raised in Taiwan. He developed a poetic voice for the struggles of Asian Americans, as well as the human condition, and has taught at New York University in the Department of Dance.

He has worked with Dance Theatre Workshop's Artists Exchange Program and as an Arts America Speaker. In 2002 the Company received the New York State Governor's Award, and Mr. Chen has been the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Organization of Chinese Americans (Long Island Chapter), and the CUNY Asian Alumni Award for Outstanding Community Service. His work includes "Meditation of a Drunken Peacock" and "The Dream."

Mr. Chen's recent work, "Heart of Grace," a premiere which was seen recently at the Dance Theatre Workshop, featured the dancers: Sarah Godbehere, Renouard Gee, Antoine Gadpaille, Linn Huang, Kayan Lam, Lunshan Liad, Li-Ann Lim, Despina Sophia Stamos, and Dito Sudito. "Heart of Grace" explores the façade of the ancient mask in the traditional lion dance to the caged within, and is filled with exotic dance movements, imagery, mystery, strength and color. The work was commissioned by the American Music Center Live Music for Dance Program.

H. T. Chen & Dance Co. Inc. 70 Mulberry St. 2nd flr, NYC 10013, (212) 349-0126. info@htchendance.org, www.htchendance.org. ♦Fred Berliner

"People talk about slow motion in my pieces...that's

wrong. It's NOT in slow motion, it's in natural time.

Most theatre deals with speeded-up time, but I use

the kind of natural time in which it takes the sun to

set, a cloud to change, a day to dawn. I give you

time to reflect, to meditate about other things than

those happening on the stage. I give you time and

space in which to think."

— Robert Wilson

New York City
212 472 1071
by appointment

NARAYAN
P H O T O G R A P H Y
HEADSHOTS FOR THE ACTOR

www.NarayanPhotography.com