

Two Ways of Directing

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

THERE ARE PROBABLY TWO OPPOSING WAYS of doing just about anything including directing a play. There is the traditional way of the director as captain, taking responsibility for realizing the world of the production and plugging the actors into his concept. And there is the more unconventional way of the director as medium, through whom the ideas of a group of collaborators are filtered.

If the traditional director rises to the level of auteur, demonstrating a capacity for creating a unified metaphorical production, he can produce memorable theatre. If the traditional director is a visionary, he can create productions that enter theatre history. Stella Adler spoke of the great Russian director, Vakhtangov: "His contribution was stylization, so individual, you could not put your hand on it. He knew the style necessary for every leaf. It was entirely a great experience seeing all the levels — Chinese, Russian, Jewish, Catholic, religious ceremony — on which his genius worked."

Mainstream theatre expects directors to work the traditional way, and most directors more or less achieve some sort of world. Understandably, a director may leave off attention to an aspect or aspects of production, due to lack of time or skill or both. I once worked with a director — I was playing Hedda Gabler — who was so overwhelmed trying to direct the actors that he left everything else to the designers. When I asked to discuss my costumes, he said, "I don't know anything about costumes, look at how I dress."

My most recent director Harriet Power (for the American premiere of Sebastian Barry's "Fred and Jane") was as attentive to detail as an actor could hope for. At one point over tech weekend, she apologized for fussing with my hair. But I didn't mind. Being fussed over is part of the bargain: I put my trust and resources in your hands and you fuss over me. The actor/director relationship in mainstream theatre generally assumes the dynamic of child to parent, or traditional wife to traditional husband, like Nora in "A Doll's House" before she walks out.

Jiri and Blanka Ziska at the Wilma Theatre are two of Philadelphia's appreciable traditional directors, whose work headlined the Wilma's Caryl Churchill Festival

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this spring. Jiri, who has a background in film, directed a stark, clean, cool, incisive production of "A Number" (Churchill's play, centered on the theme of identity seen through the lens of cloning) to which he added his own authorial stamp, by inserting soundless, grainy, eerie projections of babies and proto-babies between the scenes. Blanka directed a beautifully amalgamated production of Churchill's "Cloud Nine" (about sexual, racial and class politics) that was more thoughtful than comical and that focused just as much on the hazards of empire building as of gender discrimination. As a result the 1979 play felt right for now and not dated in the least.

Max Reinhardt was the quintessential traditional director. He would configure an entire production prior to rehearsal, filling notebooks with minutiae, and then direct the actors in concordance with his notebooks. Still, according to Stella Adler who worked with him, Reinhardt depended upon the actors. "He expected a full performance," she said, which she was prepared to deliver. But as Harold Clurman wrote, "At one of the rehearsals, Stella took Reinhardt aside and said, 'Professor, the characterization you have suggested to me is first-rate. I shall be glad to fulfill it. But I have something else in mind.' Reinhardt said, 'Show me!' When she had done the scene her way, he said, 'Much better. You should play the part your way.'"

Stella Adler herself almost never undertook the role of director. Yet when my class graduated from the Adler Studio, she directed five of us in Thornton Wilder's "Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden." In rehearsal she treated us as student-actors but once we got a hold of the play, she let us have it and we made it our own. It had been her directorial mission, above all, to help us find and build the characters, and in that she was successful. On opening night, when she saw us fully outfitted in our costumes, she sat down and cried. We were her baby birds taking flight.

We five "Happy Journey" actors gathered for a reunion in New York City in June of this year. We hadn't been together in more than thirty years. Although only one of us is working in the theatre to this day, all of us acknowledged Stella's influence in our professional and personal lives. Dan is a psychotherapist in New York City who leads workshops; Jeanne is an administrator at a battered women's shelter in Nashville; Karen is a storyteller in

California; and Rick, in Cambridge, Mass., trains people in the hospitality business. We convened on a Friday afternoon at the Adler Conservatory, and within minutes we were back together as we'd been in our growing up days, when Stella had taught us to open our eyes and "take out the whole middle class." Immediately and over the next two days, we recalled and recounted stories galore, we did Stella imitations, we assumed our former "Happy Journey" roles and entered into an unrehearsed reading of the play, we fell over ourselves laughing, and we loved each other. That's the staying power of the theatre infused through a great teacher.

On Friday night we went to see the revival of Clifford Odets' "Awake and Sing" at the Belasco Theatre where the play had premiered with Stella Adler in the lead role of Bessie Berger in 1935. Serendipitously, our five tickets were front row center. Early in the play, when Pablo Schreiber as Ralphie was confiding in his grandfather Jacob (Ben Gazzara) that he had a girlfriend, his face shone to light the stage as Odets' magical love lines sailed from his throat: "Boy, I'm telling you I could sing! Jake, she's like stars. She's so beautiful you look at her and cry! She's like French words!" All five of us simultaneously saw our eyes wet with tears. It was an instant of pure emotional truth, recognizable to us Adlerians as a moment of perfect acting, and it was also a vision of our youth.

