

Creating An Audience

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



IN THE MONTH OF APRIL, Villanova University ran the Philadelphia premiere of "Urinetown," directed by Peter Donohue, who is leaving his post as Theatre Department Chair to become President of the university. Back in 1986 when I was appointed Theatre Chair, I was somehow imbued with the good sense to bring Peter on as Production Manager. Peter is an Augustinian priest and my first sight of him was in a Joe Orton play, being funny, talented,

reckless and generous all at once. At the time I didn't know what insightful casting it was to choose Peter for an administrative staff position. He traveled from Production Manager to a doctoral theatre program in Illinois, and returned to Villanova as head of theatre, where he's resided for 14 years. He's become an award-winning director of musical theatre and is likely the first person in academic history to ascend directly from a theatre office to a presidency. It could be said to be a path modeled by Ronald Reagan.

"Urinetown" was chosen for the season before Peter knew he was to become President. It may well be his swan song directorial achievement; and being a satire of musical theatre, "Urinetown" is a fitting cap to a career in musical theatre. Opening night was a hoot and holler success, with the spectators sensing the director saying goodbye to them and the genre. Everyone gave over wholeheartedly.

Audiences, I believe, are unaware of how crucial their participation is in the realization of a performance. Theatre is the only art form whose vitality is dependent upon audience interaction. Next down in audience-dependency would be rock concerts. The expectations placed upon audiences by the theatre are high and wide: concentrated attention, emotional involvement, audible reactions, suspension of disbelief, and communal engagement. Actors can feel the temperament of an audience – if they are uniting or dispersing, giving or withholding, invested or indifferent. The audience is a participant in creating a significant theatre experience through their shared responsiveness; and the more they participate, the greater their compensation for the price of a ticket.

In *Creating a Role*, Stanislavsky wrote: "The conditions of having to create in public... encourage..."

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communion, because the atmosphere of a performance, heavily impregnated with the nervous excitement of the crowd, serves as the most effective channel for an actor's creativeness. The mass feeling enhances his feeling of being electrified, it intensifies the atmosphere in the auditorium, and it increases the flow of inner currents."

In my most recent venture on the Villanova stage, playing Hannah Hawke in "Prayers of Sherkin," directed by James J. Christy, and written by Sebastian Barry (author of "Steward of Christendom"), I experienced a memorable opening night audience. I wish I could have packaged them to redistribute to other actors on other opening nights. I wish their kind had shown up for every performance of the run. But alas, the audiences for "Sherkin" were mixed – some reached out, some withdrew. It's bittersweet when the best audience comes first: an awesome opening and then waiting for the awe to return. What was distinctive about the opening night audience is that they listened – I could feel them listening – and with "Sherkin," if you wanted to experience the play, you had to listen. The cast was using three different Irish dialects, and Sebastian Barry is a language playwright. He writes lyrically. The "Sherkin" action is largely internal, subtler than Chekhov even. There's virtually no battle in the play, no fighting. Characters disagree and are at odds but they come to resolution through acceptance and not through blows. The acceptance is hard earned at the price of self-sacrifice, and nobody wins. They endure. They try to be kind to each other. They live their lives.

I remember maybe ten years ago attending a women's theatre panel featuring Judith Malina and Erica Monk where the topic was the need for new myths in our culture and new (feminist) paradigms for playwriting, debunking the (masculine) model of conflict as the source of drama. Sebastian Barry seems to be creating a new (feminist) paradigm. Conflict is not the centerpiece of his work; and he's giving us emotionally mature characters (rather than 20, 30, 40, and 50 year-olds struggling to grow up, as is the tendency with various modern characters – the Tyrones, the Lomans, the Kowalskis, Mamet characters, Neil LaBute characters, etc.); and he's sympathetic to women. Sebastian Barry was artist in residence at Villanova for the spring semester, and on one occasion he revealed that when he and his wife married he resolved to advise their

children, girls and boys alike, to marry women!

A few of the critics who came to "Sherkin" recognized a fresh face in Barry. "The City Paper" critic wrote: "Ten years ago I would have found this play boring, my wife admitted afterward, saying more about maturity and modern culture than about 'Prayers of Sherkin,' which some spectators, denied familiar storytelling clichés, may reject... Fanny Hawke [the jeune femme] bravely goes 'like a dreamer to wake in a new world,' and in its deceptively simple way, Barry's lovely play challenges us to take the same journey." Another critic, writing for Philadelphia's major newspaper, "The Inquirer," did reject "Sherkin": "This play is, finally, not dramatic."

