

The Impermanence Of Theatre

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

IMPERMANENCE IS EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME. This moment is gone. Nothing is fixed. What, if anything, can be permanently solidified or held? Everything, and one's memory of everything, is evermore eternally changing.

The theatre epitomizes the truth of impermanence. The theatre is a great and good reminder of things in flux without a trace left behind.

When the curtain comes down, what remains? How interesting, that the theatre proposes to capture human experience and in the same instance demonstrates that no experience can be captured.

The actor seeks to live in the now. Surrendering to the present-moment is the actor's act of courage. It means finding the confidence to renounce security. It means not trying to repeat what worked before. It means not hoping to recreate what Stella Adler called "yesterday's performance." When he can be presently awake in the given circumstances, even if only for this one moment, the actor becomes a spiritual warrior-artist, proclaiming the truth of impermanence.



Madame Ranevskaya in "The Cherry Orchard"

Lately I've been recognizing impermanence, not only as the essential nature of theatre and performance, but also as a pervasive and potent literary theme. That may be because I recently completed a run of "The Cherry Orchard," playing Madame Ranevskaya. Where could impermanence be more poignantly felt than in Chekhov's

last play, written as he was dying?

At the penultimate moment of "The Cherry Orchard," the stage is empty. No one of the family or household ostensibly remains on the estate. All the house and property have been sold at auction. Everyone has departed in hopes of pursuing a new lifestyle since the old one is over. An entrepreneur has displaced the gentry. There arises the sound of axes chopping down the cherry trees. For the ultimate moment of the play, onto the bare stage, comes the ancient servant Firs, throwback to the olden days of serfs and masters. He's been misplaced by the family and unintentionally locked in; he's sick and diminished; he lies down and dies. The play ends in a vision of impermanence.

The recent theatre season in Philadelphia has been permeated with the perfume of impermanence: There was Ibsen's "The Master Builder" at People's Light and Theatre Company, where we watched the cast of characters as they watched the powerful architect Halvard Solness fall to his death from the peak of a tower that he had built and triumphantly ascended.

Another fall from a prodigious height was on view in the Opera Company of Philadelphia's gorgeous premiere of Verdi's grand "Otello" wherein the noble Otello succumbs to unspeakable marital jealousy. Based on Shakespeare's tragedy, the opera is less subtle and more melodramatic. Iago of the opera (he who provokes Otello's descent into jealousy) is blatantly envious of his superior officer, very much the villain bent on revenge. We see, as we know, that Shakespeare, too, like Othello and Otello, is subject to impermanence!

Jealousy arrived from Japan at the Kimmel Center of Philadelphia through the Kashu-juku Noh Theater in a gloriously elegant presentation of "Aoi No Ue." Lady Aoi is on her deathbed, infected by the evil spirit of a jealous rival. The ailing Lady never appears in bodily form, but is represented by a length of red silk gently, dexterously unfolded onto the forestage. Wielding an unfurled fan, the rival points and jabs and strikes at the red silk, seemingly endlessly! But the torment does end! Through the tireless intercession of a Buddhist monk, the rival dissolves her venom, thereby freeing the Lady and herself from the poison of hatred.

Network for New Music in "Trade Winds from Japan" employed Western and Asian instruments (koto strings and

sho windwood) to perform chamber pieces by Debussy, Takemitsu and Dai Fujikura – the last accompanied by a Gene Coleman video exploring both figurative and abstract images of things Japanese. Unintentionally but inevitably, the Japan images evoked raw memories of the impermanence recently revealed through earthquake, tsunami and nuclear instability.

A new musical, "A Passing Wind," by Seth Rozin of Interact Theatre Company and produced by the Kimmel Center, depicted the wildly popular career of Le Pétomane at the Moulin Rouge at the turn of the 19th century. Renowned as a flatulist or professional farter, he was famous for remarkable control of his abdominal muscles, enabling him to fart myriad sounds and tunes at will. Then with World War I came austerity and a loss of popular interest in laughing at farting; and so, the flight of fame and fortune. The Arden Theatre offered a classic musical, Brecht's "Threepenny Opera," seated in the playwright's understanding of dialects: that everyone in society, like everything in the universe, is interdependent and in constant motion. We feel this motion in the undulating fortunes of Mack the Knife, as infamously he rises and falls and rises again. We understand that Brecht would like us to critique the relative nature of ethics purportedly held by society.

Produced at the Academy of Vocal Arts, Strauss's opera, "Arabella," didn't just sound marvelous but seemed wonderfully modern. Written by poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal and set in Venice in the 1860's, the libretto reveals a set of bankrupt parents trying to find a wealthy husband for their beautiful elder daughter. To fend off creditors they have been having their younger daughter

continued on page 8

JOANNA ROTTÉ is a writer, teacher, director and actor. Her books include *Scene Change: A Theatre Diary*: Prague, Moscow, Leningrad and Acting With Adler. She is Professor of Theatre at Villanova University and Director of Asian Studies. She regularly performs in Villanova's repertory theatre, recently in "Long Days Journey Into Night" and "Mother Courage," and has directed featured productions for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, Tina Howe's "Museum," including her own plays "Art Talk" and "Prajna" (based on a script by the Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa). Her play "All Victorious Ocean: the Noble Life of Yeshe Tsogyal, Tantric Yogini" appeared in the Fringe Festival. As a practitioner of Buddhist meditation, she is a member of the Council of Shambhala International.



