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Northwest
THEATRE
REVIEW

Volume 12

2006

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NORTHWEST THEATRE REVIEW

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The Case for Art in Perilous Times

LIBBEY APPEL

These are, in fact, extremely perilous times. We all turn on the television or radio first thing in the morning to find out whether we are at war, whether somebody has bombed us, whether our economy has completely gone under, which country is being raped and pillaged, what disease is spreading among populations. I have lived through more than the second half of the 20th Century, which was barbarous, and here we are in the 21st Century, and it feels to me as if the times are more perilous and dangerous than I've ever known before, perhaps because of the 9/11 disaster on our shores.

This peril is mirrored in the arts as well. A number of years ago Robert Brustein, the theater producer and critic, expressed perhaps the most pessimistic view of what the future is for the arts. He wrote,

The channels that support serious advanced expression are quickly drying up. The big cultural dinosaurs will probably survive and some theaters and dance companies may hang on if they fill their schedules with the equivalent crowd pleasing holiday shows like A Christmas Carol and Nutcracker, but high art in America is dying and dying along with it are our hopes for a still significant civilization.¹

Yes, that's a very pessimist view. At this moment, in these perilous times, that view may seem to ring true.

The doom and gloom naysayers have been saying that the theatre is dead my whole life. I grew up in New York, and I was a teenager and young adult in the 1950's. You must remember the '50's – Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Eugene O'Neill's late plays, Lorraine Hansberry – the 50's, the great flowering of American realistic drama. And I remember so well (because I didn't understand it) people saying,

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"Theater is dead". "It's the fabulous invalid". "You should have been around in the 30's and 40's when the theatre *really* was something."

Well, my favorite story about whether theatre is dead took place four centuries ago. The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods of theatre were the richest that the world has ever known, producing the kinds of plays, ideas, thoughts, feelings, that no other period – even the Greeks – ever produced. People went to the theatre all the time. In 1642, with Oliver Cromwell and the Reformation, theatre was banned – not only banned, but it became law that if you talked to an actor or even *knew* an actor, you were sentenced to be hanged. So theatre was stamped out completely and put aside, never to be reopened again. Well, of course, in 1660 King Charles II was restored to the throne, and within five minutes William Wycherley was writing; Congreve was writing; theatre was flourishing. Theatre was clearly alive in artists' souls during the banned period, and once the ban was lifted, they were willing to express themselves in such rich, barbed, satiric language and make such a truthful examination of their society, which still makes sense to us today. So you can't get me to say that theatre is dead. I'll never believe that. Even if all funding is taken away, no matter what happens, there are going to be theatre artists who need to survive, need to express themselves. Even in the most poisonous times, we adapt, and we survive.

In 1940, when the bombing blitz was happening in London, and it was dangerous for people to congregate because of the terrible Nazi assault every single night, Churchill was asked to close the music halls and theatres. His response was, "What are we fighting for?" He wouldn't do it, because he recognized that society needed the opportunity to relish and share in the energy of the communal experience in the arts. In the most difficult times we write plays about those times: *Death of a Salesman* and *Troilus and Cressida* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *The Merchant of Venice* and *Waiting for Godot*. Playwrights have always written about the really tough stuff. They were never defeated. They never played it safe.

So what do we do about it? How do we handle it? Why are artisans and artists necessary to our time, to any time, and how can we make that case?

Well, the truth is that civilization is measured by its artists and the glories of its artwork. Civilizations are remembered and understood starting from those first cave drawings that we found in Lascaux and Les Chaveaux, where artists felt compelled to paint figures that had to do with their hunting. They certainly didn't need it to explain the hunt to each other. But they had the urge to express in extremely graceful and exquisite lines what their human activity was about.

The Golden Age of Greece which we hold up for our paradigm in terms of law and understanding of how to run a society is remembered through its dramas, its vases, its statuary, the Parthenon and Homer's poetry. In every era, it is the artists who make the indelible impression of their society. We remember Michelangelo, we remember Mozart, we remember Beethoven and of course, we remember Shakespeare. We don't remember too many of the politicians, very few of the scientists and not a single lawyer or accountant. It's the art that speaks to the civilization.

John Ruskiu, 19th Century art critic, philosopher and painter wrote, Great nations wrote their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Of all three, the only trustworthy one is the latter, the book of their art.²

So how do we make this case to society? After all, this case must speak to not only the dreams of our society but to the actual "bread and butter." Without art we cannot exist as a society. We have nothing to pass on. We have no aspirations. We have nowhere to go.

How do we make this case? Well, of course, Hamlet makes it for us:

...the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.³

Without the mirror up to nature, no society can know itself in the doing and the living. We need to make sure that people understand that by doing plays by Shakespeare – by doing *Julius Caesar*, by doing *Titus Andronicus*, by doing *Macbeth*, by doing *Richard II*, by doing *all of the plays* – we are actually speaking to our contemporary times, and that mirror is something that our society needs to peer into.

We also have to make the case that the arts inspire our dreams. They give us reasons to live, to move ahead, to aspire and to imagine. Albert Einstein wrote,

When I examine myself, and my method of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy [e.g. imagination] has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing ... knowledge.⁴

I think that's a magnificent statement, because it tells us what was important to this genius who changed the 20th Century and centuries to come. What he discovered about the universe and the laws of physics and nature was more influenced by his own imaginative thought than by book learning. Albert Einstein, who was an amateur violinist, probably was influenced in his thinking by playing Bach and Beethoven and Mozart. What a comforting thought.

There are practical reasons for supporting the arts, and these are things that we artists are seldom able to articulate, but they are crucial for us to speak about because people don't recognize the essential nature of what we do. In 1995, an analysis of SAT scores showed that they were much higher for those who studied arts – 59 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on math.⁵ That means that students are learning better when they have arts in the schools. So, when we take the arts out of the schools (because that is the first thing you drop when the money is scarce), what are the consequences for our children?

Nationally, the not-for-profit arts industry supports 1.3 million jobs. We're not just something frivolous. We're an essential part of the fabric of our societies and our communities. It yields \$37 billion dollars annually in economic activity and returns \$3.4 billion annually to the Federal Treasury through taxes.⁶ So, we're doing our part, we artists and artisans, not only for our communities but for the Federal government as well.

But art is a perilous vocation. It's particularly perilous for us in the theatre, I think, because music and painting and dancing and other art forms are much more abstract. We tell the truth in language. We speak to the human dilemma in situations that all of us have experienced. Of course we use abstract forms, we are theatrical in the way we do it, but we speak to the heart of the human dilemma. And that is always dangerous. People get scared sometimes when they see their lives exposed, when the mirror is held up to their nature. We are on a quest for the truth and that is always dangerous. Eudora Welty said, "human life is fiction's only theme."⁷ Theatre artists tell concrete stories. We take on the big issues. We move around in the murky, dark and frightening areas of human behavior. Indeed, we tell about real life in illusory terms. It's as Picasso said, art is the lie that leads to the truth. Harold Clurman, the great Group Theater director observed that "...theatre lies like truth."⁸ We make demands on people. We ask you to listen. We ask you to feel. And we ask you to go through the struggle with us. We must remember that people go to the theatre not to feel good but to feel. That's our obligation, to make them feel and think. Regardless of the peril, (to paraphrase Samuel Beckett) we must go on.

There is a wonderful quotation from Martha Graham that I think speaks to what the particular artist must do:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time this expression is unique; and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.⁹

I think that is an exquisite sentiment, and I often read it just before the critical reviews come out for a play I've directed. Try to remember that it is your unique expression that we're after and not somebody else's opinion about that expression. I somehow feel that that has given me courage through many years of work.

And then there's John Hirsch. He was a cantankerous, difficult personality but a genius; a brilliant director and teacher. He was the artistic director of the Stratford Festival in Ontario and also of the Seattle Repertory Theatre. He came to work with me at Cal State Long Beach for a few weeks and was incredibly inspiring to me. This is what he says, and this also is something that I always keep at my side:

I am in the theatre because I am enthusiastically and compulsively committed to making sense of my life and of life in general. My way of doing it is by living in the theatre. By constantly being in contact with great minds through the classics I have chosen to direct over many, many years. Because I work with many marvelous people who make me proud that I am human – great actors, designers, composers and craftspersons. They make me proud of being part of the human species and that sense of celebration and all that flows from it sustains my faith in being human.¹⁰

I thank John for these words, because that's part of what sustains my faith in not only being human but being a theatre artist.

Artists are people who believe in change, transformation and above all the celebration of the human spirit. Tolstoy once said that what we look for in a work of art is the revelation of the artist's soul – a glimpse of God. In the midst of the deepest pessimism, artists are unbeatably optimistic. Even Samuel Beckett's deeply pessimist plays are written with such extraordinary poetic control and brilliance that they are in fact optimistic, not in message, but in form and in shape. What invaluable stories we have to tell with the most exquisite words and images that the world has ever known.

I'd like to share a personal story. When I was between my junior and senior year in college, I went to Italy with the Experiment In International Living. I was an overweight intellectual-type with everything in my head and no confidence in my body. I went to live in a very tiny town in the Dolomite Mountains, and one time a group of really darling Italian friends suggested we all go for a hike up into the mountains. Well, I don't want to exaggerate here; it wasn't a mountain climb. It was just a hike up into the mountains, but it was still quite beyond my capability. There was just no way I was fit enough to do any kind of mountain hiking. But it was an exquisite day, and we all went out together. Of course, it didn't take very long before the group got quite a bit ahead of me. And finally Roberto Patuzzi (I remember him to this day, because he was very good

looking), who was in charge of making sure that I wasn't going to fall off the mountain, looked back and called down to me encouragingly, "Libby, Libby, Libby – *CORAGGIO, FORZA, AVANTI!*" I don't remember whether I completed the hike or not, but I do know that those three words have been the guideposts of my life: COURAGE, STRENGTH, MOVING FORWARD.

We must challenge ourselves and our audiences. We must hold on to our dreams, as Langston Hughes tell us,

Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is like a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.¹¹

I'd like to close with a final thought that has always meant a great deal to me. It is from Susan Sontag, the recently deceased novelist, critic and playwright:

To me literature is a calling, even a kind of salvation. It connects me with an enterprise that is over 2000 years old. What do we have from the past? Art and thought. That's what lasts. That's what continues to feed people and give them an idea of something better.¹²

That's what we offer people, the dream of making something better in their lives. That's what we do. We make art. So you mustn't let any funding crisis depress you; you mustn't let lower ticket sales make you wish you were a lawyer or accountant. We must recognize that the work we do is as important as that of the bread maker, the butcher, or the guy who builds the roof over your head, and that's the case that we have to make for our society. Remember, when all seems lost – *CORAGGIO, FORZA, AVANTI!*

Endnotes

¹ Brustein, Robert. The war on the arts. (On Theater). *New Republic*. Sept 7 1992, v207, n11-12, p35(4)

² Johu Ruskiu, *St. Mark's Rest: The History of Venice*, Preface p. 1 (1885).

³ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. 3.2.20-24.

⁴ From correspondence with Janos Plesch, quoted in Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: His Life and Times*. Ty Crowell Co., 1971, p. 87.

⁵ The College Board, *Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers*, 1995.

⁶ "The Benefits to Business of Participating in the Arts," *Arts & Business Quarterly*, Spring 2001.

⁷ Welty, Eudora. "Place in Fiction", *Collected Essays*. New York, 1994.

⁸ Clurman, Harold. *Lies Like Truth: Theatre Reviews and Essays* (An Evergreen Book). Grove Press, 1960.

⁹ Quoted in Agnes De Mille, *Dance to the Piper*. Atlantic Monthly Press Books, Boston, 1952, p. 335.

¹⁰ From "Thinking It Over", the keynote address to the 1987 California Theatre Conference, June 19-21, Stanford, CA, as reproduced in *West Coast Theatre News*, Summer/Autumn 1987 issue.

¹¹ Langston Hughes, *Dreams*.

¹² From "Susan Sontag Finds Romance", an interview with Leslie Garis, *New York Times Book Review*, Aug. 2, 1992.

That's Not Funny: A Look at Lesbian Comedy

SHELLEY DOUMA

Until the last twenty years, the study of comedy has been all but passed over by feminist theorists, perhaps because feminists have had to struggle to be taken seriously. Because some feminists may have believed that their theories were not being given serious consideration, comedy may have been avoided owing to a discussion of comedy by a feminist might be considered as doubly funny by some readers. (Barreca, *Last Laughs* 4). Feminists have also gained the reputation with some people of having little or no sense of humor. The riddle, "How many feminists does it take to screw in a light-bulb," leads to the sharp reply, "That's not funny."

This reputation is not only granted to feminists but can be extended in some ways to all women. The attitude that women have no sense of humor can be traced back through centuries. The playwright William Congreve observed in 1695 that:

...I must confess that I have never made any Observation of what I apprehend to be true Humor in Women...Perhaps Passions are too powerful in that Sex to let Humour have its course; or maybe by reason of their Natural Coldness, Humour cannot Exert itself to that extravagant degree, which it does in the Male Sex.(1)

Congreve's attitude extends well into the twentieth century. Reginald Blyth, who wrote *Humour in English Literature*, takes Congreve's observation and goes further with it. In this 1959 text, Blyth says: "...women have not only no humour in themselves but are the cause of extinction of it in others" (14). Blyth goes on,

This is almost too cruel to be true, but in every way women correspond to

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and are representative of nature. Is there any humour in nature? A glance at the zoo will answer this question, and even the animals, let alone primitive men, must have always felt the contrast between what they wanted and what they got. But women are the undifferentiated mass of nature from which the contradictions of the real and the ideal arose, and they are the unlaughing at which men laugh. (15)

Women have been given little credit for having the ability to understand comedy, much less the aptitude to write comedy. Although women may not find certain jokes humorous, the assumption that women have no sense of humor does not have to follow. A woman may not laugh at a joke, but that does not necessarily signify that she is unable to understand or "get" the joke, but perhaps indicates that she simply does not relate to the underlying assumptions or point of view which are necessary in order to find the joke funny.

