

# Style

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

For the most part, our theatres in New York City and across the country, at least our commercial theatres, aspire to work in the style of realism. Our schools of acting continue to teach variations of the Stanislavsky System based in the style of realism.

It's a century now since Stanislavsky. And stage acting in America has yet to achieve the kind of realism manifested by the Moscow Art Theatre, inspired by the plays of Chekhov.

Realism is an artistic style. In the theatre it requires the intention to act "as if" everything is actually real. The place or setting, and all that goes with it, is to be taken as real by actors and audience. So too, the actors and audience are to take the characters as real persons. The actors are to behave "as if" the events of the play are really happening, and the audience is expected to cooperate, to play along, engaging in a willing suspension of disbelief. How sweet that everybody together enters into an act of mutual agreement based on imagination!

But I wonder if the American theatre is living up to its end of the realism agreement? More and more, when I go to the theatre, I see an interesting set, sometimes quite realistic in detail. Then I see actors pretty much talking to each other in front of the set. The actors may sit on a few pieces of furniture or on abstract shapes constituting set pieces (which can work just fine in realism), or they may walk about, or they may take stances in partial profile. What they don't especially do is live within the set. Realism, to be authentic, requests the actor to create the illusion of actually living life particular to circumstances given by the playwright. What has happened to our theatrical tradition, that realism seems to be more about talking than about particularized "as if" living?

Here's an example, only one example of many and not the most egregious but nevertheless vivid. I attended the opening of Bruce Graham's "North of the Boulevard," world-premiering in Philadelphia at Theatre Exile. The play takes place in an auto repair garage. The set was amazing: the interior of a garage equipped with an actual car and staggering amounts of tools, metal parts, and auto equipment hanging from the walls, on shelves, in cabinets, and everywhere the eye could look. I would surmise that only two of the four actors in the all-male cast actually put his hands on a tool or a piece of equipment in the course of the evening. In total, actors came into contact with the accoutrement of the set on which (but not within which) they were performing probably less than five times. They didn't make use, or even take note, of the abundance of shop equipment surrounding them. It seemed such a waste of great stuff! (Why not just paint flats to look like a shop

if the set is just background?) The actors talked and talked to each other and sometimes they yelled. They did speak like men who work or hang out in an auto repair shop, because that's how the play was written. But they could have been just about anywhere that working class guys congregate. Their behavior was the generic behavior of actors on stage simulating realism. It was not particular to grease monkeys in an auto repair shop.

Our theatres have become proficient, even expert, in producing plays that at a glance may look like realism and at a listen may sound like realism but are not being performed in the style of realism. I don't believe the legacy of Stanislavsky is generic simulated realism. The Stanislavsky System invites the actor to create behavior appropriate to the place where the action unfolds, as well as behavior belonging to the social class and profession of the character. How generous to the audience, how exciting for the actors, if our theatres were to produce real realism!

On the other hand, there are forms of theatre in which realism can and ought to be set aside. There is opera, in which the emphasis is on voice; or music theatre, featuring song and dance. Shakespeare demands the rhythms of verse and the perfection of diction. There are the Greeks and Racine and today's movement theatre. These forms may draw upon elements of realism but ultimately their artistic style bows to a more theatrical truth.

Last summer in the month of June, I enjoyed an imaginatively designed and beautifully sung production of Wagner's opera, "The Flying Dutchman," at the Princeton Festival. Although the actor in the role of the "thin" Dutchman wasn't thin and an African-American actress played the daughter of a white father, it ultimately didn't upset the aesthetics. It was odd in terms of everyday logic but acceptable in terms of the conventions of opera where voice production supersedes skin color and body-type.

The month of July brought me to a gloriously grand production of "Aida" at the Cincinnati Opera performed in gorgeous Music Hall, a national historic landmark ranking acoustically as one of the finest performance venues in the world. Though multitudes were in attendance, I regretted that not every single one of the 3,500 seats was occupied. Everyone possible should have heard the thrilling high notes of Latonia Moore in the title role of the Ethiopian princess, just a year past debuting at the Met as Aida. The Cincinnati Opera, the second oldest opera company in the nation, not only draws singers from the Met but audiences from across the Midwest. I grew up in Cincinnati and there at the age of 17, I attended my first opera, all by myself. (My friends weren't drawn to orchestral music.) The opera was "Aida." For the first 50 years of its history, including when I was in high school, the Cincinnati Opera performed outdoors at the Cincinnati Zoo Pavilion. I've not forgotten the sound of nearby elephants trumpeting in tune with Verdi's triumphal entry march into Egypt!

To add to the charm of my return to "Aida" in Cincinnati, when the artistic director was giving the curtain speech, he invited the audience to turn to a stranger and ask them to name the first opera they had ever attended. For the man in front of me, it was "Don Giovanni" in St. Louis. I shared my "Aida" story. Then at intermission I read the dramaturg's program essay, which coincidentally began:

"You never forget your first "Aida." Mine came when I was 12, in the ultimate of all "Aida" performance venues, the Arena di Verona, with 20,000 people showing wild enthusiasm for the singing as well as the spectacle. I came away assuming that no opera could be more thrilling to experience in a live performance than "Aida." Today, so many years later, I see no reason to change that opinion."