When I mentioned my theory to Sebastian Barry that he's bringing a new (feminist) paradigm to playwriting, he offered how that's what a British critic noted when his work was first produced at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, that he's creating characters without hostility. But then, he said, Martin McDonagh ("Pillowman") emerged in Ireland and violence reclaimed the day. McDonagh, compelling voice that he is, has reportedly stopped writing plays, because, he said, "I think I've said enough as a young dramatist. Until I've lived a little more, and experienced a lot more things... I want to... grow up, because all the plays have the sensibility of a young man." I wonder if Barry's mature sensibility will enjoy the return of the day?

Building the role of Hannah Hawke was altogether a unique adventure. I learned from Sebastian that Hannah is based on his great aunt and is essentially the same woman as the title character of his novel *Annie Dunne*, even though Hannah's and Annie's stories and circumstances are dissimilar. Barry writes intuitively, applying imagination to people and events from his family history. With the novel *Annie Dunne*, I had Hannah Hawke's inner life written out for me – emotions, thoughts, feelings, and sensations as well as attitudes, values, qualities, and motivations. I had more psychology than I could use to create a role! Still, I needed to do the physical work. In the play Hannah is described as having a bowed back, and so is Annie in the novel. I started by hunching up my shoulders and rounding them forward. From there I went to my memory of a next-door neighbor, a spry and elderly Irish woman, Mary McBride, who would talk to me over the backyard fence wrapped up in sweaters and crossed arms, like with

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Marian Seldes: An Actress for Our Age

This past March a memorable "Evening with Marian Seldes" was presented at the T Schreiber Studio. Introduced by Terry Schreiber with a glowing introduction, he began by saying: "It's a tremendous honor to welcome Marian Seldes here. If this was England, she'd be a Dame." "I am a dame!" Ms. Seldes replied joyfully. Soon this legendary actress regaled the enthusiastic audience of acting students and those who had come to his informal evening, with her extraordinary life experiences on stage and off, and her deep-seated passion and love for the theatre and the art of acting.

The daughter of noted author Gilbert Seldes, she began her studies at the Neighborhood Playhouse under the tutelage of Sanford Meisner and Martha Graham.

With her first appearance on Broadway in 1947 opposite Judith Anderson in "Medea," Marian Seldes' legendary career was followed by "Tower Beyond Tragedy," "The High Ground," "That Lady," "Ondine," "Crime & Punishment," "The Chalk Garden," "A Gift of Time," "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore," "Tiny Alice," "Father's Day," "A Delicate Balance," "Equus," "The Merchant," "Ivanov," and her Guinness Book of World Records performance in "Deathtrap" which lasted from 1978 until late 1982, without her ever missing a single performance.

Off-Broadway, she was seen in "Tongue of a Bird" opposite Cherry Jones, "Different," "The Ginger Man," "Mercy Street," "Isadora Duncan," "Painting Churches," "Richard II," "Richard III," "Gertrude Stein & a Companion," "A Bright Room Called Day," "Another Time," "The Boys from Syracuse (Encores!)" "Three Tall Women," and at the

Williamstown Theatre Festival in "The Royal Family," "Dead End," and "The Matchmaker."

Ms. Seldes began acting in television in 1952 and has appeared in over 80 different series appearances and such films as "Mona Lisa Smile" and "The Haunting," as well as in 179 episodes of CBS' Radio Mystery Theater. She has recorded *Willa Cather*; penned a novel, *Time Together*; her autobiography, *The Bright Lights: A Theatre Life*, a most beautiful book to read about the theatre; and articles in "The New York Times" Arts & Leisure, Book Review and Travel Sections, and for "Victoria Magazine" and "American Theater." Her marriage to noted playwright/screenwriter Garson Kanin lasted for many years until his death.

Currently nominated for a Drama Desk Award for her scintillating performance in Terrence McNally's new play: "Dedication of The Stuff of Dream." Ms. Seldes also received a Tony award for "A Delicate Balance," a Tony nomination and Drama Desk award for "Father's Day," a Drama Desk nomination for "Ivanov," Obies for "The Ginger Man" and "Isadora Duncan," a Connecticut Critics Award, Ovation (LA) Award and Helen Hayes award nomination for "Three Tall Women," and was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1996. Devoted to sharing her love for the stage, Ms. Seldes taught at the Juilliard School from 1967 till 1991, and in 2002 began teaching at Fordham University.