Women and feminists might avoid comedy, because often they are put down in order to create comedy. Many jokes create laughter at the expense of women. Sigmund Freud examines jokes and their structure in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud writes that many jokes have a deliberate bias, and depend on a triangle created by two men and a woman. In this triangle a man makes a sexual, or libidinal, advance on the woman. If she turns him down or resists this advance, the man allies himself with the other man, and together they direct the sexually charged dialogue at her. This exposes her to the third person in the triangle and makes her the "butt" of the joke. Thus, the lack of enthusiasm sometimes expressed by women toward comedy, and the charge by men that women have no sense of humor makes some sense. If women are degraded and put down in order to create comedy, then their enjoyment of comedy seems unlikely.

Women are not encouraged to participate in or create comedy, and this might be another reason that feminists have avoided much discussion of comedy. A study by a group of sociologists concluded that: "...women are neither expected, nor trained, to joke in this culture" (McGhee 225). Not only are women passively discouraged from participating in comedy, but they are also actively restricted from using comedy. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte argues that men stop women from using comedy in order to maintain their own power in the system, and that they are able to "...justify such restrictions by creating ideal role models for women that emphasize modesty, virtue, and passivity" (81). Women are not expected to joke in our culture and, in fact, are taught through role models created by men to avoid using comedy.

Finally, feminists may have avoided studying comedy, because it has often been used in order to uphold and strengthen the status quo; a goal

which feminists do not share. One of the central traditional notions of comedy uses comedy as a social corrective, a medicine which heals the rebellion bubbling in society. Comedy ridicules the outsiders, changes them so that they are like everyone else and then brings them back into society. At the end of a comedy, the same order exists as at the beginning, although different people may be playing the key roles. Regina Barreca explains this concept:

Comedy has been seen as part of the natural cycle of regeneration and renewal. Renewal, however, implies the continuation of established patterns: new figures in unalterable positions. Regeneration has the same attendant sense of change-without-change, sons replacing fathers, daughters replacing mothers, but without any slippage in the power structure. Once the younger figures achieve their new and rightful positions in the power structure, the tensions are released and, presto, we have comedy. (*Untamed and Unabashed* 19)

This type of comedy upholds the patriarchal order. Theorist Albert Cook, in his text *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, writes that "...comedy is probable, normal and conservative" (62). For Cook and theorists who agree with him, the strength of comedy stems from the return to normality, the restoration to order which is found at the end of the comedy.

This return to normality often is seen in the story-line around which many comedies are structured. Northrop Frye, a literary theorist, argues in his essay, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," that comedy sets up a *social* order in which: "What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will" (141). In this social and literary order the woman is simply an object to be fought over, and has no agency¹ in her own life. The structure of these comedies upholds and renews the order in which men are in power, and women are suppressed.

Theorists like Cook and Frye argue that comedy upholds the status quo, but women have used comedy for the opposite purpose. Barreca argues that women's comedy² provides another type of ending which breaks down rather than regenerates order. She says that:

The experience is put towards the impetus of destruction, not catharsis. It disables one from continuing as before, rather than enabling the continuation of the status quo. The pleasure derives not from the perpetuation of the familiar but from its destruction. This pleasure depends on surprises, disruptions, reversals, disunity and disharmony. The experience cannot be absorbed into the prefabricated cultural structures; it doubles on itself, not purged but strengthened. (*Untamed and Unabashed* 19)

This type of comedy, comedy which has as its goal the destruction of the status quo, sets up in opposition to traditional notions of comedy.³

While traditional notions of comedy put forth the idea that the return to order at the end of the play resolves all conflicts and upholds the status quo, some theorists argue that the section before order is restored provides opportunities for challenging and changing the status quo. In some types of comedy, the central, inverted section is used in order to challenge and transform order, not to uphold it. Barreca challenges the thought that comedy can only be used to uphold order in the status quo: "Certain forms of comedy can invert the world not only briefly but permanently; can strip away the dignity and complacency of powerful figures only to refuse to hand them back these attributes when the allotted time for 'carnival' is finished" (*New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* 6). Barreca offers an alternative to conclusions reached by theorists like Frye and Cook and argues that at the end of comedy, order might not be restored at all. In some comedies, particularly comedies written by women, the central, inverted section in comedy questions and threatens the status quo:

The world turned upside down can prove that the world has no rightful position at all, and that we have created our own systems of balance based on nothing more than the continuation of what has gone before, that reason and nature are no more reasonable and natural than they are cosmically ordained: this kind of comedy terrifies those who hold order dear. (Barreca, *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* 6-7)

Barreca contends that even though the inverted section of the comedy may not last, its existence suggests that there is no rightful order. This suggestion threatens to break down the system by which the people in power, for the most part men, control the world in which they live.

Theorists Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement argue that women find pleasure in breaking down the system in which men are in power, and that for women a restoration to order like that which is found in the conclusion of many comedies is a return to subservience and powerlessness. The inverted section of comedy offers women the opportunity to explore ways of challenging the status quo. Cixous and Clement point out that from a woman's "...own anarchic point of view, it is pleasure in breaking apart; but from the other's point of view, it is suffering, because to break apart is to aggress" (34). Women use comedy to rip apart the fabric of the status quo.

The comedies written by women to break apart the status quo have often been misread, because they do not necessarily follow the conservative lines delineated by theorists like Frye and Cook. Comedies written by

women which do not include values and elements which are sweet and reconciliatory have often been mislabeled as tragic or non-comedic even when these works center around elements which are normally linked with comedy. Barreca contends that women take the elements linked with comedy, and use them to subvert, to undermine, comedy as a conservative force. She lists some of the elements found in women's work:

...irony, hostility, aggression, the grotesque, explicit or implicit political agendas, for example.... While providing at least some of the distinguishing signs of comedy—exaggerated characters, use of puns or wordplay, absurd situations—women writers still manage to undercut the conventions they employ by shifting the very framing devices used to give definition. (*Untamed and Unabashed* 19)

Women use the tools of comedy for a different end than upholding social order. They employ comedy in order to pull apart order, and for people who are in power in that order, the comedies written by women may not seem very funny.

Barreca discusses another element which holds power in comedy, the element of anger. She argues, "Comedy can effectively channel anger and rebellion by first making them appear to be acceptable and temporary phenomena, no doubt purged by laughter; and then by harnessing the released energies, rather than dispersing them" (*New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* 6). Anger is considered by many people in the dominant order to be unacceptable and unattractive when found in women (Modleski 27), and so in many cases the anger and rage women feel are hidden in comedy. In spite of the masked nature of anger in comedy, this anger is used as a dangerous force against the status quo.

In her book, *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Barreca explores the combination of rage and comedy. She believes that feminist theory has: "...acknowledged the power of rage in writings by women, but has as yet left unexamined the crucial roles of comedy paired with anger as shaping forces and feminist tools" (5). Women's comedy employs anger to work at the task of "...de-centering, dislocating and destabilizing the world" (Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed* 30).

Judith Wilt, a feminist theorist, argues that women's comedy is lined with anger and fire in her essay, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs." She believes that women are able to find a "...boundary where comedy ceases to cheer and succor and becomes violent, destructive, murderous" (174). Women's comedy is fueled by rage, defies the status quo, and is able to reach a point where it no longer is amusing but might even be considered frightening. Barreca contends that comedy is a powerful tool for change in the revolution against the dominant order:

"Comedy is dangerous. Humor is a weapon. Laughter is refusal and triumph" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 30). Comedy is used to candy-coat anger and aggression, but it is also a dangerous weapon in its own right.

The anger and rage within women's comedy are used to upset, to challenge and to subvert dominant culture. Barreca discusses the power from the laughter which springs out of comedy by women:

...we laugh—and laugh with a vengeance. Much of women's comic play has to do with power and its systematic misappropriation. Women's humor is about our reclamation of certain forms of control over our own lives. Humor allows us to gain perspective by ridiculing the implicit insanities of a patriarchal culture (*Untamed and Unabashed* 12).

Comedy, and the laughter which follows it, allows women the opportunity and the tools by which to take control of their own lives and the world in which they live.

The power of laughter is easy to overlook; however, laughter is used to oppose the patriarchal order. Simone deBeauvoir, a French feminist theorist, argues that women stand outside the world which men create for themselves, and that because of their status as outsiders, they can critique the order in which men are dominant. This critique occurs because a woman looks at a man who sees her as "...servant and companion, but he expects her to be his audience and critic and to confirm him in his sense of being; but she opposes him with her indifference, even with her mockery and laughter" (229, emphasis mine). Women use laughter and humor to break apart the patriarchal order and to recreate their relationships with each other and with men in that order.

Laughter can bring about change. Julia Kristeva, a French feminist and philosopher, argues that laughter "...lifts inhibitions by breaking through prohibitions...to introduce the aggressive, violent, liberating drive" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 224). Laughter provides opportunities for transformation, for revolution and for subversion. Far from being simply a pleasurable experience, a bout of laughter can also bring about revolution.

Comedy by women not only provides the opportunity and cause for laughter but also allows female characters the chance for agency. Some types of comedy work to undermine oppressive authority (Rowe 102), and women's comedy attempts to provide female characters the chance to follow their own choices. Female characters within comedy can challenge the status quo, can overcome patriarchal order and can seize control of their own lives.

Women's comedy breaks apart, transforms and subverts the status quo by using anger and laughter and by providing a model in which

women can see female characters with the agency to control their own lives, to determine their own identities. Through an examination of lesbian comedy, one can perceive how lesbians follow and transform the model provided by women's comedy and also consider the elements of anger and rage, transformation, subversion and self-definition within lesbian comedy. While lesbians are women, not all women are lesbians, and comedy by lesbians is both similar to and profoundly different from comedy by women.

Lesbian comedy is different from comedy by women in several ways. Unlike women in general, lesbians have been given no constructive place within the dominant culture. Women start from a place within dominant culture and try to improve their place. Lesbians begin without a real toe-hold and must create a place from which to start. Therefore, the lesbian drive for power occurs through stronger tactics, because it starts further away from power. And lesbian comedy accomplishes self-definition in more explosive ways than comedy by women in general. Lesbian comedy is also different from comedy by women because, while women's comedy expresses anger toward men and the system, lesbian comedy directs anger toward heterosexual men and women as well as at the structure in general.

Theorists like Regina Barreca and Judith Wilt have broken ground in the study of comedy by women; however, the study of comedy by lesbians is still comparatively unexplored. Barreca lists some of the factors which she believes influence our sense of humor: "...almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humor; age, race, ethnic background, and class are all significant factors in the production and reception of humor" (*Untamed and Unabashed* 12). Missing from the list is sexual orientation or preference. This omission is telling: a recent (1994) text by a feminist scholar who is a forerunner in the study of comedy by women does not acknowledge the significance of sexual orientation in people's response to and creation of comedy.

Barreca addresses the lack of discussion of lesbian comedy and argues that the lack of critical discussion of lesbian comedy is not due to a lack of lesbian comedy but to an ill-equipped critical tradition which is unable to deal with comedy by lesbians ("Introduction" 20). Lesbian comics take the elements of women's comedy and use them for their own goals. Lesbians seek power in their own lives and in culture, attempt to break apart and transform the status quo and create agency and the chance to define themselves through the use of comedy.

Lesbian comedy has been overlooked in other ways as well. Critics have, for the most part, completely missed lesbian texts and performances, and many plays and playwrights have been lost through time and neglect

(Hellner 39). However, scholars like Nancy Ann Hellner are attempting to recover overlooked texts from earlier periods. The Lesbian History Group, a group of scholars dedicated to reclaiming lesbian contributions through history, points out, "Knowledge of our past gives us cultural roots and a heritage with models and experiences to learn from and emulate, or choose not to follow" (2). The rediscovery of lost texts written by lesbians provides contemporary lesbian writers with a tradition which they can choose to model or decide to go against.

Women writers of comedy combine anger with laughter, and the results are often bitterly funny and look very little like traditional comedy. Lesbians are even further out of the power structure than heterosexual or "straight" women. While straight women are suppressed, they are represented in traditional comedy. For the most part, lesbian characters either do not exist or are closeted in traditional comedy. This is similar to what many people have seen as the place, or lack of place, of the lesbian in society. Vito Russo, a film theorist, points out that lesbians have not even always been acknowledged as existing:

The stigma of tomboy has been less than that of sissy because lesbianism is never allowed to become a threatening reality any more than female sexuality of other kinds. Queen Victoria, informed that a certain woman was a lesbian, asked what a lesbian might be. When the term had been explained, she flatly refused to believe that such creatures existed. Early laws against homosexuality referred only to acts between men. In England the penalty for male homosexual acts was reduced from death to imprisonment in 1861, but the new law made no mention of lesbianism. Nor did the target of the pioneering German gay liberation movement, Paragraph 175, which outlawed homosexual acts between men but omitted any mention of lesbians. (5)

In the past lesbians have been almost invisible. Lesbians are double-outsiders looking into the patriarchal order. Not only are lesbians not men, but they also do not fit into any role which men have created for women in the patriarchal order. Thus, the power which deBeauvoir attributes to women as outsiders can be doubly granted to lesbians.

