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Author(s): Daniel Larner
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Freedom and Dignity:  
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Daniel Larner  

I. Barrie Stavis in the Context of His Times  

There are times when humanity seems caught up in a tide of events too complex, too overwhelming, too fast, too powerful to comprehend. The 20th century has smashed us with a series of tidal waves: World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the nuclear arms race, the threat of ecocatastrophe. Today a wave of democratic revolution sweeps Europe, and the superpowers are beginning to make peace. Is the world suddenly becoming a better place? Are our efforts finally, somehow, being rewarded? Or are we rather just lucky, a fortunate few, poised on a swing of the historical pendulum that happens to be upward?  

In these times when we perceive ourselves as caught in the working of forces far greater than ourselves, we are devalued, we feel empty and impotent, useless and futile. When fortunate developments occur under the stewardship of weak, intellectually incompetent leaders who pander to money and manipulate the public with slogans, we may seek refuge in cynicism, criticism, rage, or even violent rebellion. We may turn inward and see life as stripped of meaning, futile and useless. We may see relationships, connections and institutions as fleeting and unstable, and we may have little patience with ideals, generous impulses, or prescriptions for change. In this debilitated state, hedonism and materialism arise along with enthusiastic religion in a general inward turning. Healing the self is seen to precede healing the world. Indeed healing the self is seen as the only possible positive human action. Even the healing or improvement of another person is too much to ask for most of us. Institutions seem futile, justice fails to cope with crime, law becomes a hornet's nest of inhuman complication, and lawyers can look like predators. Doctors can look like a cause of disease and even a menace to public health. Moral values seem to exist only in the enclave of the
family, or in the private confines of one's own innermost confessional. Even taboos dilute themselves and disappear, or shatter shockingly in front of one's eyes. Foundations shake and all seems unsure.

As the 20th century has worn its way through nine-tenths of its course, its drama has reflected these developments. The century began with realistic melodrama much in vogue; and in the *avant garde*, naturalism was finding its way onto small stages in Europe. While the world moved toward war, the simpleminded, black-and-white morality of melodrama began to reflect a cynical mockery of all morality, while realism and naturalism displayed for us the hopelessness and depravity of the world outside the wealthy drawing room. At one logical extreme of this development, the *tranche-de-vie* set out new ground by suggesting for the first time in the theater's history that the literal imitation of "real life," moment by dragging moment, in real time, was a powerful and effective way to translate reality onto the stage. It was a naive idea, and indeed it did not last. Its most lasting thrust was that it legitimized the depiction on the stage of persons rarely seen there — those from depressed and unattractive circumstances. Naturalism, the depiction of human life as the clear, logical outcome of the interaction of people with their environment, became associated with drama portraying the lives of people from the poor and downtrodden classes. Soon authenticity in this form was impossible to achieve without accepting that limitation. The rich and well-spoken looked artificial and stilted in the naturalistic idiom. Naturalism and realism became the means by which the problems, not the joys, the inevitable decay and destruction, not the triumph and creation of life, were conveyed to the 20th century audience. The expressionists then took the depressive anomie, impersonality and brutality that came with mass industrialization and found a way to make them concrete on the stage, turning states of mind, feelings and nightmares into theatrical objects and structures.

Reality (as distinct from reverie or fantasy) has always dominated the American stage in the 20th century, and the conventions used to delineate reality have been crucial to the dramatic styles that went with them. O'Neil, in his early short plays and later in his huge family dramas, and a whole generation of neo-Freudian playwrights, used the conventions of 19th century pathetic drama, welded with bits of melodrama, parlor realism, expressionism and domestic comedy to recreate a kind of inner landscape on the stage, a psychological reality that presented the world as reflected by the mirror of individual feeling and experience. In the American Twenties, Thirties and Forties, naturalistic drama, concerned with the external or environmental influences shaping the lives and characters of individuals, paled in influence and importance before the volcanic
strength of the psychological drama, concerned with the inner reality, the unconscious, and the compulsions of the soul. Dramatic conventions had to follow suit. Sets began to represent moods and feelings as well as circumstances. They sometimes symbolized the state of the psyche or dominant inner circumstance from which the characters could not escape (e.g., the oppressive elms hanging over the farmhouse like the pendulous breasts of a suffocating mother in *Desire Under the Elms*). From *The Emperor Jones* to *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, from *The Glass Menagerie* to *Summer and Smoke*, American dramaturgy largely followed and brought forward the inner drama of an individual.