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Talking to Actors

continued from page 1

of each and every actor. In most cases, basic English does the trick but if one is trying for a nuance or something that has to be dredged up from a much greater depth, finding precisely the right words is like finding precisely the right key to open a chest or precisely the right power-tool to get a carpentry-job efficiently done.

The other point, alluded to by Glenda Jackson, is that a suggestion directed to the imagination can be much more effective than giving actors specific physical tasks to perform. Specificity of that kind speaks only to the actor's motor-actions, whereas a stimulating or provocative suggestion couched in a vivid simile or metaphor may activate creative buds that lie beyond signal reactions. Of course, an excess of the latter can easily generate semantic confusion and if a director is too fancy, it not only confuses actors but angers them as well. The great Russian actress and teacher Maria Ouspenskaya, an alumni of the Moscow Art Theatre, once asked an acting-student to try to 'be' a chocolate malted. He tried with all his might to create the essence of chocolate-maltedness in his voice and body. When he was finished, Ouspenskaya shook her head and said in her Slavic-lilted English: "No, you vass vanilla!"

The other point about direction is that it shouldn't be 'indirection.' If a director out of courtesy or timidity or fear of giving offence, or a thousand other rationalizations, pulls his punches, he will only exacerbate his problems. Obviously one should be direct, choosing precisely the right adjectives and adverbs to describe what is being presented by the actor and what is being sought. Some directors are blunt, others equivocate. The blunt ones can ruffle feathers

because all actors have egos and no one likes to be found wanting. But acting is a profession for adults and if actors are hypersensitive to criticism, they are in the wrong business. A good actor will respect honest criticism frankly expressed; a hypersensitive actor may take umbrage, but nine times out of ten, the former actor's performance will be improved and the offended actor will come around. If one wants to achieve honest results, honesty among colleagues is unquestionably the best policy. ♦ 2010

An excerpt from the book, *How To Stage A Play, Make a Fortune, Win a Tony & Become a Theatrical Icon* published by Amadeus Press/Limelight Editions). Reprinted with the permission of the author.

CHARLES MAROWITZ has directed over 70 productions, including five with the Royal Shakespeare Company, thirteen in London's West End, and at state-theatres in Germany, France, Italy, Romania, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In London he founded The Open Space Theatre in 1968, staging world premieres by Michael Weller, Jules Feiffer, John Guare, Terrence McNally & Israel Horowitz. His radical, free-styled adaptations of Shakespeare began in 1967 with "The Marowitz Hamlet" at Berlin's Akademie der Kunste, and performed world-wide. His recent productions include Vaclav Havel's "Temptation," at the National Theatre, Prague, Czech Republic, in close collaboration with President Havel. His books include *The Other Chekhov*, *The Sounds of Music: Early Recording Artists*, *The Other Way: An Alternative Approach to Acting & Directing*, *Prospero's Staff*, and *How to Stage a Play, Make a Fortune, Win a Tony & Become a Theatrical Icon*. Founder of the Open Space Theatre in London, he is the Founding Artistic Director of Malibu State Company.

"In acting, as in all art, there is a constant reaching for another depth. To plumb the depths to bring about a dimension that is almost indistinguishable from reality."

— Sidney Poitier

The Impermanence Of Theatre

continued from page 6

pose as a boy. Despite mistaken identities and somewhat sinister jealous intrigue, all ends well for all. The younger daughter gets to come out of drag and to dress in a dress for the man she has secretly loved. Where he had considered her his guy friend, he's now thrilled to consider her his girlfriend. Whimsical impermanence!

At the Philadelphia Theatre Company in "Let Me Down Easy," Anna Devere Smith enacted her paeon to the dignity inherent in how persons die of sickness, accident, and old — across class and culture. Even the calendar experienced impermanence, when an evening performance had to be rescheduled, allowing Ms. Smith to answer the call to bring her show to the White House.

"The Cherry Orchard" was meant as my farewell performance at the theatre where I've directed and acted for twenty-seven years, beginning in 1984 with the role of Shen Te in Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan." A few seasons ago, I compiled a short list of parts I hoped to play before I die (not that I'm inordinately in danger of dying but one's days do run out). Ranevskaya was the one remaining role on the list. So in Act IV, when my Lyubov Ranevskaya was saying goodbye to her brother Gaev, and to the nursery where she had slept and played as a child, and to her beautiful cherry orchard, and, indeed, saying goodbye to all that is poetic — it was poignant. The goodbyes of my Ranevskaya were infused with my own goodbye to life as an actress on that very stage. At every performance, and especially at the last, my eyes were wet and I was smiling. ♦2011

"The actor is an instrument that pays attention.

Something happens to him as a result of paying attention which is pure expression. It is happening even when he thinks nothing is being expressed. I'm talking about the expressiveness which is part of the fundamental equipment of the human being — and therefore of the actor."

— Lee Strasberg

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