Plays by lesbians have been difficult to uncover, and some scholars have made their goal the recovery of texts by lesbians. In a 1992 dissertation entitled *Marginal Laughter: Humor in Contemporary American Lesbian/Feminist Drama*, Nancy Ann Hellner combs literary history in search of lesbian dramatists. Hellner argues that lesbians have been writing plays since as early as 1735, when Charlotte Gibber Clarke wrote *The Carnival; or, Harlequin Blunderer and The Art of Management; or, Tragedy Expelled*. Because women, especially lesbians, have frequently been excluded or have been reluctantly added in small doses to the literary cannon, extensive digging has been necessary in order to unearth lesbian dramatists.

Discovering lesbian writing seems a daunting task at times. The difficulties in the search for lesbian writing stem in part from critical suppression of lesbian writing, and this occurs in part as a refusal of critics and biographers to acknowledge lesbian symbolism and imagery for what they are. For example, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a play depicting the growth of love and friendship between two women. This play, *The Lamp and the Bell* (1921), was the subject of some critical discourse. However, Jean Gould, who wrote the most recent biography of Millay, points out,

Elizabeth Aikens, Millay's first biographer, states that the play is an allegory of academia, though her explanation of the parallels to college life seems more farfetched than the play itself. The aspect of latent lesbianism implicit in the plot seems to have been overlooked entirely (134).

In the case of *The Lamp and the Bell*, a major critic overlooked essential, central elements of dramatic devices in the play in order to avoid discussing the issue of lesbianism.

Lesbian writing might also be missed, because readers might be trained to assume a heterosexual writer and miss lesbian content, because they are not looking for it. May

Swenson, who wrote poetry and a play entitled *The Floor* (1966) was closeted for much of her life. In one of her final poetry readings, however, she chose to read several erotic, lesbian poems. In a telephone interview with Klein Healey, one of Swenson's close friends, Hellner discovered that Healey had been surprised at Swenson's choice to read these poems. She asked Swenson about her decision, and Swenson responded, "Oh, don't worry about the audience. They missed the whole point" (Hellner 67). Swenson's audience refused or was unable to discover lesbian content in her poetry.

Playwrights like Holly Hughes, Jill Fleming, The Five Lesbian Brothers, Jackie Kay, Debbie Klein and Jane Chambers have written plays within the last twenty years in which lesbian content is impossible to ignore. These women are up front about their lesbianism. The comedies they have written use laughter and comedy for different purposes: to uncover or redefine lesbian identities and to break apart or subvert a suppressive patriarchal order.

Footnotes

¹ By the term "agency" I refer to what Janet Gupton calls: "...the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power or producing change" (7).

² The type of comedy to which I refer is written by women, and attempts to break down rather than uphold traditional patriarchal order. I do not mean to imply that all comedies written by women fit into this category, nor do I mean to say that all comedies written by men uphold the status quo.

³ By "traditional notions of comedy" I mean the type of comedy discussed by theorists Northrop Frye and Albert Cook. This type of comedy strives to support the status quo, and works its way from order into some sort of rebellion, "carnival" or chaos, and back to order.

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When Nazis Sing: Meta-Theatricality, Fascist Aesthetics and Transgressive Humor in Mel Brooks' *The Producers*

JESSICA H. HILLMAN

On March 17, 2002, the Jewish Museum in Manhattan opened an exhibition entitled, "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art," to a maelstrom of criticism, and emotion ranging from disgust to anger. Concentration camp survivors picketed outside the museum, protesting the exhibitions' perceived trivialization of the horrors of the Holocaust through its ironic, rebellious and at times humorous images of Nazi perpetrators. While this controversy raged, fifty blocks south Mel Brooks' smash hit musical *The Producers*, with its far from politically correct portrayal of Nazism, was running to great acclaim and virtually no protest. In fact, audiences were scrambling for tickets and paying literally hundreds of dollars for the chance to see pigeons with Nazi arm bands, a production number featuring a choreographed Busby Berkeley swastika, and a Judy Garlandesque Hitler.

Brooks' portrayal of Nazis and Nazi themes can be argued to be vastly more transgressive than some of the art works at the Jewish Museum, and yet *The Producers* seemed to escape the anger incited by the "Mirroring Evil" exhibit. This curious disparity in reaction highlights the importance of a closer examination of Nazi portrayals in popular culture, particularly in the often overlooked area of musical theatre. It is precisely in these popular, and therefore, widely distributed cultural responses to Nazism, that our most basic ideas and beliefs as Americans can be explored and interrogated. Accordingly, this project explores the complicated multi-layer satire in Brooks' newest hit, as well as its place in our culture's fascination with both the Nazi era and with one of the few fully American art forms, the Broadway musical. *The Producers'* equation of show business with fas-

cism, and in turn, fascism with sex, presents layers of signification not fully recognized in the popular and critical response to the musical.

Mel Brooks, born Melvin Kaminsky in Brooklyn in 1926, began as a stand-up comedian, heavily influenced by both the vaudeville and Borscht Belt traditions. In the 1950's and 60's he worked as a writer on such TV series as *Your Show of Shows* and *Get Smart* and in 1963 earned critical success for his Oscar winning animated short, *The Critic*. His first feature film, *The Producers*, opened on May 18, 1968, starring Zero Mostel as producer Max Bialystock and Gene Wilder as accountant Leo Bloom, who together come up with a money-making scheme to over-finance "the worst show ever written," and abscond to Rio with the money. The show they choose is entitled "Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva in Berchtesgaden." In this filmic incarnation of *The Producers* Bialystock chooses the appropriately named hippie, LSD, to play Hitler, but LSD's unwittingly humorous performance grants the show hit status, landing Bialystock and Bloom in Sing Sing prison.

Initial response to the film varied. According to Lester Friedman, a film scholar, the Jewish community felt, "shock, horror, dismay and embarrassment" (qtd. in Zelizer n.p.), toward the film. As one would expect, the comic Nazi representations in *The Producers* were vastly more shocking in 1968, a period marked by slowly changing attitudes towards the Holocaust and the troubled moral ambiguity it evoked, than they are today. Brooks was prevailed upon by the film's distributor to change the title of the movie from *Springtime for Hitler* to *The Producers* in fear of the potential backlash. Roger Ebert relates a story of an encounter in an elevator between Mel Brooks and a woman disapproving of the film who said, "I have to tell you, Mr. Brooks, that your movie is vulgar." Brooks retorted [. . .] 'Lady, it rose below vulgarity'" (qtd. in Zelizer 1). Various critics attacked Brooks' bad taste in their primarily mixed reviews. Renata Adler, the *New York Times* film critic, typified such a response, "Strangely enough, the first act of "Springtime for Hitler" [. . .] is the funniest part of this fantastically uneven movie [. . .] There is just enough talent and energy to keep this blackest of collegiate humors comic. Barely. [. . .] On the whole, though, *The Producers* leaves one alternately picking up one's coat to leave and sitting back to laugh" (Adler n.p.). Public response to Brooks' movie mirrored the pivotal moment in the film where "Springtime for Hitler's" first night audience initially reacts with open-mouthed shock and then breaks into hilarious laughter. The film became a commercial success, and Brooks received an Oscar that year for Best Screenplay.

Fast forward to the year 2000, when, after numerous film successes including *Blazing Saddles* (1973) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974), Mel Brooks decided to musicalize his first movie. He worked with musical

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supervisor, Glen Kelly, to embellish and orchestrate his newly written score, and asked Thomas Meehan, a collaborator on several of Brooks' films, to help him adapt the screenplay into a format more suitable for the musical stage. The production was directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman, who took on the directorial reigns for *The Producers* after its original director, her husband Mike Ockrent, passed away during the early stages of the process. Critics agreed that Stroman should be granted much of the credit for the success of the project, due to her inventive staging and keen eye for the requirements of the musical stage, as opposed to the cinematic demands with which Brooks was familiar. *The Producers* opened April 19, 2001. A record breaking twelve Tony awards, booming box-office, and virtually unanimous rave reviews assure that *The Producers* will run far into the future. The Broadway version, in addition to further musicalizing the script, made significant plot alterations, primarily excising the character "LSD" and instead casting the author of "Springtime for Hitler," Franz Liebkind, in the eponymous role of his show, replacing him opening night with the flamboyant director Roger DeBris. The ending of the film was also significantly changed in order to present a suitable "musical comedy" finale.

Although critics reacted negatively to the film's Nazi subject matter in 1968, the healing passage of time and transference of *The Producers* to another artistic medium seems to have softened the protests. Even a rabbi, Gerald L. Zelizer, when writing on the topic "Is *The Producers* tasteless?" states:

While Hitler and the Holocaust were evil, I believe that after an adequate period of time comedy actually can become a healthy outlet to help people cope with even heinous crimes . . . as World War II recedes further into history, comedy becomes a . . . more legitimate coping mechanism, a catharsis for the victims of the 20th Century's most vicious mass killers. This time, even Jewish newspapers have joined the chorus of hosannas for *The Producers*. (Zelizer n.p.)

John Simon, in perhaps the only non-rave review for the musical, underlines this argument in a less positive manner: "With the passage of time having made Nazi jokes less disturbing and audiences less discerning, the show within the show couldn't help being a hit, which makes the eponymous producers into even bigger fools than intended" (Simon n.p.). Not everyone agreed that passage of time made humor regarding Nazis acceptable. Some angry letters to editors of New York publications appeared after the opening of *The Producers*, but these seemed to be in the vast minority. At least according to box office and critical reactions, most people seemed to find the musical an entirely acceptable forum for dealing with the Nazi past.

Scholars of the Holocaust debate the limits of artistic representation. Can we approach the horrors of mass genocide through an artistic lens, or will art by its very nature diminish the reality of the unspeakable crimes perpetrated by the Nazis? Some argue that certain crimes and tragedies, such as the Holocaust, are too tremendous to approach through anything but the most clinical or factual lenses. But an important distinction must be made between representations of Nazi villains, and depictions of the crime they perpetrated: the Holocaust. Musical representations have almost universally avoided actual Holocaust representations in favor of images of encroaching Nazism in *Sound of Music* (1959) and *Cabaret* (1966), or the belittling of the Nazi in *The Producers*. Mel Brooks has stated,

[I don't] make fun of the Holocaust. It's too large, too heartbreaking. You can't really deal with it, it's too earth-shattering. But I do use Hitler and the Nazis and the guys who perpetrated the outrage. I make fun of them, showing what brutes and pigs they were" (qtd. in Elkin n.p.).

Brooks' show makes no mention of the Holocaust specifically, and indeed its Nazi representations, with the notable exception of Franz Liebkind, the unhinged vaudevillian Nazi who writes "Springtime for Hitler," are confined to a show within a show context, as "staged Nazis" in a meta-theatrical space, thus avoiding many of the difficulties of Holocaust related humor. It may be questionable whether it is possible to ignore the link which has been established in America between Nazi imagery and mass death, between a swastika and anti-Semitic hatred. The implications of laughter at Nazi imagery, of a comic Hitler, encompass the shock and discomfort of the knowledge that one is laughing at the perpetrators of one of the most horrific crimes in the history of the human race. This fact should be faced in order to understand fully the sources of laughter in *The Producers* and the ensuing implications for American society.

Using humor as a weapon against Hitler and the Nazis has been a continual theme in Brooks' career. In addition to *The Producers*, he wrote many anti-Nazi satirical pieces for *Your Show of Shows*, dealt with the issue in his remake of the film *To Be or Not to Be* (1983), and wrote a video, "The Hitler Rap," for MTV. He makes no bones against making fun of Germans:

Why should I not like Germans? Just because they're arrogant and have fat necks and do anything they're told so long as it's cruel and killed millions of Jews in concentration camps and made soap out of their bodies and lamp shades out of their skins? Is that any reason to hate their guts (qtd. in Elkin n.p.)?

Brooks states, "If you can laugh at your enemy, you've won" (*Recording The Producers*). He uses laughter as a weapon, one more powerful than tanks and guns to exorcise any lingering power or allure of fascism. Brooks

opines, "You can't compete with a despot on a soapbox [...] the best thing is to make him ludicrous" (qtd. in Zoglin n.p.). And no one does ludicrous better than Mel Brooks. He manages to make utter fools of Hitler and his followers, using a wide range of comic techniques. Franz Liebkind, the deranged, pigeon-loving, helmet-wearing, musical-theatre-writing Nazi, presents an example of Brooks' less than subtle humor. His satire of a Bavarian folk song, "Der Guten Tag Hop Clop," which includes Liebkind's shouted orders: "You will sway!" induces laughter through far from delicate means, as do his pigeons who sing backup and don swastika arm bands. Indeed, the vast majority of *The Producers* takes place on a purely comedic level, including slapstick, physical comedy and "in-jokes" for fans of Brooks' films. Initially the centerpiece of the show, the "Springtime for Hitler" sequence, also seems to take place on a unadulteratedly comic level. Showgirls wearing massive wiener schnitzel headdresses certainly fit into the Brooksian over-the-top sense of hilarity. However, the theme of this sequence, and indeed the show in its entirety, takes a more subtle approach by equating show business with fascism.