Ms. Seldes began by saying: "I'll tell you, the most important reason I'm here is not because of me. It's the opposite. I had people who believed in me when I began, those whom I studied with at the Neighborhood Playhouse. I'm here because of them. I've had a wonderful life and it's still going on. So don't give up hope ever. The dream each of you has should remain vivid. I never wanted fame or money. I wanted to belong to the community and to do the very best work I could. You have to trust it. It will give you a wonderful life. Life is so precious – it's about sharing that joy. When I studied with Martha Graham, she told us: "The unique must be fulfilled." Think of yourself as unique. It's up to you to believe in yourself and to give back to the theatre."

"I grew up in New York City so I was able to go to the theatre when I was young. I remember seeing "Krapp's Last

"There is grandeur in stillness, and it is the eye that is the mind's signal and the soul's interpreter. It is the actor's chief business to express the emotion of the human heart. The eye discloses the tumult that rages within, and speaks of the inner thought even more completely than can the tongue. It has a language of its own – an expression that is as far above any language as the eternal firmament is above the ephemeral butterfly."

— Julia Marlowe

Tape" and Edward Albee's "The Zoo Story" in the early 60's and I was enthralled. Those two plays made an enormous impression on me and then years later in 1967, I played Julia in "A Delicate Balance." I had hoped one day to play in a play by Edward. And I did; it meant so much to me. The first reading was in his house in Greenwich Village. I thought about how those actresses must have felt in the Moscow Art Theatre when Chekhov said to them: "This is your play."

And then in 1993 I played in "Three Tall Women," and when the play moved from the Vineyard to the Promenade, Edward received the Pulitzer. It's been more than I could have dreamed of – to work in such works by a writer I revere."

Ms. Seldes went on to describe how she works on a play by Mr. Albee: "It is like a musical score, with notes and rests and ellipses. If it's two periods, you pause."

Then Mr. Schreiber asked Ms. Seldes how she approaches a role. "My way of working is to approach every script, every play, as if it's new. I prepare very carefully; I don't have a work of working. I prepare very carefully, you have to give it the care and love. You have to fall in love with it. I'm always anxious to see what the costume designer thinks what I'll look like. I just love props! I also love to watch physical behavior on stage. A wonderful actor doesn't just make the transformation in their heart and mind but in their body."

Then Mr. Schreiber asked her about working with a director. "No one can tell you how to act," Ms. Seldes replied. "A director demands result, so how do you handle it? You make it work for you. I come from a theatre where you didn't interrupt the director. I worked with wonderful directors: Guthrie McClintic, Alfred Lunt, Herman Shumlin. They would "demonstrate" what they wanted in those days. They had been brought up in a time when ladies wore gloves and hats to the first rehearsal. When I worked with John Gielgud, I wrote everything down he said. I constantly read the play. Those of us who work in the theatre, we don't come in to show off our temperament. The theatre makes you healthy. Aristotle said the theatre is a medicine – that's why people come."

Ms. Seldes then talked about seeing certain actors on

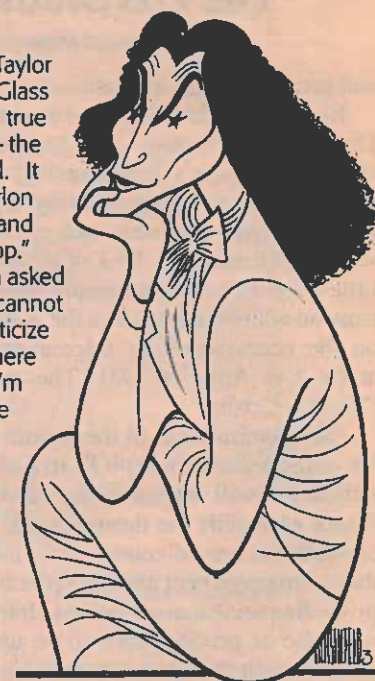
stage. "I saw Laurette Taylor three times in "The Glass Menagerie." It was so true and so honest, so real – the reality was wonderful. It was the same with Marion Brando in "Streetcar," and Kim Stanley in "Bus Stop."