Completing the auspiciousness of the occasion was the fact that my seating companion, my nephew's daughter, 15 years old, was experiencing not only her first "Aida" but also her first opera! High style arose everywhere that evening – in the sumptuousness of the hall, on stage, in the singing, in the music, in the costuming, in the chorus, in the trumpets, in the literature, and in memory.



**JOANNA ROTTÉ**, a writer, actor and director, is Professor of Theatre at Villanova University. Her books include *Acting with Adler* and *Scene Change: A Theatre Diary: Prague, Moscow, Leningrad*. She regularly performs on the Villanova stage, most recently in "Cherry Orchard" and "Long Day's Journey into Night." She has directed featured productions for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, including her own plays "Art Talk," "Death of the Father," "Prajna" (based on a script by the Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche), and "All Victorious Ocean: the Noble Life of Yeshe Tsogyal, Tantric Yogini," in which she performed the title role. She has recorded five of Pema Chodron's books for Shambhala Publications: <http://www.shambhala.com/catalogsearch/result/?q=rotte> She is a meditation practitioner in the Shambhala lineage. [www.nohtrainingproject.org](http://www.nohtrainingproject.org).

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to engage in a thoroughly non-realistic, utterly foreign theatrical style – not as audience but as theatre practitioner. Years ago I had discovered five Noh plays based on the life of a medieval Japanese beauty named Ono no Komachi. Over time, I adapted the five plays to form one play depicting the quintessential events of Komachi's long life. Historically, Komachi was a real person who in her youth served at the Emperor's court. She became a poet of renown and teacher of poetry. (You can find ever-evolving translations of her marvelously evocative poetry!) Through the loss of lovers, husbands and family, ultimately through the loss of everything, she became an old beggar and finally a person of spiritual attainment.

The play was directed by Elizabeth Dowd of the Noh Training Project (using suggestions of performance elements of the Japanese Noh. The production did not try to imitate or wholesale appropriate the Noh. Though the actors were white American women and men speaking, chanting and singing English, it wasn't fusion art. There was borrowing, not blending. The Noh came through in whiffs of gesture, movement, dance, voice, drums and flute. The production created the stirring scent of an abiding perfume, that we could call Zen style.

I love that in the contemporary theatre, every style is welcome. There is room for stately classicism and room for commedia clowning. I don't love when a style is made generic. Everybody comes up short. It doesn't have to be that way! When a style is specifically, uniquely and fully entered, meaning arises. And when meaning arises, the world is enriched. ♦2013

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

## PAN ASIAN REPERTORY

T · H · E · A · T · R · E

37th Season at  
the Theatre Row Complex  
410 W 42nd Street

### FISHING for WIVES

April 5-27  
in the Chairman Theatre  
A Vintage Romantic Comedy

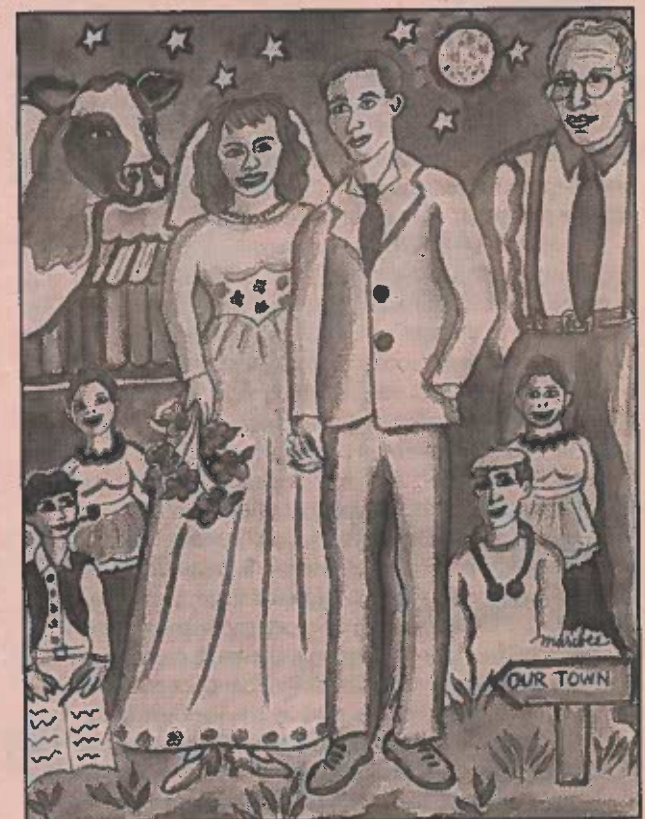
### NO NO BOY

May 14-18  
in the Studio Theatre  
Inspired by The Acclaimed Novel by John Okada

### NUWORKS

June 10-15  
in the Studio Theatre  
Forum for Emerging Artists

More Info online at [PanAsianRep.org](http://PanAsianRep.org) or 212/868-4030



OUR TOWN - Thornton Wilder by Maribee