After the show, out on the street in front of the Belasco, Rick joined the crowd at the stage door exit. He was waiting for movie star Mark Ruffalo, who had just played, from the heart and with a lot of heat, the sexy, tough-talking Moe Axlerod. I went over to ask Rick, "What are you going to say to him?" and he said, "I'm going to say, 'This is Joanna.'" I said, "Oh, so you want me to stand here with you?" When Mark got to us, he signed Rick's program. Then I said, "There are five of us here tonight. We're having a reunion. We haven't seen each other in more than thirty years. We all came from different parts of the county and we all studied together with Stella, and we were here tonight in the front row of 'Awake and Sing.'" And he said, "I studied with Stella!" I said, "I know you did." I told him I knew that he had, that I knew it when I saw him on screen in "You Can Count on Me," that his performance said, "That actor studied with Stella." (I wouldn't in a million years be able to recognize every actor

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who had studied with Stella but when the teaching has taken and the actor is truly talented – then it shows.) I said, "I loved your performance tonight. You were wonderful." He said, "Well you would know." I said, "We all knew," and I called Karen and Jeanne and Dan over to be with us. Mark Ruffalo said, "I'm honored you picked this show to see," and he took my face between his hands and gave me a kiss on the lips.

The bond between Mark Ruffalo and me was Stella Adler. We recognized her touch in each other. Stella taught a way of working, a technique, as she called it, that gave the actor the ability eventually to do without her. That was her gift and that was our lesson to learn: freedom. She urged us, when we were ready to work in the world, not to look to anyone, the producer or the director, for assistance. She said, "Know that the director may want to exploit you. Whatever his attitude, understand that he may have chosen not to care. But always give your best by offering your creative self. Take the position of a servant, in service to the production, but do not forget that the servant estimates the master. Know with whom you are dealing." She was speaking of the traditional director.

The other way of directing theatre, the non-traditional way, entails collaboration with the actors. Two notable performance companies in Philadelphia manage to function skillfully with this approach. Both are experimental. There is the ten-year-old Pig Iron Theatre Company, co-artistic directed by Dan Rothenberg, who for the most part is listed as director of the group; and by Dito van Reigersberg, who is an actor in the group; and by Gabriel Quinn Bauriedel, also an actor. In 2005 Pig Iron was awarded an Obie for its outrageous production of "Hell Meets Henry Halfway," adapted from a gothic novel by Gombrowicz about a band of narcissists stuck in a castle.

Pig Iron was in residence at Drexel University in Philadelphia this spring, where they reprised five pieces from their repertoire, including "Hell Meets Henry," and offered one new work, "Love Unpunished" that was created in collusion with Headlong Dance Company, the other notable company in Philadelphia that works collaboratively. The program calls the piece "group authored" and while Rothenberg is listed as director and David Brick of Headlong is listed as choreographer, the program tells us "the piece has been led – directed and choreographed – equally by both of us."

"Love Unpunished" is an almost wordless reflection on 9/11. The scenic environment is a stairway with two corners: that is, one set of stairs comes down from right to left to a landing, then another set of stairs comes straight down to a landing, and then a third set of stairs comes down from left to right to a hallway that runs from front to back. From the top of the play, various people come down the stairs, going about their business, and then the same people come down the stairs, exactly as they had before, going about their exact same business, as if in a loop. Gradually, the pace accelerates and some people start hurrying down. Soon, firemen come up the stairs while people go down. One of the people asks, "Is there a real fire?" A fireman's sole response is "Continue down." Then there is an explosion and confusion, things become scary strange and off-kilter and people begin to hit the hall wall and fall. People flip over the stair railings and fall. I thought of Sartre's "No Exit," but made more palpable because of the absence of philosophizing. "Love Unpunished" is very effective, very moving theatre. It's smart, beautiful, stark and sad. The bodywork of the actors is phenomenally precise.

A co-directing triumvirate also heads Headlong Dance Theater: David Brick, Andrew Simonet, and Amy Smith. In June they contributed a movement theatre piece, "Shosha," to "Dance BOOM!" at the Wilma Theatre, with choreography by the entire company. There was far more language in "Shosha" from a dance group than there was in "Love Unpunished," and it was perfect that way. "Shosha," based on an I. B. Singer novel, is the story of a Jewish girl (Nichole Canuso) in love in 1930's Warsaw in the shadow of impending war.

An actual non-traditional director (David Brick) is performing in an experimental dance theatre piece, playing the role of an ever-so nice, ever-so attentive, ever-so-power-centric traditional director. Wonderful! Pig Iron and Headlong – conscientious, clever, adventurous, serious and funny. They are working the hard way, the non-traditional way, collectively and collaboratively. ♦2006

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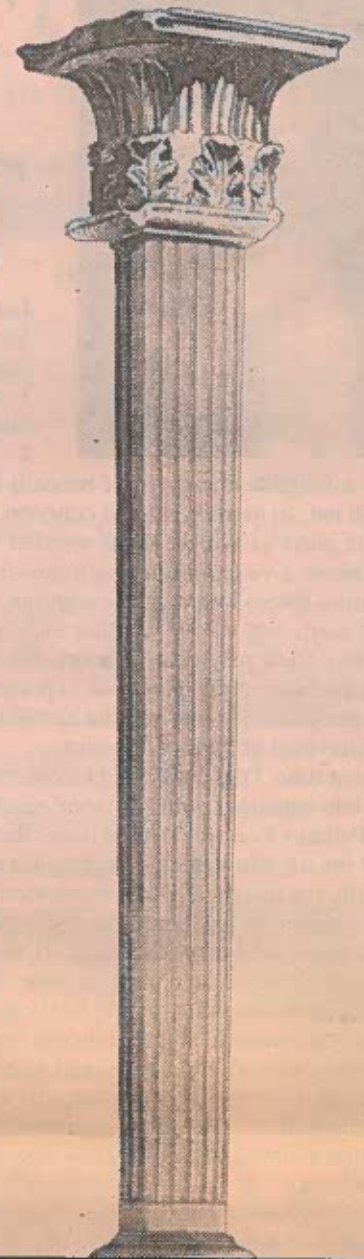
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