In the Fifties, first in Europe then in America, what Martin Esslin called the “Theater of the Absurd” turned the individual inside out, expressing personal anxiety in the form of deracinated social institutions, gutted language reduced to ritual, ritual action resulting mindlessly in destruction, and existential nightmares transmogrified into the commonplace expectations of everyday life. They took their inspiration from Büchner, de Musset, and the German expressionists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

More recently, dramas from the romantic realist school concentrating on the fate of a single relationship, from beginning to end, while they may appear at first glance to be about social circumstances, always end by being centered on the question of whether or not the protagonists' love relationship will survive and thrive. By centering themselves on our present preoccupation with love, and the personal satisfaction connected with intimate relationships, these plays use romance to shunt aside political and social concerns, and to beg the question of how society can evolve to facilitate more peaceful, productive ways of life, let alone happier, more lasting associations. Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God* is a good example of this kind of work. The relationship at the center of the action — between a teacher in a school for the deaf and one of his adult pupils — is very moving. But the larger metaphors of the play, and its larger concerns, all nicely brought forward in Act I, are overwhelmed, then forgotten in Act II as we become completely absorbed in the fate of the relationship of the central young couple.1

During the same post-war period, film began to take on the appearance of newsfilm, stripping down its editorial vocabulary, losing the fades, wipes, and dissolves that once gave it great imaginative flexibility in time and space. This trend, while moderated a bit in the last few years, has mirrored the poverty of imagination and the truncated, carefully guarded sense of limited, frightened reality that have been the American political and cultural legacy of the Seventies and Eighties. Later we shall examine in more detail the
effect of this development on the drama and how drama, film, and
newsfilm have circled each other into a vortex of disconnection and
despair.

Throughout this century, a few genuinely political playwrights
have attempted to pierce this trivialization, imaginative poverty,
cynicism, and apathy, and reawaken our confidence that we can
choose our lives and alter our circumstances. Bernard Shaw refused
the shibboleths and hollow assumptions of the Europe of his own
time. He was disillusioned by the murderous stupidity of World War I,
but he continued to write into his old age, still hoping that through
clarity and humor we could come to see the folly of our ways and
reform. Earlier, in his 1906 preface to Major Barbara he compares
himself to his society in this manner:

Here am I, for instance, by class a respectable man,
by common sense a hater of waste and disorder, by
intellectual constitution legally minded to the verge
of pedantry, and by temperament apprehensive and
economically disposed to the limit of old-maidish-
ness; yet I am, and have always been, and shall now
always be, a revolutionary writer, because our laws
make law impossible; our liberties destroy all
freedom; our property is organized robbery; our
morality is an impudent hypocrisy; our wisdom is
administered by inexperienced or maleexperienced
dupes, our power wielded by cowards and weaklings,
and our honor false in all its points.2

Even if it were possible to be harsher than this about our own
circumstances, it is well to take this example from Shaw that
connection with the political order is essential to our vitality. Our
thought about ourselves, our ability to care for ourselves well over
time, will never exceed our ability to care for our society and our
social circumstances.

Bertolt Brecht is perhaps the most successful and influential
of the political playwrights whose work extends beyond World War II.
He combines his writing with a theory of theater (the Epic Theater)
designed to show how drama can empower the members of the
audience rather than victimize and disarm them. The fact that one can
find significant contempt in the theater world — both east and west
—for Brecht’s theories (usually a smug and naive contention that the
theories simply do not work, even in his own plays)3, illustrates how
far our demoralization has spread with regard to the effectiveness and
importance of political structures and ideas in public life, in private
relationships, in our institutions, in our art.
It is in this context that Barrie Stavis, since the early 1940's, has labored in the American and European theater, staking out ground for the conviction that strong minds and hearts can make a difference, and that understanding the world we live in and improving it is our greatest good. He has fought for a theater in which the center of our concerns can be the great issues of human welfare and survival, of governance and justice, of law and right, rather than those issues that preoccupy the popular magazines and the gossip tabloids — the question of whether a relationship will survive or not, and if so on what terms. In doing this, as we shall see, Stavis is still writing about people, about their hearts and minds, their relationships and concerns. But his scope is much wider, and his sense of human capacity far larger.