This equation begins with the centrality of self-aware theatrical references in the piece. Brooks states that *The Producers* has "always been a love letter to Broadway" (qtd. in Cleaver n.p.), and indeed, the show is chock full of tributes and references to the Broadway musical. Some might call the show a parody of its own form, and certainly there is a dual layer of satire in the piece, first of Nazism, secondly of the musical itself. Fred Kaplan states in the *Boston Globe*,

It is a risky thing to make a musical that is also a parody of a musical. Parody can lose its edge when the target is itself; a musical can lose all energy when its conventions lack conviction. Yet *The Producers* pulls it off (n.p.).

The musical pulls it off, perhaps because, as Ben Brantley states,

[Brooks is] totally, giddily in love with the showbiz mythology he is sending up here [...] Mr. Brooks has taken what could have been overblown camp into a far warmer realm in which affection always outweighs irony (n.pag.).

Virtually, the entire musical delights in its status as meta-theatre, in its gloriously abandoned self-referential theatricality, from the allusion to *Fiddler on the Roof* in "The King of Broadway," to a dancing Hitler audition scene à la *A Chorus Line*, to set designer Robin Wagner's homage paid to *Guys and Dolls* and *Follies*, to Brooks' tribute to *42nd Street* where Carmen convinces Roger to take over the part of Hitler by stating, "You're going out there a silly hysterical screaming queen and you're coming back a great big passing-for-straight Broadway star" (Brooks 178) !! But nowhere does *The Producers* self-referentiality attain more power than in Brooks' central metaphor, Nazis represented, (or misrepresented), through musical theatre, and Hitler portrayed as a second rate Broadway crooner. Here

the meta-theatre serves a larger purpose: to equate Hitler and the fascists with theatre, and by naming this as a source for potential allure, further debasing their source of power. Robert Brustein, in his article entitled "The Jew Who Buried Hitler," states, "...nobody can touch Brooks when it comes to letting the air out of evil icons [...] generally by exposing how much they have in common with showbiz" (Brustein n.p.).

What do fascists have in common with showbiz? Susan Sontag, in her seminal article entitled "Fascinating Fascism," writes of the allure of Nazi aesthetics and their connection to theatre:

The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transaction between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly garbed and shown in ever swelling numbers. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and [...] "virile" posing [...] The rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns [...] rehearses the very unity of the polity. The masses are made to take form, be design. (91-92)

Sontag's choice of the words *choreography* and *movement*, is far from accidental. Remove the political associations in this quotation and one is arguably left with a definition of a musical production number, with ever swelling numbers of chorus members dancing in unison, often around a leader figure, making "form and design" out of bodily movement. Sontag herself states, "[Fascist aesthetic] art is hardly confined to works labeled as fascist or produced under fascist governments" (91). She cites a Busby Berkeley film, *The Gang's All Here* (1943), as an example. This reference presciently invokes the pivotal moment in "Springtime for Hitler," where chorus members dressed as black leather clad storm troopers enter, each flanked by two identical full sized human puppets. These units of three join in formation, and through a massive mirror which lowers from the flies, we see their configuration into a large rotating human swastika, with Hitler in the central point. Director Susan Stroman recognizes the parallels, "[The moment] became a perfect statement of what the Nazis were like, actually, these indistinguishable storm trooper puppets" (qtd. in Singer n.p.). The phenomenological rush of associations at this moment defy quantification. The image calls into mind a Berkeley style extravaganza, and also invokes associations with *A Chorus Line*, which similarly draws the comparison of dancing chorus members to fascist style automatons. The moment also draws allusions to Boris Aronson's tilted mirror in the original set design for *Cabaret*, another musical dealing with the Nazi era. As this association demonstrates, the darker implications inherent in *Cabaret* are not absent from *The Producers*. Michael Billington, in *The Guardian* echoes these sentiments:

Stroman even echoes a mock-Busby Berkeley overhead shot from the movie [...] But what seemed absurd in 1968 now feels like an ironic comment on show business's flirtation with fascism. [...] By making us complicit in the pre-

sensation of a ghastly Hider musical, Brooks plays on our collective guilt and reminds us of the theatre's dependence on the sound of Munich. (n.p.)

The swastika moment presents a disturbing mix of the humorous and the frightening. Mel Brooks maintains he does not make fun of the Holocaust, merely Nazis. But how well is this distinction maintained? Can we look at the massive swastika formation on the stage and not automatically summon images of death camps and enormous human suffering to mind? Though popular response to *The Producers* would seem to argue yes, the implications of this response throw light on our culture's darker obsessions and urges. Brooks states,

Comedy must be daring [. . .] It must skirt the edge of bad taste. If it doesn't, it's not challenging or exciting" (qtd. in Gardner n.p.).

Brooks walks this razor's edge between humor and disgust and fear more closely than we might initially discern.

Hans Christoph Kayser writes of a perceived shift in the American media's portrayal of the Nazi, from sadist to clown. Kayser describes the shift from sexualized Nazi figures in so-called stag magazines of the 1960's, to the figure of the bumbling inept Nazi depicted in the popular TV series of the 1970's, *Hogan's Heroes*. The trend in musical theatre also seems to follow this sequence, from frightening and sexualized Nazis in *Cabaret*, to the buffoonery of Brooks' Nazis in *The Producers*. However, a clear progression along Kayser's argued line from villain to buffoon is complicated by some of the darker thematic strands present but not generally discussed in reaction to *The Producers*. We cannot dismiss the depth and complexity of Brooks' approach to Nazism as solely buffoonery.

The sexuality of fascism, and in this case the homoeroticism of Nazism utilized for the purposes of humor in *The Producers*, adds a layer of complexity to the text. Why does Brooks equate gay sexuality with fascism? Certainly he was not the first to do so. Kayser analyzes the "stag magazine" trend, which takes the first step in sexualizing Nazism:

It is primarily in stag magazines that the image of the cold, brutal, inhuman Nazi flourishes. Typical feature captions read: "Tortures of Hider's Prince of Pain," [and] "My Wild 17 Days in Hider's Underground Bunker of Lust" (849).

After discussing a tome sold in adult bookstores which displays Nazi uniform details, Susan Sontag explores the issue further.

Why has Nazi Germany, which was a sexually repressive society, become erotic? How could a regime which persecuted homosexuals become a gay turn-on? [. . .] Between sadomasochism and fascism there is a natural link. "Fascism is theater" as Genet said. As is sadomasochistic sexuality: to be involved in sadomasochism is to take part in a sexual theater, a staging of sexuality. (102-3)

Although I do not suggest that Brooks addresses sadomasochism directly, the trappings of S&M cannot be escaped in *The Producers*. In "Springtime for Hitler" we hear and see the cracking of a whip, and the costumes reproduce in detail Nazi regalia, which has become central to the sexualization, and specifically to the homoerotization of fascism.

Though the characters of the gay director Roger De Bris and his common-law assistant Carmen Ghia were present in the 1968 film, their parts were considerably smaller, and most of the sexually pointed humor is unique to the musical. Brooks belittles Hitler by associating him with homosexuality, first by granting him the middle name of Elizabeth. Liebkind states, "Not many people know it, but the Fuhrer was descended from a long line of English queens" (Brooks 118). When the stereotypical "theatre queen" director DeBris takes over the role of Hitler, every gay theatre cliché is plumbed for humorous depths. No moment is more telling than when DeBris, playing Hitler, channels gay theatre icon Judy Garland. He sits on the edge of the stage, lit with a pin spot, mouths "I love you" to an audience member and proceeds to sing of his humble rise to power:

I was just a paper hanger / No one more obscurer / Got a phone call from the Reichstag / Told me I was Fuhrer / Germany was blue / Oh What oh what to do / Hitched up my pants / And Conquered Frauce / Now Deutschland's smiling through (185).

The references to Judy Garland are far from accidental. John Clum, writing of the link between gay culture and musical theatre in his study *Something For The Boys* (1999), states that Judy's appeal to gay men embraces "diva worship" and goes beyond camp to a deeper identification with her humiliations and difficulties. David Bergman defines camp:

Camp is a style that favors "exaggeration," "artifice," and "extremity" [. . .] the person who can recognize camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp [perform in an artificial or exaggerated or mock effeminate way] is a person outside the cultural mainstream [. . .] camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire. (qtd. in Clnm 7)

The Broadway version of *The Producers* carries camp, and particularly this "self-conscious eroticism" associated with the concept, to an extreme level of cartoonishness. As Max and Leo sing of Gary Beach's Tony award winning performance of Roger playing Hitler, playing Garland, "Our leading man was so gay, he nearly flew away" (194). Roger flits, mugs and flames his way through the number to a level that necessitates explanation. Why this extremely sexualized portrayal?

In the Broadway musical, but not the film, Brooks directly equates "Springtime for Hitler" with a sexuality which would be considered deviant

by the Nazi regime. Although critics have separately addressed the satires of homosexuality and Nazism in *The Producers*, the two issues are intimately conjoined in this climatic number. Why does Brooks equate gay sexuality with fascism? On a basic level, it would be the "ultimate" personal insult to Hitler to portray him as a homosexual, thus adding power to Brooks' strategy of deploying laughter as a weapon. But the sheer intensity of the association demands further explication. Perhaps Brooks, a heterosexual man, pushes the Nazi portrayals and images into the land of "deviant" sexuality in order to exorcise any lingering allure that his fascist display might invoke. As addressed above, the sexual appeal of Nazi imagery, in addition to our innate attraction to the choreographic display of unity and power characteristic of both production numbers and fascist aesthetics, are more insidiously appealing than we may admit to ourselves. Saul Friedlander questions: "Is such attention focused on the [Nazi] past only a gratuitous reverie, the attraction of spectacle, exorcism, or the result of a need to understand; or is it, again and still, an expression of profound fears and, on the part of some, mute yearnings as well" (qtd. in Young n.p.)? Only through the depiction of the potentially appealing fascist display as transgressive by association with "depraved" sexuality, can we, as the audience, be assured of our repudiation of Nazism and of the latent fascist within us all.

Why do we have a compulsion to express the horrors perpetrated by Nazis in artistic formats, and why in the musical in particular? America cannot seem to rid its collective imagination of the threat offered by the Nazi era. We see portrayals of Nazis across the media and the arts, and especially in the theatre. In addition to *The Producers*, at least two major musicals, *The Sound of Music* and *Cabaret*, deal with the Nazi threat. Other, less universally successful musicals have continued to address this dark period in history and its implications. In some ways it is logical that the Broadway musical, a fully American art form, has been a venue for playing out our cultural obsession with Nazism; however, the portrayal of such violent, hateful figures runs counter to our stereotyped perceptions of musicals as "fluff." But as we have seen, the complicated thematic strands and darker implications inherent in *The Producers* make the label "fluff" even more inappropriate in this case. What happens to the figure of the Nazi when placed on the musical theatre stage? Mel Brooks' answer is hilarity, but a hilarity imbued with deeper associations than are at first apparent.

Why does *The Producers* thrive without protest while the "Mirroring Evil" exhibit has become bogged in a swamp of controversy? Perhaps it is the power of humor to overcome not only protest, but evil itself. Brustein states,

The Jew who finally buried Hitler, Mel Brooks demonstrates that comedy is not only capable of exposing stupidity and pretension. At times it can also exorcize and nullify evil— not as powerfully, but sometimes more lastingly than a hundred Sherman tanks, a thousand B-42s, or a million GIs (n.p.).

Does our society use theatre to attempt to free itself from remembering and re-experiencing the pain of the Nazi era? Do we invent new ways to keep the subject fresh, to never forget, lest it happen again? Are these positive motivations entirely straightforward, or is our fascination with evil perhaps connected to darker forces within ourselves? Approached with more questions than answers, the musical, that most liminal and effervescent of forms, may be able to contribute a forum for the examination of these most complex of issues.

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Infusing Asian Theatre Forms into the Undergraduate Theatre History Class

JANET GUPTON

For many, teaching theatre history at the undergraduate level is a difficult feat to accomplish well in one or two semesters. Adding any nonwestern forms of theatre makes the task even harder, not only because an instructor is rushed to cover a vast amount of material but my past experience has shown that many students are resistant to move beyond their "comfort" level to engage in understanding a theatrical aesthetic very different from the concepts of "realism" and Stanislavski-based character development that has been the predominant focus of their studies and training thus far. The goal of this article is to offer ideas, resources and exercises that propose an introductory and, hopefully, more experiential approach to incorporating Asian and eastern theatrical forms into the semester(s). In this article I will focus more on traditional theatrical forms of India, China and Japan, but with some exploration into the contemporary theatrical forms of these countries to see the trajectory of eastern aesthetics at work. Additionally, while this article proposes ideas for a theatre history class, many of the exercises can be applied easily to a broader range of classes, including some outside of theatre.