A student actor then asked about the audience. "I cannot bear it when actors criticize the audience. There comes a time when I'm burning for an audience to teach me the rest of my performance. Some of them have saved for week to buy a ticket and we owe them everything." An actress asked about auditioning. "I've always been willing to audition for any part I've wanted to play, I still do. You need to know the ground rules of the audition. If there's a reader, then

you imagine them as the person you want to be talking to. It's up to you to make the event work. Use everything you can to bring alive what the playwright has given you."

She ended by saying: "If there is less of the kind of theatre we would like to see, it's up to you to create the kind of theatre you would like to exist. I think the theatre is like a religion; I feel this. Make the theatre what you want it to be!"

◆Ronald Rand



Marion Seldes in "Equus"
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one hand holding up an elbow and the other cupping her chin. Mrs. McBride's covering-up behaviors made sense for Hannah, who is an old maid virgin, self-conscious of her bowed back, and long-suffering. I started with Annie's spine, added Mrs. McBride's protective postures, and found the body of my Hannah.

When I talked to Sebastian about his great aunt, his inspiration for Annie/Hannah, he mentioned she could be sharp in speech and off-putting to adults, but that children loved her. She was, he said, his favorite person from childhood. It was a luxury to consult with the playwright and it was formidable to play a favored person from his life. I can hardly imagine how stunning it would have been to play Mary Tyrone if O'Neill had been in the house (which he never was), or Laura in "Glass Menagerie" when Tennessee Williams was on board!

Sebastian Barry saw only a dress rehearsal of "Sherkin" and not a performance. He doesn't sit in the theatre for his own plays. He's not fond of being among the audience. As a director, I sympathize with his reluctance. When I've directed, I'm unfit for absorbing audience remarks. It's not that the remarks may be negative but that they necessarily may be superficial, while I, and the cast and designers, have reached into our guts to bring the play to life. As a director, I prefer not to overhear the audience. Harold Clurman told me he used to sit on the curb across the street from the theater on his opening nights and stare at the marquee until the show let out. Also, things can go wrong on stage and witnessing wrong-goings can be killing for a director. On the opening night of my production of Sam Shepard's "Tooth of Crime," at the very top of the show, just as the live band was kicking in to rock the house, the lead actor playing Hoss grabbed the microphone out of its stand and wailed into it, but no sound emerged. He was singing but the band drowned out his un-amplified voice. I fled the theater and then someone flipped a switch on the soundboard and the microphone came on, but the song was almost over and the show was ruined at the start. To this day I regret having run from the theatre instead of having run on stage to call a halt and direct the band to begin again. I think the audience would have gone along with take two. (Better yet, it would have been if the actor playing Hoss had silenced the band and ordered them to start over, which he could have done, playing the King of Rock'n'Roll, but that level of spontaneous finesse requires immense mindfulness. The actor later told me he had

thought of starting over, but of course thinking of it was too late. The actor has to already have done it without thinking.)

On the opening night of "Sherkin" the fire alarm went off in the building. The play required candle-making on stage, and the off stage preparations had gotten out of hand, filling the corridors with smoke. The audience waited outside until the smoke cleared and then they came back in, everyone of them. We picked up the show at the top of the scene that had been interrupted, and the audience was with us. Nobody abandoned the play. How could anyone have left? They had formed one body, then they went outside for some air, and then they reformed as one body, and no one was going to be the cause of an amputation.

Sebastian Barry was in the building on opening night. He was surprised by the audience responsiveness, how in tune to the play they were, laughing at every possible turn, "as if they were an Irish audience," he said. He experienced a successful transplant of "Sherkin." By paying attention, the opening night audience universalized the play for the playwright, the actors, and themselves. "Sherkin" became not an Irish story but our story.

In the run, extraordinarily, the fire alarm went off again, for a different reason. This time some of the audience didn't wait for the 'all clear.' Some of the audience left. They were a different audience. They hadn't made themselves 'one body.' They hadn't merged. So it wouldn't have been so indiscreet for someone to peel off and exit.

I'd like to give a mini-course nationwide in audience preparation, helping people compose themselves for becoming spectators of live performance. Moreover, I'd like theatres to offer a preamble before every performance, something that is not the cell phone and candy wrapper speech, nor the seeking donations speech, but something respectful and non-patronizing that orients the audience to the distinct tone, tenor, style and ideas of the singular production in which they are about to share and requests the honor of their participation in creating the event. Audiences need to know they play a lead role in making theatre. ◆2006

Written exclusively for "The Soul of the American Actor"

"The thing an actor needs the most is courage."

— Joan Littlewood