Stavis has been joined in our time by a small number of determined playwrights from South America, from Africa and Europe. David Hare, Howard Brenton, Edward Bond and others continue to be performed in England in the face of historical trivializers like Peter Shaffer, and elegant _philosophes_ like Tom Stoppard. I do not deplore Stoppard and Shaffer — every culture deserves a spectrum and variety of sensibilities. But Hare and the others do survive, and in some cases thrive. Heiner Müller, Günter Grass, Vaclav Havel, and other European writers are now becoming better known to American readers and theater goers.

A new equation, fostered by Havel, between the political and the moral (rather than the popular one between the political and patently immoral) presents the prospect that audiences can once again associate political issues with deep personal satisfaction. In the Sixties and early Seventies, Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, Peter Brook in England, and Herbert Blau in America, brought new excitement and larger political dimension to the theater, rethinking the actor's art and the relationships between actors' bodies, their lives, and their roles on the stage. They constructed dramatic presentations out of the immediate existential reality of those bodies, their histories, memories, and social circumstances. For Blau and Grotowski, the body reflected and contained the society, its nature and experience. To be fully, intensely in the body was therefore to tap the power to create living characters with resonance beyond the merely personal, with rich social and political dimensions. They taught us to think of "character" on stage in a much larger, more intensive framework.

By the time Blau and Grotowski were doing their most influential work, however, Stavis had already spoken of his characters as "forged." Their actions are, from beginning to end, in the social dimension. They have resolved the questions in their lives regarding who they are and what they are going to do. They set about to do it.
The plays are not about the protagonists’ struggles to realize themselves, but about what they are doing to act on their convictions and what happens to them in the process. Sometimes there is pause and disillusion. Galileo has his doubts and wonders if his course is the correct one; George Washington agonizes about his defeats; Joe Hill wonders if he’s hurting the workers’ cause. But these protagonists nonetheless see a clear course for themselves in the world, a course demanded by their social understandings and their moral principles, and made available to them through their intellect, talent, and determination.

There has, I think, been sufficient analysis of Stavis’ technique, his methods of depicting forged characters, his taste for what he calls “objective” drama, and his sense of what makes a suitable subject, a suitable conflict, a dramatic action of sufficient size to create this kind of drama. However, there has not been sufficient attention to the kinds of men and women who actually appear in Stavis’ dramas. Are these warmed-over archaic heroes, their conflicting loyalties and tragic choices transferred from ancient Greece or Elizabethan England to contemporary America? I think not. His plays are about social circumstances, and though they are not about romance, and not about “relationships,” they are certainly about the souls of the men and women who commit themselves to actions of enormous importance. What kind of people can do this? Are they changed from what came before them, and if so, in what way? And what can we learn about ourselves by watching these heroes make their choices?

II. Stavis’ “Forged Characters” and the Modeling of the Individual Life

In an intriguing investigation called “Why the Self Is Empty: toward a Historically Situated Psychology,” Philip Cushman argues that “our terrain has shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition and shared meaning.” After the collapse of feudalism, an “increasingly bounded, masterful self” arose as the modern state was faced with controlling the individual while the culture shifted from a religious to a scientific frame of reference. In the Victorian era, this bounded self became the container “for that which could be hidden from oneself and others.” This “sexually conflicted Victorian self” arose in a society in which it became of utmost importance to contain oneself, to suppress feeling, to stay reliable and stable, to keep to prescribed ways of thinking and behaving. It is not surprising that during this time traditional rural communities were being uprooted by the industrial revolution, work was becoming “increasingly compartmentalized and alienating,” and
gender roles were taking on a “polarized and restrictive cast.”7

Into the 20th century, and particularly after World War II, the self underwent serious changes. As the economy began to depend more and more on the persistent consumption of unnecessary goods, “flash ... [comes to be] valued over substance, opportunism over loyalty, selling ability over integrity, and mobility over stability.”8

Unlike character, which is centered on personal moral integrity, advice manuals of the time taught that personality was synonymous with being liked by others. The self was conceived of as capable of personal change; impressing others and gaining their approval became an important aim in life.9

As Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman depicted so poignantly, it became all-important to be a good guy, to be liked.

In short, as the industrial economy geared up for phenomenal growth at the end of the war, the self was transformed from a conflicted, restricted self trying to control, restrict and govern its behavior, to an empty self with a perpetual need to let go of inhibitions, to acquire things to fill itself up, to make itself more comfortable, to improve itself, to supply its unending addictions and cure its ills, to fulfill its spiritual hunger and assuage its loneliness and uselessness in the wake of the urbanization of life and the destruction of community.10 Cushman wants us to understand that the “self” is a social construct, and how we work (and who we think we are) is determined in part by social circumstances and social controls.