The Set-up

The theatre history class that I teach is two 15-week semesters with a writing-intensive requirement. The class meets four times a week for fifty minutes and is awarded four credit hours. In addition to theatre history, the class covers dramatic literature as well as the major theoretical writings on theatre. The class not only looks at theatre but also the underlying cultural, philosophical, social, political and religious events or ideas that affect the theatre. In the past I covered the Asian material at

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the end of the second semester but have found in doing so, the students are often too stressed about the approaching end of year that an unfamiliar subject like eastern theatre forms does not garner their interest as much. Furthermore, by "tacking" it on at the end, the process feels more like the token nod to Asian theatrical forms. Thus, I cover the material in the fall semester after the students have explored Greek and Roman forms of theatre and culture. For this class I use *The Longman Anthology of Drama and Theatre: A Global Perspective* as my textbook. Beginning with Indian Sanskrit drama the students can make comparisons between the beginnings of the western and eastern traditions. Hopefully, by finding some commonalities between the two traditions students will be less intimidated by Asian theatre forms.

FIRST WEEK

Day One: Laying the Groundwork

Eastern versus Western Perceptions of Theatre

The first week, in order to begin the exploration of Asian theatre forms, I ask students either individually or in groups (if the class is large) to identify concepts, ideas, practices they perceive as western forms of theatre and those perceived as eastern or Asian. These ideas are written on the board under the headings western and eastern. After discussing the ideas and differences they have identified, we turn our attention to the schema that Antonin Artaud created to explain some of the differences between the two types of theatre.¹ Artaud based his list on observations made while witnessing Balinese trance rituals. Artaud notes that Asian theatre often deals with the mystical and uses gesture and signs, while western theatre tends to focus on the realistic and employs dialogue and words. In Artaud's comparison, the purpose of eastern theatre is connected with ritual and transcendence which is achieved when the performers and audience allow themselves to be taken to metaphysical states. Western theatre is usually concerned with ethics and morality based on the "here and now" of the actual events unfolding. For western theatre this unfolding of events happens due to a logical cause and effect chain of occurrences. Eastern forms of theatre do not rely on this rational continuity because the goal of the performance is to help the audience transcend reality. Finally, Artaud points out that eastern theatre uses spaces and platforms and depends on rhythm and sounds while western theatre uses scenery and settings and speech is valued over sounds. This initial comparison of eastern and western theatrical concepts serves as a framing device for future discussions. Usually this discussion consumes the first day of the time allotted for eastern theatrical forms.

Day Two: Some Philosophical Differences

The Concept of "Self" in Western and Eastern Modes of Thought

For the next class period we continue to explore some of the differences of eastern and western concepts that influence its theatrical forms. One of the major factors is the concept of "self" in both cultures. Many of the students are familiar with Descartes' quote, "I think, therefore I am." I ask students to discuss Descartes' premise and how it creates the sense of "self" in western philosophy. In this discussion we usually arrive at the notion of "self" as an autonomous being that exists as a unique separate identity. The western self focuses on the essential qualities that preexist and presumes a transcendental being (God) existing prior to the creation of the self. This concept of self also creates a duality in thinking. "I am this, therefore I am not that." After establishing this concept of self as a western ideal, I offer the following exercise as a way to reconsider the concept of self as it works in eastern philosophies.

Exercise for Identifying the "Self" in Eastern Philosophy

The students draw "roles" from a hat ; i.e., teacher, parent, boss, close friend, sorority/fraternity member, girl or boyfriend, etc. A few people draw "be yourself." In stations about the room, the "be yourself" people walk around the room and interact with the various other "roles" without knowing ahead of time what roles the others are fulfilling. The role players note how the "be yourself" person interacts with them once they begin to discover what role this person plays in their lives. I ask the "self" players to note how their interactions change as they move from role player to role player. A controversial subject matter can also be discussed as those playing themselves move from one to the other role players to see how that changes the interaction. We do this exercise for about ten minutes and then leave about ten minutes to discuss the changes noted as those playing themselves went from one station to another.

Variation on the Exercise

A fun variation on this exercise that reinforces the same concepts is to create masks that have faces of famous people (or even fellow classmates or local celebrities) on them. I have the masks facing down so that no one knows what "identity" they are assuming. Each person dons a mask and begins to interact with the others wearing masks. Obviously, the way in which each person is treated informs the person wearing the mask something about her or his identity. Before revealing the identity of the mask, each person is asked to discuss how she or he was treated and what dialogue, action, etc.,

created a stronger understanding of her or his identity. Again the focus of this exercise is to illuminate the fluidity of identity. The concept of self is forever changing in the process of interaction.

The Eastern Concept of "Self" as Relational and Underdetermined

After discussing the notion of the "self" in flux as it encounters the various other people in the exercise, I guide the discussion toward thinking of the concept of self as constantly undergoing change as it comes into contact with the world around it. In eastern philosophies, the self is a relational and underdetermined entity. The self exists as a set of relationships in the world and cannot be separated from the "many" who make up that world. No "one-many" distinction exists in the concept of the eastern self as it does in western modes of thinking. Another way to reinforce these differences in the concept of self is to frame the discussion as the western idea of the "human being" versus the eastern idea of a "human becoming." By this I mean, in eastern philosophies, change is always a constant and so the "self" is always changing in relation to the many. An end reality for the "self" is not part of eastern philosophies. For the eastern self the "way" becomes apparent in the walking of it, and what it means to be human is the constant change that comes from living in the cosmos. Thus, to say "I know" in eastern philosophies translates to "I am making my way." Having explored these very different notions of self hopefully sets the stage for how eastern forms of theatre evolved. For example, I might ask students to consider how the concept of self might influence the development of "character" in a western versus an eastern piece of dramatic literature.² Hopefully, the students will start to see the connection between the psychologically motivated western character as a manifestation of the western concept of the unique self whereas the eastern use of character "types" illustrates the relational nature of the self as it encounters the world.

Day Three: Introduction to Indian Sanskrit Drama

On the third day of class, we turn our attention to traditional Indian Sanskrit drama. As the students will learn from the assigned reading, traditional Indian drama emerged out of ritual, which was often the reenactment of cosmic events as set forth in the sacred teachings of the *Veda*, or fertility celebrations and shamanistic events in which the actor/storyteller became the intermediary between the gods and humans. Having already covered the origins of Greek and Roman drama, students can easily find the similarities between the eastern and western origins of theatre. That is, both forms emerged out of ritual, and the rituals are often connected to pleasing the gods in order to ensure favorable crops

and/or fertility. Drama evolves in both cultures as a means of teaching the next generation, via story-telling, the appropriate means to honor the gods and ensure a happier lifestyle. I find that by highlighting the commonalities between the two aesthetics, students feel more assured in exploring the eastern forms of theatre.

Finding Analogous Western Examples to Sanskrit Drama

To introduce the idea of the Sanskrit language and its use of gesture and codified movement, I will either show a clip from the recent revival of *Big River* on Broadway that I recorded from the Tonys' broadcast in which the director has chosen to include the "signing" of the songs and events on stage or bring in a guest lecturer who is fluent in American Sign Language to demonstrate the use of gesture as a mode of communication. With a guest artist, it can be fun to have the students read a small portion of the famous Sanskrit play, *Sakuntala*, while the guest signs it. Either of these ideas is intended to move students beyond their reliance on dialogue and the spoken word and suggest to them the possibilities of gesture and movement as valid ways of experiencing the text. I might also elicit a similar response by showing a short video clip of dance and asking what affect the dance had on them.³ If I am lucky someone might say that watching a dance piece evokes a certain mood. This desired response can lead to the next step of understanding the goal of Indian Sanskrit drama, which is to create the appropriate *rasa* in the audience member that can lead to enlightenment.

Understanding Rasa and Bhavas in Sanskrit Drama

In their assigned reading on traditional Indian theatre, the students have been introduced to the sacred text of the *Veda* called *The Natyasastra* that sets forth the dramatic theory and all aspects of Indian Sanskrit drama, including the architecture of the theatre, costumes, acting, etc. This *Veda* provides that the ultimate goal of humans is to reach enlightenment, and enlightenment can be reached through acts of theatre. *Sangraha* or the goal of drama is to maintain the world through rightful actions. *The Natyasastra* states, "...nothing has meaning in the drama except the *rasa*." There are eight *rasa*, and these in turn are related to the eight basic human emotions or *bhavas* which are portrayed on stage to make possible the realization of the appropriate *rasa*. *The Natyasastra* is concerned with how these emotional states are presented on stage through words, actions, costumes, and make-up in the manner required to produce the appropriate *rasa*. Although a play may contain more than one *rasa*, one *rasa* must dominate, because the final aim is to induce a sense of harmony and composure. For this reason, all plays end happily.

"Cooking Up Some Indian Theatre"

An exercise that can help a student understand these concepts is to compare the Indian Sanskrit performance to cooking and recipes. I bring to class a simple dish of pasta that can be altered according to the ingredients added. For example, you might bring in some pasta and then blind fold a "brave" few students. The other students can then have a choice of sauces and ingredients (i.e. marinara, alfredo, pesto, salt, pepper, etc.) to pour over the pasta. The blindfolded students then taste the dishes and figure out the main ingredient or flavor of their pasta. By doing this exercise, students learn that just as flavor comes from combining many spices, sauces, herbs, etc., the *rasa* that Sanskrit tries to achieve comes from the combination of the various *bhavas*. In Sanskrit the ingredients are music, dance, and very specific gestures of the hands and face that are combined to create the "dish" for the audience.

After establishing that the goal of Indian Sanskrit drama is to create a certain *rasa* in the audience member, I then ask students why this goal is important to Indian drama. If they have done the reading, they should begin to see how certain tenets of the Hindu religion influence the development of the drama in India. Without investing a large amount of time to Hinduism, I provide a very brief outline of how Hinduism's religious beliefs relate to the drama. As with drama, the goal of Hinduism is to achieve oneness with the world around you or reach an understanding of truth. Hinduism provides that many paths exist to reach the ultimate Truth. Likewise, many *bhavas* exist to create the appropriate *rasa* in the drama. Furthermore, in Hinduism a person on her path to truth must not insist on taking only one way. The paths to truth are concerned with taking the rightful actions necessary to achieve the truth and achieve release from the life cycles. The rightful actions a person attempts to take are those in which the person strives to connect with the rest of the universe and not set her or himself apart as a separate entity. At the end of class I ask how the previous day's discussion of the eastern and western concepts of self relate to Hindu religious beliefs and certain themes in Indian Sanskrit drama.

Day Four: Discussion of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*

To cover the dramatic literature of Indian drama, I assign Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* for the next class period. To encourage the students to think of the play both as literature and as a performance piece, I assign them questions to address in a short response type of paper as well as put them into groups in which they are to devise a short performance of a scene from *Sakuntala*. For the presentation they create their own set of

gestures and dance to tell the story. I provide some traditional Indian music.⁴ I also discuss the various movements of the hands and eyes that are part of Sanskrit performance.⁵ The performances ensure that the students have taken the time to create a series of gestures and movement to which they have given meaning. Hopefully, with this assignment, they begin to see the artistry of a stylized piece of theatre. After presenting the performances to each other, we discuss what emotions or effect that watching the performances had on the audience members. Hopefully, after this first week, students feel more comfortable and more excited to explore other Asian forms of theatre.

SECOND WEEK

In the second week traditional Chinese theatre is explored. As with traditional Indian theatre forms we begin our discussion noting how China's theatre also arose out of ritual, folktales⁶ and dance.⁷ Obviously, like western theatre the tradition of theatre in China is too complex to cover in a very short time frame. To give the students some background of the various dynasties and their influence on theatre, I provide a short chronology of the dynasties highlighting events like the "Children of the Pear Garden" school of acting created by the emperor Ming Huang (712-755 ce) in the Tang Dynasty.⁸ This school is considered the oldest Chinese acting company and even today actors like to trace their roots back to this school. Again this information is important, because it shows students the long tradition of Chinese Theatre.

Day One: Philosophical Foundations in Traditional Chinese Theatre

After this initial foray into Chinese history, I like to discuss the philosophical influences on Chinese theatre such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. But again, because of limited time, this discussion is curtailed into introductory concepts. To make Confucianism more immediate and consequential, I introduce an exercise/competition that begins this week and continues through the end of the semester that results in points for their final grade for the class.⁹ I introduce the exercise with the following quote from Dr. Roger Ames of the University of Hawaii at Manoa:

Confucianism celebrates the way in which the process of human growth and extension is shaped by, and contributes to, the meaning of the totality. The human being is co-creator with the natural processes. <http://organizations.oneouta.edu/philosc/ames.html>.

Exercise

Using the quote the class revisits the concept of the eastern self as one that is dependent on the influence of others. With this notion

in mind, the class is divided into teams and named for the various Chinese dynasties. The teams become responsible not only individually or for their own team members but also for the whole class. At the outset, we discuss certain Confucian values. For example, *he* roughly translates as *harmony*. *Ren* is authoritative conduct that a person "authors" as he comes into contact with other humans. *Li* are the rules of proper behavior in Confucianism such as observing propriety, facilitating communication and fostering a sense of community within one's life and the roles and relationships they share with that family and community. *Hao xue* is the love of learning and *zhong* is doing one's best.

Using these Confucian concepts we discuss how they may translate into this particular class. For example, *he* is created when students read their assignments and actively engage in discussions with each other and with the professor acknowledging the contributions that each student is making to the discussion. Some rules of *ren* are getting to class on time, not being absent and engaging in the discussion. *Hao xue* and *zhong* can be accomplished by doing the reading, answering questions about the reading, and writing good response papers.

