SOUL TALK

"Reality Theatre"

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

ALL PLAYS ARE IN SOME SENSE POLITICAL if only in that all plays establish a power structure among characters. Clov succumbs to Hamm's impotent power in "Endgame." Konstantine struggles with his mother's star power in the "Seagull." Stanley and Blanche upend each other's realm of power in "A Streetcar Named Desire." In more overtly political plays, that is, in the plays of Ibsen or Miller or Brecht or Mamet— a character may do battle with a society or a system or an ideology or even a government. It's important for actors to digest the politics of a play. I had an immensely talented scene partner in college who went on to play Marat in "Marat/Sade" in graduate school before he began a career on Broadway that was cut short by death. He said that "Marat/Sade" had politicized him personally, and none too soon, he said, for the sake of his acting— that he matured as an actor through understanding his character in terms of the play's power situation. So if not through working on a play as explicitly political as "Marat/Sade," how may actors begin to comprehend how power operates? By observing the political life of the world! At this time in American history the governing power appears to be operating through what Tennessee Williams in "A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" calls mendacity.

For example, at least three recent books that reference the behavior style of the current White House administration feature the word lie in their title. One wonders if it has become presidential policy to hide, mask, evade or in some way dismiss reality for the sake of holding onto power. We appear to have a condition of: 'Say it is so and it is so!" In other words, in respect of Pirandello, "Right You Are— If You Think You Are."

In his book The Life of the Drama, theatre critic Eric Bentley wrote:

"The statesman and his mob run the public part of reality with the help of surrealistic fantasies in which they probably even believe: hence the monolithic sincerity which makes it possible for them to talk balderdash with a straight face. How well anybody who has lived through one of their wars remembers their reiterated declaration that our side, whichever our side was, was going to win *because we were right*! In the fantasy of villains and heroes— the fantasy of melodrama – victory for the heroes goes without saying."

Not unlike the "statesman and his mob" (if one accepts Bentley's generalization), the theatre is dependent upon lies but with entirely different intentions. In the theatre, where everyone knows the play is a fiction, where actors and audience alike agree to suspend disbelief for the course of their time together, the lie provides an opportunity for something not a lie to be revealed. That something is a vision of reality, and not a version. While reality is not easily realized in the theatre, it is the highest aim.

When the State dispenses fiction it treats it as nonfiction and asks its audience to suspend disbelief, not for the duration of two hours in a darkened theatre, but for a lifetime in broad daylight. When to hold sway and not to explore reality is the aim of the political state, then politicians will tend toward simplistic views. Their pronouncements will diminish and not illuminate the complexity that is reality.

In the theatre, a simplistic view is called melodrama. The complex view is called tragedy or comedy or tragicomedy. The "mob" part of each of us relishes the bloodlines of melodrama: elevated or overblown rhetoric, a clearly delineated villain, exaggerated mannerisms, and a happy ending based on the downfall of a villain.

As Eric Bentley has informed us, tragedy is concerned, as melodrama is not, with justice. Tragedy entails conceding that the culprit is oneself: that my life, my existence, my human nature is the problem. The tragic protagonist is of the same flesh as the melodramatic, except that he or she is complex, which means that he or she is real, because with complexity comes ambiguity. As Bentley has noted, "The tragic hero is really heroic, while the melodramatic hero really isn't."

Consider Prospero in Shakespeare's tragi-comedy, "The Tempest." While in the beginning Prospero may appear a melodramatic character with his storms and spells and his anger at so-conceived villainous enemies, by the end he reveals himself as heroic and just. Taking Caliban unto himself, he embraces the badness as his own:

This demi-devil
(For he's a bastard one) had plotted . . .
To take my life . . . this thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine.

In accepting Caliban, Prospero accepts complexity. He accepts responsibility for his own predicament. He accepts the pain of reality. Prospero's acceptance of Caliban is a metaphor for a leader's owning up to all events that happen and all beings that exist within the realm. It is unfortunate for the populace when a head of state persists in the narrowness of melodrama and does not expand to become a Prospero.