The central point of my argument is that in a world sorely lacking in community and tradition, the most effective healing response would be to address those absences through structural societal change by reshaping political relationships and cultural forms and reestablishing the importance of their transmission.11

But, as Cushman points out, “normative psychology” is prevented, by definition, from adjusting and altering the structure of society. Cushman argues that in spite of the fact that their frame of reference is a part of the problem, some psychologists manage to heal anyway. They do so by using an approach to therapy — Cushman calls it the “life-style solution” — which is adapted from the world of advertising. In advertising, the key idea to be conveyed is that if you use a given product, you will have the right “life-style,” your emptiness will be filled and that will bring you happiness. That process results in notoriously cruel delusions. But for the sensitive

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psychologist, not too anxious to bring the "scientistic psychotherapy discourse" (that problematic framework) to bear on his/her patient, a kind of "life-style" cure can be effected through "the modeling of respect, psychological courage and empathy" that "helps patients imitate, practice, and finally internalize the qualities they most need."12 Ironically the tools of the selling trade, translated into an honest context, are put to good use in the era of the empty self.

In the theater, Stavis has found the artistic means to model lives predicated on the power of the individual to alter the world he lives in, even in cynical and powerless times. He has accomplished this by avoiding those contemporary dramatic modes that treat "life-style" and the development of the inner self as ends in themselves. His characters are determined to improve the circumstances of human life, to hold their course no matter what the cost, and to serve as examples of insight and strength to others. In this respect, Stavis' point of view is determinedly positive and incurably optimistic.

The similarities between Stavis' way of creating dramatic interest and the actual life and thought of Vaclav Havel are striking. In a review of Vaclav Havel's plays, Stanislaw Baranczak sees Havel as registering the voices of "human normalcy," recording the ways in which totalitarianism destroys the morality and courage of ordinary people.

But Havel the moralist counters ... that in a totalitarian society it is precisely the "abnormal" troublemakers who have preserved the last vestiges of normalcy. Theirs is the ordinary human striving for freedom and dignity, the kind that ultimately matters more than the misleading normalcy of a full stomach.13

It is precisely the "normalcy of a full stomach" that is the preoccupation of Cushman's "empty self." It is Stavis' forged characters, on the other hand, who are engaged in what Havel sees, in this context, as the "ordinary human striving for freedom and dignity." Baranczak continues:

And Havel the self-ironist acknowledges, and brings into dramatic relief, the intrinsic irony of the dissident's position: they may well be the only normal human beings around, but since they constitute a ridiculously powerless minority, their cause, noble though it is, will always be doomed to defeat.14

Of course, Havel's own train of hopeless defeats has turned into

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heartening victory, into triumph. This pattern occurs in all of Stavis’ plays, even if the victory occurs after the death of the protagonist. Joseph’s impending murder in the desert seals both the irony of his failure to work effectively with the Egyptian people and the creative grandeur of his political vision. It affirms the force of his determination to serve those same people and to enhance their lives. Joe Hill’s civil murder by a court of law underlines the victory of his ideas and the survival of his spirit. John Brown’s sacrifice of himself, his family and followers in a hopeless cause emphasizes both his folly and his amazing courage. Against all odds, he moves to do what is right on behalf of the “ordinary human striving for freedom and dignity.” These are qualities of life that Brown will, by any means, extend to all God’s children. He takes complete responsibility for his own actions, and attributes his failure only to his own deficiencies—he can do nothing but try, and he cannot not try. In a review of Havel’s Letters to Olga, Janet Malcolm finds Havel in a similar position:

From Letters to Olga we may gather how much more potent the optimistic view is for Havel’s imagination. His is a comic vision. “I am not interested in why man commits evil,” he writes in one of his philosophical meditations. “I want to know why he does good (here and there), or at least feels that he ought to.” In the age of Auschwitz, this is an arresting preference, particularly for a man who has himself been persecuted most of his life by a harsh totalitarian state and who as he writes is being punished in a hard-labor camp for speaking out against its abuses.

Havel himself writes:

It must seem a paradox: I write mercilessly skeptical, even cruel plays — and yet in other matters I behave almost like a Don Quixote and an eternal dreamer, foolishly struggling for some ideal or another. At my core I’m shy and timid — and yet in some forums I’m notorious as a rabble-rouser who is not afraid to say the toughest things right to someone’s face . . . [For] many people I’m a constant source of hope, and yet I’m always succumbing to depressions, uncertainties, and doubts, and I’m constantly having to look hard for my own inner hope and revive it, win it back from myself with great difficulty . . .