Exercise in Confucian Values

At the outset, each team gets 100 points as does each person on the team. Throughout the semester, the following rules are applied:

- Lose five points (team and person) for each class tardiness. If the same person is tardy a second day, that person, that person's team and each of the other teams lose five points and so on.
- Lose five points if absent (person and team). Second absence of same person loses five points for person, team and class and so on.

"Harmony points" (points returned to a team):

- Five points returned to team and class, when person calls about tardiness or absence. The tardy or absent person still loses the five points.
- Five points returned to team, if person on team leads discussion on the reading.

"Doing Your Best points" (points returned or added to a team):

- Team with highest average score on the quizzes on the reading, response papers, etc., gets five points added to final grade. Teams with an average score of eighty-five on these assignments get two points added to final grade.

- Team with most improved cumulative score on the quizzes and response papers will get ten points added to their final written exam.

Hopefully, the exercise teaches not only personal responsibility but also the responsibility due to the whole class: one person is in a relationship with the rest of the class and vice versa, so that a person's actions have consequences for the whole.

Day Two: Observing Chinese Opera Performances on Video

Establishing the Confucian values that shape the Chinese psyche helps frame the development of the drama. On the second day of week two, using the Peking or Beijing Opera as the major traditional Chinese theatrical form, the class views the video, *Chinese Opera*, to gain an introductory knowledge of this theatre form. After watching the video, some of the issues we might discuss are:

- In what ways does the training of actors for the Chinese opera differ from the training of western actors?
- How does the training of the actors reflect some of the Confucian values we have discussed?
- How do the staging techniques of Chinese Opera reflect some of these Confucian values?
- What are some of the similarities between Indian Sanskrit drama and the Chinese Opera?
- What elements of Artaud's characteristics are present in the Chinese Opera?

The video provides a great introduction to the development of Chinese opera and the training and conventions that are used.

Staging Techniques in Chinese Opera

Also evidenced in the video are the simple staging techniques of Chinese Opera, which reinforce the relational nature found in Chinese theatre forms. For example, the stages are very simple and their scenery usually consists of two wooden chairs and a large box or table covered with a bright cloth. To create a bridge, the chairs may be placed with their backs to the box. An actor ascends one chair, crosses the table and descends the other chair, symbolizing the crossing of a bridge. The chairs, by themselves, are chairs but placed in relation to the table or box, they become the bridge. Other staging devices commonly used in the Opera also reinforce the relational nature of objects.

Exercise

To get students to understand the staging techniques of Chinese opera, bringing similar set pieces to class and having students explore the various ways one might use the pieces is a great way to challenge the students to embrace the simplicity of this eastern art form and move away from western traditions of sets and scenery.¹⁰

Day Three: Understanding the Relational Nature of the Chinese Language

On the third day of class in week two we examine the codependency and relational nature present in Chinese life that is also present in the Chinese language. Several examples can be used that will illustrate this point. The first is a very basic examination of the written "characters" in the Chinese language and how these characters, when placed together, create meaning. When characters are combined in relation to each other, the meaning changes accordingly. For example, when the characters of the sun and moon appear together, the concept of "brightness" is created.¹¹ When the character for a woman is combined with a swaddled child, the concept of "wellness" is created. When the character of two dogs and the character for "mouth" are placed side by side, the concept of "whining" is evoked. These examples are intended to help students understand how so many aspects of Chinese culture, including the written language, are about creating meaning through their relation to those things around them.

Exercise Using Chinese Poetry To Show Relational Nature of Chinese Language

The following exercise uses classical Chinese poetry to show the infinite meanings that can be expressed through a single set of characters that make up a Chinese poem.

Each student receives a "pony" or a literal "word for word" translation of a Chinese poem.¹² Using these words they are to create the poem that these words suggest to them. For example, a line of Chinese text that translates "word for word" into English might be "suspect is ground upon frost." A student might then translate these words to mean "like frost on an unsuspecting ground." Having the students create their own version of the same poem gives them agency in creating meaning. It can also be used to show how Chinese opera, which performs many of the same stories over and over again, creates new meaning with each audience member, because the audience member also has a role in the authorship. This exercise reinforces the interactive nature of creation be it poetry or dramatic performance. Students are asked to share their creations with the rest of the class. The myriad of meanings from one line of text is remarkable and very "eye-opening."

Assigned Plays for Understanding Chinese Values

In addition to creating their own poems for this class period, the students have been assigned to read two classical Chinese plays, *Autumn in the Palace of Han* and *The Qing Ding Pearl*. An alternative schedule is to assign *The Qing Ding Pearl* and the contemporary Chinese play, *The Bus Stop*.¹³ *The Bus Stop*, while decidedly modern, mixes elements of western "realism," absurdism and Chinese opera techniques. With *Palace of Han* not only are Confucian values present in the play, but Buddhist and Taoism concepts also permeate the play. As with Hinduism, the basic tenets of Buddhism and Taoism are summarily discussed, and an outline is provided for the students. With *The Qing Ding Pearl* the slapstick humor of the boxer characters contrasted with the seriousness of the old fisherman character illustrates the free mixing of the comic and the tragic within Chinese opera. Further, the characters present strong types not unlike the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, and students are quick to draw this parallel. However, the characters' psychological motivations are not important to Chinese opera, and this play makes that clear.

Day Four: Staging *The Qing Ding Pearl*

Because *The Qing Ding Pearl* is a short play with an accessible plot, I assign parts to the students, and we spend part of the fourth day of class creating and discussing how the play might be staged as Chinese opera. We use the traditional set of two chairs and a box, and we decide upon a few choice properties to complete our setting. We also experiment with some of the staging devices discussed in the reading, so that students gain an experiential knowledge of Chinese opera. The last ten minutes of class are spent reviewing and discussing Chinese opera and its similarities and differences from Indian Sanskrit as well as Greek and Roman theatre.

FINAL WEEK**Day One: Anecdote on Japanese Aesthetics**

The final week is devoted to three major traditional forms of Japanese theatre: No, bunraku and kabuki. Because many excellent video resources allow students to view these art forms, a fair portion of this week is spent watching these videos either in class, or the videos are assigned for viewing outside of class. Prior to addressing the theatrical forms of Japan, certain facets of Japanese culture are discussed. Further, as with China, a very brief historical overview of Japan and its theatrical forms is also covered.¹⁴

Before beginning the week on Japanese theatre forms, I provide the students with the following anecdote and ask them to ponder what they think the anecdote illustrates about Japanese culture and aesthetics.¹⁵

Sixteenth-century Japanese tea master and Zen monk Sen no Rikyu desired to learn The Way of Tea. He visited the Tea Master, Takeno Joo. Joo ordered Rikyu to tend the garden. Eagerly Rikyu set to work. He raked the garden until the ground was in perfect order. When he had finished he surveyed his work. He then shook the cherry tree, causing a few flowers to fall at random onto the ground. The Tea Master Joo admitted Rikyu to his school.
<http://www.soika.com/links/projekte/texte/ewabisabi.htm>

Using this anecdote as a springboard for discussion, we briefly explore concepts of Japanese aesthetics. This anecdote allows me to introduce several concepts. To begin, we explore the ideas of *wabi* and *sabi*. These terms have been translated in various ways. One of the definitions I offer to students provides that,

Wabi Sabi invites the viewer to appreciate of [sic] the minor details of everyday life and gain insight into the beauty of the inconspicuous and overlooked aspects of nature. Present-oriented and comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction, imperfect simplicity takes on new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty of organic forms and personal, individual solutions.
<http://www.soika.com/links/projekte/texte/ewabisabi.htm>

To reinforce concepts such as *wabi sabi* pictures of Japanese gardens and courtyards can be used or, if resources are available, a demonstration of the Japanese tea ceremony helps students understand these concepts.

Another tenet of Japanese culture that infuses the Japanese performing arts is *yugen*. Also defined in various ways over the centuries, some of the meanings include “dark” or “obscure,” evoking the mysterious as well as “beauty that is suggested rather than stated” (Keene 22). The term also has been defined as a graceful expression even in that which is ugly or frightening (id.). In the traditional No theatre of Japan, *yugen* becomes a guiding goal, according to Zeami, the artist responsible for recording the theories of No in his work, *The Kadensho*. In addition to *yugen*, the concept of “aware” or “mono no aware” influences Japanese aesthetics. Like *yugen* this term has changed over the centuries but has generally translated to “sensitivity [sadness] to things” and its impermanence in this world. It also means “the capacity to experience the objective world in a direct and unmediated fashion, to understand sympathetically the objects and the natural world around one without resorting to language or other mediators.” <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/GLOSSARY/MONO.HTM>. The definition also illustrates the influences of Shinto and zen Buddhism in Japanese aesthetics.

After exploring these concepts in a class discussion, I ask the students to bring an object to class the next day that captures the essence of one or more of these concepts and be ready to explain their choices. For example, I often bring in as a personal example an old but beloved pair of shoes or shorts that have been worn threadbare but still have a simple

grandeur and usefulness to them. This “show and tell” exercise helps students not only to think about the concepts outside of class but to apply them to their everyday lives. It also reveals much about the individual students, and what they value in their lives.

Haiku Exercise

Assigning the class either individually or in groups to compose *haikus* that capture the essence of an object while also considering the concepts we are discussing is another exercise aimed at keeping the students actively engaged in his or her learning process.¹⁶ By using *haikus* the student is required to simplify and condense her or his use of words while choosing the perfect seventeen syllables that will capture the essence of the work but also allude to how much more exists beyond the surface reality. Plus, students find it fun to do. Creating a *haiku* challenges the student to work within a clear structure based on a Japanese ideal in poetry. On this first day of exploring Japanese aesthetics, I also show *The Tradition of Performing Arts in Japan*, a video-recording that provides a good introductory look at No, Kabuki and bunraku.

Day Two: No Theatre of Japan

On the second day, after discussing the objects that the students have brought in which evokes the concepts discussed the previous day, I show some excerpts on No drama from *Noh, The Classical Theatre of Japan*, so the students can begin to see how the aesthetics are manifested in the art form. The students have also been assigned to read the short No play, *Komachi at Sekidera* by Zeami, which we also discuss for that day. The play discussions are used to reinforce the concepts that we have used throughout the week to frame our growing knowledge of traditional Japanese theatrical forms.

Day Three: Kabuki Theatre of Japan

The third day is devoted to Kabuki theatre. Once again several wonderful videos exist that can show students actual performances. *Aspects of Kabuki Theatre* provides a nice exploration into the *onnagata* role in the Kabuki tradition, while *The Making of Kabuki Medea* with Shozo Sato illustrates the blending of eastern and western aesthetics in a University of Illinois’ production of *Medea*. Another video that can be used to this effect is *Kabuki for Western Actors and Directors* which explores how Kabuki acting techniques might be incorporated into the performance style of an Elizabethan classic such as *The Jew of Malta*. Because of limited classroom time, these videos might also be assigned as outside viewing homework or only partially viewed in class. In addition to the videos, students are

required to read *Kanjincho* or *The Subscription List* for this class period. Once again, this play offers many avenues of exploration into both the performance traditions of Japanese theatre as well as the philosophical and cultural basis for the art forms.

Day Four: Bunraku Theatre of Japan

The last day of this week is devoted to bunraku theatre and contemporary Japanese theatre. One of the major ideas I like to address with bunraku theatre is that unlike a fair amount of western puppet theatre, bunraku is not geared toward a young audience. Instead, it is seen as adult entertainment and the artistry of the puppet masters is greatly valued and prized by Japanese audiences. One of the things I personally can offer this section of the class are pictures and my account of visiting the National Bunraku Puppet Theatre in Osaka, Japan. Having actually the chance to handle one of the puppet's heads, I can appreciate the complexities of this art form and the tremendous skill and training required to master it.¹⁷

Contemporary Japanese Theatre

Finally, the video *Theatre in Japan* provides a nice transition between traditional Japanese theatrical forms and current trends in Japanese theatre. After viewing the video we discuss what elements of traditional forms can be found in the contemporary and avant-garde scene of present day Japan. This discussion paves the way to discuss the contemporary play, *The Man Who Turned Into A Stick* by Kobo Abe that has been assigned for this day.

Conclusion

Even though four weeks is longer than many instructors may feel comfortable allotting to Asian theatre in a fifteen-week semester, it is not nearly enough time to capture the richness that these countries and their theatre forms offer to a western-based audience. Furthermore, with the mixing of genre and performance styles prevalent in contemporary western theatre, especially those incorporating eastern aesthetics and performance techniques, this very limited jaunt into Asian theatre might help a student negotiate the changing face of western theatre. At the very least exploring Asian performance practices and dramatic literature broadens the possibilities of theatre for the students and hopefully makes them less pejorative about other traditions. Obviously, an article of this nature could be expanded and cover the topic much more thoroughly. However, in writing this article, I hope to provide a "starting place" for those perhaps not already initiated in Asian theatre studies and to share some ideas and resources for overcoming the potential resistance to incorporating this area of study into a theatre history sequence.

Appendix A Outline of Chinese Dynasties

I. Background:

China: first dramatists, first actors performed in Buddhist temples and the Spring Festival (circa 7th Century bce), which predates Thespis of the Greeks by a century.