A theatre artist doesn't need to work in the style of realism to depict reality. Shakespeare and all the classics give us reality and not realism. A production may offer real content, which is the province of the playwright, and real expression, which belongs to the actors via the director. The best theatre happens when neither content nor expression betrays reality.

In May in Philadelphia at the Wilma Theatre I saw a production of Stephen Adly Guirgis's "Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train" directed by Blanka Ziska. The language of the play seemed so real that it felt almost overheard; as if Guirgis had written the way John Millington Synge had— from listening to his characters converse in real life. (In the case of Synge that meant listening to Irish peasants through a chink in the floor of an upper-story rented room on the Aran Islands.) During the same week in Philadelphia, I saw Theatre Exile's production of novelist Don DeLillo's "Valparaiso," wherein the language is purportedly that of daytime TV but it felt manufactured. It didn't feel real in the way that David Mamet's real estate sales talk in "Glengarry Glen Ross" feels real or the way David Rabe's media hype guy talk in "Hurlyburly" feels real – even though Mamet's writing and Rabe's writing aren't actual or factual to life. Reality language in the theatre (from Synge to Guirgis) reminds us of life but is larger and more poetic than everyday speech; and it is a result of the playwright's talent as well as his ear.

Reality acting has to do with what Marlon Brando was able to achieve. Every actor alive is indebted to Brando and to his teacher Stella Adler who was indebted to Stanislavski. Brando enabled every student of acting to understand that from now on he or she must find a way at least to sound real, and better yet to be real. Most actors nowadays, students included, are able to sound real, much to their credit, even when working with verse or in a vocal style. To be real— a matter of being genuine— is the quintessential acting challenge. It's also the problem of the politician, isn't it?

In June at the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia I saw a production of Dickens' "Hard Times," adapted and directed by Heidi Stillman, and performed by Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company (of "Metamorphoses" renown). I saw the production twice— it was that beautiful. I'm surprised it hasn't been picked up for New York. Admittedly "Hard Times" is a melodrama – it is, after all, Dickens (arguably the best of melodrama!)— and so the plot is simple and the characters are uncomplicated: good coming into contact with bad and bad coming to comeuppance. But the acting was true. Yes, it was stylized and the lines were played largely straight out front and at times the delivery was as if chanted, but the acting was true.

The story of "Hard Times" focuses on a repressed young woman, Louisa, who has been coerced by her powerfully authoritarian father to revere facts and abhor fancy. The Lookingglass production, unlike the novel, brings us the artistry of rope dancing. Actors fly above the stage with skill and abandon, creating wondrous images lovingly lit and accompanied by a score as stirring as Satie. The final glorious image is that of Louisa, omni-presently costumed in blue/black: after mounting the ropes to entwine her arms, she succumbs to being twirled by two men from below, and as she spins, her skirt balloons out in a swirl of freedom; and as she spins faster, spun into ecstatic flight, the lights dim to darkness. In this end moment Louisa becomes a sexual woman liberated from the hold of her once-dogmatic father. As she veers beyond the good girl, the production transcends Dickens.

Still, the power lines of Dickens' "Hard Times" offer the actors avenues to political awareness, like "Marat/Sade" did for my college friend. Questions of domestic, social, economic and sexual supremacy abound in the play: parent dominating child; son denying mother; industrialist oppressing laborers; nihilist toying with girl. This is dramatic stuff! The drama of any production may intensify to the extent that the actors and directors explore the politics of relationships and don't limit themselves to a psychological view of character. To well prepare for political exploration, actors and directors may take the politics of society as their classroom. We in the theatre can look to the behavior of the presidency – if not for truth and if not for a vision of reality – well, then, for lessons to learn, for distinguishing melodrama from heroism. ♦2004

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For the full text of the essay, including specific political references, please go to www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte.

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ON THE BEACH

We stand inside a minute —
just 60 seconds wide.
The glistening rock our father,
the warming sun our Mother
and you my only child.

SANDY ROCHELLE