II. Dynasties:

- Cheen (Qin) 1st dynasty (221-206) (bce)
- Han (400 years) (206bce-220ce), Buddhism introduced from India
- Six Dynasties period (220-589) (ce)
 - Buddhism really took root
 - Active role of women in scholastic life and intellectual discourses
 - Great calligraphy and art
- Sui (Sway) (589-618) (ce)
 - Unites north and south China by building the great canal
- Tang (Tawng) – (618-907) (ce)
 - Southern dynasty that provides the full extension of the Chinese examination system
 - Period of great poets
 - "Children of the Pear Garden" school of acting, which was created by the emperor Ming Huang (712-755)
- Song (Soong) (960-1279)
 - Builds on economic developments of the Tang
 - Most advanced country in the world at the time
 - Landscape paintings become popular
 - Period of neo-Confucianism
- Yuan (Yewen) (1280-1368)
 - Ghengis & Kublai Khan era, Mongolian rule of the north resulting in many Chinese (esp. southern) scholars leaving civil life and finding refuge in hermitages. The outcome was that new interest put into creative endeavors to preserve the Chinese way of life
 - Marco Polo travels to China at this time
 - This period is comparable to the Elizabethan period

Face painting and coding of characterization begins in this dynasty

Mongol rulers had a thirst for drama and playwriting was made popular. Yuan plays are highly lyrical and emphasized poetry over dramatic action and character development. Usually written in four acts with many scenes including the *hsieh-tzu* or "wedge" scene inserted between acts

- Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

Return of pure-blooded Chinese to the throne

Drama in this dynasty were elitist and highly refined

Li Yu, the "Aristotle" of China, was the first to examine systematically the art of playwriting

- Qing (Ch'ing) (1645-1912)

Manchu of northeastern China assumed power in the mid-seventeenth century; retained the popular though less sophisticated forms of folk drama although elitist drama also continues in the courts

Manchu, however, often censored or suppressed new works for political and moral reasons

Intro of the Peking (Bejeing) Opera occurs in this dynasty. Troupes from central provinces came to perform for the Emperor, and they were a success b/c of the simple folk music and acrobatics.

Appendix B

Brief Outline of Japanese Theatre History

I. Origins of Japanese Drama

- Agricultural rites evolved into "field" drama or *dengaku* and "monkey" drama or *sarugaku*

II. The Heian Period (794-1185 ce), capital in Kyoto

- "Golden Age" of Culture
- The aristocrats become the "producers" of culture and much attention is given to luxury and the search for aesthetic beauty
- Buddhism is core belief system
- Poetry is the core art form; whereas, Chinese wrote poetry on formal occasions the Japanese wrote more informally and about things close to the heart; women were also encouraged to write poetry in this era
- *Tale of Genji* (circa 1000ce) by Lady Murasaki.

III. The Medieval Period (1200-1600)

- Development of Noh Theatre
- The Samurai became the "producers" of culture
- Development of swordplay; *haiku*; gardening and dry (austere) landscaping; tea ceremony; ink screens and landscape paintings
- Emphasis on austere, simple, suggestive of something greater, minimalist approach
- Zen Buddhism from China introduced by the Koreans and Noh drama reflects the influence of Zen Buddhism
- Zeami defines Noh drama and writes *The Kadensho*

IV. The Tokugawa Period (1600-1868) – Tokyo

- The Merchant class become the "producers" of culture
- The aristocrats saw the rising power of the merchant class and knew must do something to gain control so created the "licensed quarters" also known as the "floating world," so they could control this class
- Development of wood block prints
- High literacy rate and growth of publishing industry
- Development of Kabuki Theatre
- Chikamatsu writes kabuki and bunraku plays

V. Modern Japan (1868-1945)

- Period of isolationism coming to an end
- Young Samurai from Eastern islands overthrow the Tokugawa Regime and then send young men all over the world to learn, gather ideas and come back and revamp the country creating a modern Japan
- Tokyo becomes center of modernity and culture
- Western influence on the arts becomes obvious
- "New wave" kabuki or *shinpa* kabuki
- *shingeki* or western style theatre takes hold

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Footnotes

- ¹ The students have been assigned to read Chapter 5 "The Theatre of India, China and Japan," which contains Artaud's comparisons.
- ² Since this class has a writing intensive focus, this question also may be offered as a topic for a short response paper.
- ³ If possible, showing a video clip of Indian dance would be very helpful here.
- ⁴ *Bharata Natyam* (Classical Dance Songs) Aditya Music, 2001.
- ⁵ Oscar Brockett's *History of the Theatre* provides some of the traditional hand movements of Sanskrit drama.
- ⁶ To gain a better grasp of the Chinese folksongs that minstrels sang in the markets of China, I show students the delightful rendition of these folk songs and how they might be translated to English for our enjoyment as performed by Dr. Jan Walls on the following website: <http://www.cic.sfu.ca/clappertale/>.
- ⁷ This information is covered in the assigned reading from the textbook.
- ⁸ See Appendix A.
- ⁹ This exercise was developed by Dan Bellack of Trident Technical College, Charleston, South Carolina.
- ¹⁰ This exercise can also be used in a directing class as a way to develop students' creativity and innovativeness.
- ¹¹ The examples work best if you can find or draw/write these characters on the board to show the pictorial quality of the Chinese language as well. The following website is very useful for those who do not have a background in the Chinese language: <http://www.shnhai.hawaii.edu/>. This website allows a person to see the various ways in which the same passage is translated by different scholars and further illustrates the relational aspects of the Chinese language.
- ¹² This exercise is based on materials presented by Dr. Jan Walls of Simon Fraser

University at the Institute on "Infusing Chinese Studies Into the Undergraduate Curriculum" at the East-West Center on the University of Hawai'i campus at Manoa in the summer of 2003.

- ¹⁵ An alternative to assigning a contemporary play is to assign a recent article in the November 2004 edition of *American Theatre* entitled "The Follies of Chinese Dissident Politics" which discusses the work of contemporary playwright Zhang Xian and the suppression of his work by the Chinese Communist government.
- ¹⁴ An outline of brief historical overview is included as Appendix B
- ¹⁵ This anecdote can be sent via an online discussion group before the next class or you can also use it as a discussion topic for a short written journal entry if you desire to add a writing component to this week.
- ¹⁶ I have also given extra credit on exams for the composition of a *haiku* based on viewing art at the school's art gallery or some Japanese art piece.
- ¹⁷ I am in the process of adding these photographs to my personal webpage for others to enjoy and use.

The Theatre of Science

JOHN DOYLE

In the United Kingdom we are forced into making decisions about our education early. No liberal arts university courses for us. Sadly! For all our supposed European aspiration to relive being Renaissance men, we in fact choose, aged fourteen, between the Arts and the Sciences.

The smell of the chemistry lab, the dissections in biology, and the terrifying image of Maud Anderson (a small, round, elderly, powerful Scotswoman in a white physics coat), these were all beaten by the messy playfulness of the art room, the glories of Mozart and Purcell in the music room, and the ego massaging hilarity of the drama society. My school was in Inverness, built on the site of Macbeth's castle, so there are no prizes for guessing which Shakespeare play we studied with monotonous regularity. No, we didn't split into older and younger, not even into boys and girls, but rather into scientists and layabouts.

After a brief intellectual struggle with acceptance to divinity school, I abandoned all sense of responsibility and secretly applied for drama school.

Three fun-filled years later I graduated from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, won an International Rotary Scholarship as Junior Artist in Residence to the University of Georgia and, afterwards, returned to my native Scotland. There, aged 21, I founded the first company to take live theatre to the remote Highlands and Islands. Why are we so much braver when we are young?

This was the mid 70's, a time in my country when "issues" mattered! A time of a "real" Labour government! A time when the Arts were generously funded from central and regional sources. Funded in the belief that theatre was a tunnel towards learning. Funded in the belief that we had

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a right to ask actively questions to which we did not know the answer. A right to try and to fail! A right to enlightenment for everybody! One of the cornerstones of a civilized society!

Our plays in our new theatre company were not about kilts and haggis but rather about the effect North Sea oil was having on our community. They were not about the long lost glories of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Stuart Succession but about the effect the Dunreay nuclear reactor was having on the people of remote Caithness. Not about the colourful romanticism associated with my race but rather about the harsh realities of the Highland Clearances, when sheep were more valuable than people, and we were still living with the consequences of a nation spread over the world from Nova Scotia to St. Kilda, Australia.

None of this was science, but they certainly were issues! Issues told through verse and song; issues told through audience participation. Taking topics, which were very real to people, and making them entertaining as well as educational. And there, I suppose, is our first issue to contemplate. How do you make impenetrable information palatable to "ordinary" folk? How do you make these bigger stories, their stories?

Ever influenced by Arthur Miller, William Shakespeare, Peter Brook and others, I was beginning to recognize the importance of the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm. Characters such as Willy Loman, Bottom, the Weaver and Brook's remarkable play *The In*, which was written in gibberish and yet told so beautifully the story of the destruction of African tribal life at the hands of the Europeans, were all becoming influences. I was beginning to sense, though not necessarily formulate intellectually, the theological notion of the "extraordinary in the ordinary."

I was beginning to abandon my guilt over not being very good at reading dramatic criticism, having little or no knowledge of Stanislavsky and wanting to resist the need for traditional theatrical structure.

Let me now fast-forward you to 1989. I have by this time been artistic director of three notable British repertory theatres. The Arts had changed beyond recognition in the United Kingdom. Long years of Margaret Thatcher's government had taken their toll. Our "right to fail" was decreasing. Our repertory theatre system was being dismantling due to under-funding. We were dismantling our civilized society! The right of each community to have its own theatre in the same way it had a soccer pitch or a hospital had gone. The old playhouses were closing, and the government was building new but few "Centres of Excellence," a dishonest way of covering their draconian cuts. Our inner cities were suffering great difficulties and deprivations. We were asking questions to which "we already knew the answers."

I had just started as Artistic Director of the renowned Everyman Theatre in Liverpool. A city famous for poetry, football and the Beatles! A city infamous for having made its fortune from slavery, shipbuilding and the Beatles! Once the second city of the Empire, but by now a sad old lady who had suffered years of poverty and decay resulting in race riots and appalling mismanagement. No easy place to run a theatre, and yet nowhere was there a place which needed it more.

I wanted my first season to have an international feel and to take the "big" stories and to make them relevant to ordinary folk. Ironically, at the same time Liverpool had just opened a new "Fame Academy" designed to cultivate young overnight stars to satisfy a greedy film and TV business. Oh dear, oh dear!

Liverpool had just endured the terrible disaster at Hillsborough where over one hundred people were killed in an accident on the football terraces. My board of directors wanted me to do a play about football. I wanted to do a play about grieving. We did *The Trojan Women*, a great Greek poem-play about death. We mainly filled our seats with women - mothers. I can still hear the howl, the deep audible howl, coming from audiences who understood the passions of Hecuba and Andromache, their sisters from centuries before.

Liverpool is a city both united and divided by its religions: Catholics and Protestants who live and work together but don't always agree about their worship. Indeed, the theatre itself was in a street with a huge Anglican cathedral at one end and an extraordinary Catholic one at the other. The street is called, perhaps fittingly, Hope Street. We did two plays, which addressed quite aggressively, the issues these religious divides and hypocrisies expose, not though through the modern hard hitting playwrights of Belfast but rather through two extraordinary plays from the 17th Century.

And then, to end our first season, we did two rather unknown Russian plays, one the World Premier of *Victory Celebrations* by Solzhenitsyn and the other, a play by Vladimir Gubaryev titled *Sarcophagus*, written in the immediate aftermath of the terrible events which befell the No. 4 reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power station on 26th April, 1986.

Some years before I had directed *When the Wind Blows*, the sometimes charming, sometimes devastating play by Raymond Briggs about two characters, a man and his wife, who are victims of the "bomb." It is humane and loving and about innocence and naivete. *Sarcophagus*, though, was a very different matter.

The play is written by a journalist and is, indeed, flawed. It deals with what happens in the experimental section of the Institute of Radiation

Safety, when victims of the disaster are taken there. It is an investigation of their stories; people who are given numbers; people who are housed in cubicles; people who are dehumanized. However, let us get to the play a little later.

Let me first of all take you to Moscow.

Always looking for new opportunities, I perhaps rather naively telephoned the famous Moscow Art Theatre to ask their help in staging the play. What sort of help I wanted, I didn't know - a programme note would have been great. They offered more, much, much more. Now let me put this in context. By 1989, we were all, in the UK at least, rather intrigued by this man, Gorbachov, and we had all learned the word, *glasnost*. However, one felt uneasy under the influences of one's granny who had always insisted that it was better "...to be dead than Red," and that one day one of those "Commies" would press a button. I never did understand what was being talked about, but "Ban the Bomb" became a playground catchphrase.

The Berlin Wall hadn't yet been dismantled, and so when I was invited by the Moscow Art Theatre to visit them and to work with one of their most successful designers, Alexander Borovsky. I was, to say the least, overwhelmed. But very, very excited!

Putting one's first step on the airport tarmac seemed somewhat of a betrayal of all that childhood warning. The interrogation at Moscow Airport was uncomfortable. The disappearance of my luggage, unnerving! Weeks of communication through interpreter, exhausting! The lack of available food in my extortionately overpriced hotel was undoubtedly good for me. The interaction? One of those life-changing experiences which make you glad you do what you do.

Like every good artistic journey, it started with a relationship and grew outwards. My colleague, the designer, was complex and charming and, to say the least, temperamental. And I learned something from him, something so simple and yet so enormous. We were dealing with a scientifically based play about a real event and he asked me,

"What did I want to say?"

"What did it mean to me?"

"What did I want to say?"

I knew what I wanted to say in 1974, when I left Georgia, young and green and in my salad days. But now, 15 years later, with a mortgage and credit cards and a fear of failing, "What did I want to say?" seemed much, much more difficult.

Perhaps because we didn't speak the same language, he was able to ask me the difficult questions. To illuminate for me that my job as an artist was, as I had always known but seldom remembered, to "Increase the Treasure of Light in the Universe."

Borovsky took me to a piece of theatre each night, all in a language I didn't understand. I found myself laughing with the Yiddish Company at the folk theatre, crying with Masha in *The Three Sisters*, celebrating and regretting the destruction of the cherry orchard. He took me to forbidden churches; he wept over Stanislavsky's grave, where I felt just a little bit guilty, and we left a rose for Chekov. We shared black-market caviar in his one room apartment where he, his wife (a celebrated actress with the Mali Theatre), his daughter and his parents all lived, and where they also stored the tires from their car, which they removed nightly.

But he was alive! Very, very much alive!

And constantly the frightening question, as one stares at the empty canvas, "What do you want to say?" I knew what it was about. I could intellectualize that I had, after all, done my research by visiting the Sellafield Nuclear Waste Site in the UK. I had the high-tech interactive tour! I had recognized how such a project was completely addressing our balance of payments deficit. But what did I want to say!

Then, with some degree of secrecy, he took me to meet the author.

Vladimir Stepanovich Gubaryev was born in 1938 in Mogilev in the USSR. Originally trained as an engineer, he had worked as a science correspondent and then as Science Editor for *Pravda*. I nearly fell off my chair when he told me that as one of his privileges, he had been permitted to take his vacation at Stalin's dacha.

He was particularly interested in space travel and the use of atomic energy! The closest I had come to either was watching man landing on the moon on television with my 96 year old great grandfather, who wept! This was way out of my depth!

In his chandelier-hung apartment, which appeared to have armed security guards outside the building, he proceeded to explain that he had been the first journalist on the scene after the accident at Chernobyl. It was his reports in *Pravda* that first informed the Russian people of the disaster. He decided to write a play on the matter. Why a play? Perhaps more impact! Perhaps it would be easier to make connections with the effects on real people, ordinary folk! I liked him. We drank vodka!

He wrote his play in two months, with President Gorbachov himself giving approval to the official censors, through whom all publications had to pass. When a theatre troupe from Tambor brought the play to

the capital, tickets went so quickly that Gubaryev himself couldn't get a seat for any of the performances.

Looking through notes I kept of our meeting, I recall how charmed I was by him; how the layabout from Inverness wasn't made to feel intimidated by the scientist from Moscow.

He had been an observer at the then Soviet Union's first nuclear test when he said,

The whole surface of the earth began to glow as if it was being heated. It was exactly there, that I came to understand what Dante meant by his Inferno. Nuclear power is an invisible devil. You can't feel it or see it, but it is everywhere, and it is terrifying. We must understand that discoveries are not good or bad. With nuclear energy, very small groups of people are creating it, but billions are using it on a daily basis. We are not qualified to live so high, yet we are doing so. There is a huge gap between the discoveries and the users. The play is an attempt to bridge that gap.

I knew about bridging gaps. I had done it as a child in my somewhat dysfunctional family. I had done it with boards of management and funding bodies in running theatres. I worked with actors all the time, so what better example.

I asked him if he could give me any advice on his play. He reminded me that plays are about people. I invited him to see it in Liverpool, but the prospect of his being able to leave the USSR seemed unlikely. When I left him, I was a happier man, not only for his humanity and wisdom, but also for having my first cup of coffee in Russia; coffee he was obviously privileged enough to be able to acquire. We also left with some photographs. He had of a bird's eye-view of the empty reactor. And therein lay the answer to our dreams.

The description of the setting of the play is stated as,

A large hall, furnished centre stage with comfortable armchairs and a few low tables. The sections' daily conferences are held there. Stage right, behind a glass screen, is the desk of the Duty Physician. On it are a telephone under locked Perspex cover and a lamp. At the rear of the set is a row of cubicles with frosted-glass doors, numbered one to ten from left to right. Behind them is a cyclorama.

Now, I had done plays set in hospital environments and had always enjoyed the "doctors and nurses" bit, having been brought up on a healthy TV dose of *Doctor Kildare*. I had cherished doing the play, *Whose Life Is It Anyway*, which is set in a life support unit of a hospital. The obsessive part of me had loved recreating the detail. But then, if you recreate that "reality," you have to get it "right." You have to be correct. The very fundamentalism of your detail can stand in the way of the story. The entire

rehearsal time can be taken up learning how to “inject” realistically when, after all, that is unlikely to be what the play is actually about.

In theatre I have always found it easier to define what I do not want to do, rather than what I do want. We knew we didn't want to create a realistic clinic as you would if you were making a movie. This is theatre. We can take bigger leaps than that. It wasn't what I wanted to say.

Gubaryev's photograph was a little more of what one could say. After all the play isn't called, *A Medical Experimental Section of the Institute of Radiation Safety*. It's called *Sarcophagus!* A coffin! Just like the aerial photograph. An open coffin! And so, that was our set. That was our unreal but chillingly stark atmosphere within which we could tell our story.

Quite simply, I wanted to say it was about dying. I had discovered, by opening my eyes, what I wanted to say. I could still explore that through my own experiences of death. After all, as I have already said, what else do I have but to explore them through this dense text and its clinical, almost remote atmosphere.

We made a set, which was an enormous metal coffin on three sides. At the back it had a series of ten doors which, when individually opened, were themselves doors into further metal coffins. It was a stark, bright and strangely beautiful metaphor. It was a poem in itself. Nobody had to worry about the reality. They could focus on the people, the victims, us. Of course, its very metal quality acted, in certain light, as a mirror, and so the audience could see itself. Showing the audience to itself had been used as a technique by Brook in his original production of *Marat/Sade*. I had seen it used again in a glorious production of *The Three Sisters*. When Moscow was mentioned, the mirrored walls of the theatre reflected us. We were in Moscow. We were the loneliness and despair of the story. All reasonable artists steal from each other. A” Mirror up to Nature.” A” Mirror up to Death.” Phew! At last, one knew what one wanted to say.

I returned to Liverpool, excited but exhausted. No sooner was I back in the UK, than Europe undertook a major change. They started to dismantle the Berlin Wall. Travel laws very quickly altered and our designer, who had never previously left the USSR, was able to come to Liverpool to join us. We were living in exciting times.

Our cast was gathered, eighteen in number - a lot of people for a subsidized repertory theatre in the late 80's. Our journey began. We improvised; we explored, and we aimed to give this somewhat dry text humanity. The main character was not a victim of the disaster. Bessmertny (it means “Immortal”) was the only previous patient in the unit. A human experiment. His nickname, “Krolik,” means rabbit. A guinea pig. And a clown! He is funny and quick witted and cynical and caring. A great idea!

Like the Common Man in Robert Bolt's, *A Man for All Seasons*, or even the Porter in *Macbeth*, he is the bizarre outsider who observes so much. He is the MC from *Cabaret* trapped in a hopeless world. He can ask questions on our behalf. The doctors like him, so they have to answer. It was a clever device to overcome the impenetrable for the audience. Before the play, he has moved from cubicle to cubicle as he gets bored with each one, just in order to have a change of scenery. As Samuel Beckett proved, you need humour to make a bleak world bearable.

Many of the play's more scientific concepts come from Bessmertny. It is somehow easier to listen to him, than it would the doctor in the white coat. He is a man who, in the words of the play, has “...had to deprive himself of his past life.” A tragic but comic character!

A play dealing with reactors and roentgens and bone marrow transplants and lesions in the alimentary tract and radioactivity is not easy. It is particularly difficult when you believe theatre is for everybody and should be accessible to all. What is, however, accessible to us all is our mortality. Beckett tells us, in his inimitable way, “We give birth astride a grave.” Bleak perhaps, extreme even, but the knowledge that we will all die is somewhere in all our minds. It is a given. It is an access point in the mirror, which this play gives up to our nature.

We must remember the play is in many ways symbolic. The three nurses in the play, for example, are called Vera, Nadezhda and Lyubova (Faith, Hope and Love). During the action one of them, Nadezhda (Hope) leaves. Russian symbolism! This may remind us that we are watching a play. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* remind us constantly that they are in a play and get laughs out of doing so. Bertholt Brecht believed that in being involved in a play we should still always know that it is a play we are watching. It will begin; we may laugh; we may cry; it will end.

The play has the capacity to make us laugh, often the ironic Russian laughter in the darkness, but laughter all the same. Through laughter we connect.

Throughout our rehearsal period one question was constantly asked, “Is this true?”

We know the events of Chernobyl are true. We know that some died; many were hospitalized having queued openly in the streets awaiting admission, and we know that 50,000 people were evacuated. We know the authorities put the accident down to human error. We know the American, Doctor Richard Gale, who is represented in the play, and who worked to the point of exhaustion with Soviet radiation victims, said in a television interview,

The lesson of Chernobyl is our limited ability to respond to a nuclear accident. We were hard pressed to deal with 300 casualties, and so it is evident how inadequate our response would be to nuclear war.

But is it true? Well, it is a play. It is a representation. It is the storytelling and poetry and song and dance of life. It is playing. It need not always be factual. If it deliberately tells the lie which confuses and misrepresents, this must be wrong. But how do we define truth?

Michael Frayn says in his Postscript to the complex and challenging *Copenhagen*,

The great challenge facing the storyteller and the historian alike is to get inside people's heads, to stand where they stood and see the world as they saw it, to make some informed estimate of their motives and intentions - and this is precisely where recorded and recordable history cannot reach. Even when all the external evidence has been mastered, the only way into the protagonist's head is through the imagination. This is, indeed, the substance of the play.

Solzhenitsyn ended his wonderful Nobel speech with the thought, "One word of Truth outweighs the whole world."

But *Macbeth* isn't the truth. He was actually a very good king of Scotland. Is Shakespeare, then, a liar? I don't think so. Was he right to tell the lie? Wasn't he actually writing a play which was, as well as for contemporary political reasons, about power and greed, and love and passion? Isn't it better to be left with the wonderful, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..." than to have a footnote in history that provides a fairly meaningless truth?

Some of *Sarcophagus* is, I am sure, not accurate. Some of it is translated in a slightly stilted manner, often a lecture as opposed to a dialogue. Actors can overcome this by being colloquial, by being relaxed and giving the text the breath of humanity. Their job is to fill the words. Their job is to make us "care."

Some of it is aimed at the regime. It is a play about its time and is unlikely to last in the great canon of Russian literature. But enough of it is about people for us to care, and that must surely be theatre's aim: "to ask us to care." To make us see that "we are all the same." To ask us to recognize, head on, that we are all afraid. Just as Macbeth was at that terrifying moment of his wife's death, when he looked mortality straight in the eye. Just as Vladimir and Estragon are as they wait for Godot to come. Just as Linda Loman is when she kneels at Willy's grave at the end of *Salesman* and wonders why nobody has come.

Perhaps the most moving moment in all of *Sarcophagus* is when the peasant woman, Klava, comes out of her cubide and says,

I must go home. My cow, Dasha, hasn't been milked. And the chickens haven't been fed. I've got to milk Dash or her udder will swell; she'll die. She's all I have. She's old and ill, but she keeps me in milk. Nearly a bucketful a day. I've heard tell all the grass will turn to wormwood and the rivers will run with bitter poison. Oh, dear, I do feel funny.

A microcosm. A picture of how ordinary folk can also use biblical imagery. The extraordinary in the ordinary.

We did our play. People liked it. People debated it. People got angry at it.

Gubaryev came to see it. Only six months after our meeting in Moscow, the world had changed. It gave one hope.

He liked it. His greatest excitement, though, came from being in Liverpool, of seeing the Cavern Club where the Beatles had started. Of Liverpool he said, "It is said a writer who stays one day in a place can write a book about it; if it's for a month, only an article; and, if you stay a year, you write nothing."

My designer, Alexander Borovsky, returned to Moscow. When I asked him what I could buy his daughter as a gift he said, quite simply and with no irony, "Bananas." She had never tasted one.

Looking, now, at a programme note, which he wrote, I am deeply touched. It's a note I haven't read since 1990.

Already in our second meeting with John Doyle, we practically need not an interpreter. We spoke in the theatre language and understood each other perfectly.

I only hope he has more space to live in. I also hope he is encouraging some other jaded theatre directors to address what they want to say. Or, who knows, perhaps he is now middle aged and needs a fresh start presented to him. I trust there will be somebody there for him just like himself.

I, myself, am still a storyteller. I struggle to give it up, but I think it is impossible. I still like to tell the big stories in simple ways. But now I always force myself to answer my own question, "What do you want to say?"

The smell of the science lab seems a long way away. Sometimes, so to does the mess of the art room. The drama club? Well, it's still got just a bit of ego and rather a lot of laughter. And right now I have completed a project involving music and am approaching yet another; so, what goes round comes round.

It is still possible for us all, scientists, artists, just ordinary folk, to recognize what makes us the same and to do our small part in "...increasing the Treasure of Light in the Universe."