One thinks immediately of Galileo’s hesitations and weaknesses, Joe
Hill's self-doubts, John Brown's earnest prayers for strength, and George Washington's sober reflections on the depths of difficulty into which he has dug himself. Yet never in any of these characters is there any real backward step, any effective hesitation to complete what they are determined to accomplish, no matter how long the course, no matter how difficult the odds. They are not like Koestler's hero, Rubashov, in *Darkness at Noon*, who though his character is fully forged, suffers a huge apprehension of error in his life.  

Like Havel himself, Stavis' heroes must occasionally pump up their courage. Like Havel, they exhibit occasional weakness and are more forceful in some contexts than others. Figuratively, one might wonder how well Havel knows Stavis' plays; his remarks, like Cushman's (to whom we briefly return) seem to capture Stavis' characters.

Cushman paraphrases Kohut to the effect that "disorders of the self produce a powerful wish to psychologically merge with admired figures, to take them into the empty self."  

Cushman goes on to argue that if this is the case, then this "narcissistic wish greatly enhances the teaching-incorporating aspects characteristic of the lifestyle solution." Could Stavis' heroes be these "admired figures?" If so, would that suggest that Stavis' plays offer new possibilities for an exciting popular theater, one as engaged and determined (as "forged") as the plays' heroes? Could Stavis be about to achieve a popularity in the west similar to that which his work has recently enjoyed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? Whatever the outcome, it seems clear that the American theater as a whole has neglected the possibilities that Stavis has devoted a lifetime to exploring.

Cushman concludes that along with the shift from the sexually restricted to the empty self has gone the shift from the savings to the debtor economy. He argues that this is not a coincidence. The contemporary nation-state controls its populace not through direct physical coercion, but "through the construction of the empty self and the manipulation of its needs to consume and ingest. Three beneficiaries of this narcissistic dynamic are the modern state, the advertising industry, and the self-improvement industries." We might add the entertainment industry, which is part of what fills the empty self with images of its own problems, possibilities and development, urging us to stay on the path of those kinds of self-improvement that keep us out of the political arena.

One of the disquieting results of this constructionist perspective is the realization that our current era has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappoint-
ment to itself . . . We could also say that about our nation as a whole . . . From slavery to manifest destiny to Vietnam to the struggle over reproductive rights, we are often a nation at odds with itself. Now a new paradox has arisen: One of the wealthiest nations on earth is also one of the emptiest. 21

Our goal, says Cushman, should be to construct a society “less in need of suffering and a self that is less a sacrifice to the nihilistic economics and politics of our time.” For psychology to become a “helpful force,” the discipline would have to “acknowledge the historically and culturally situated nature of its discourse and the political and economic consequences of its practices.” 22 Such a development is long overdue not only in psychology, but in the arts, and especially in the theater.

III. Stavis’ Redefinition of Theatrical “Realism”

The next step is to find a way unsentimentally to paint what is missing rather than simply to ache in its absence. It is a movement toward a coherence of thought and vision, a fullness of feeling and response, a wholeness of connection to society and the fate of the world. To recover this movement is to re-expand our mythos to include the organism of time (history), and the reality of cultural and institutional connections.

Such a move would go beyond what we call today theatrical “realism.” American realists like David Mamet and Sam Shepard have placed us in contact with the customary myths that govern our lives, buried by facile rationales and superficial assumptions about what gods we are actually following. Mamet exposes corruption and lets us see how the vividness of our language both excites and contains us. Shepard shows us how our lives are shaped by the ghosts of our culture and our family past, stripping us down to our smallest and pettiest strivings, and holding our longing forever in front of us.

However, we pay a high price for the picture of stasis and entrapment that emerges from the realism of these contemporary playwrights. In order to understand what this costs us, we need to take a closer look at what “realism” means in the theater, and at the present context of the term’s usage in interaction with our experience of film and television.

What we usually mean when we speak of something as being “realistic” is that it seems immediate and alive, familiar flesh breathing and moving. This is close to the root of the word: the Latin res (the Greek physis), meaning “thing” or “stuff,” connoting the solid and the physical, as distinct from the spiritual, the symbolic, the
diaphanous or allusive. It is this bedrock to which Northrop Frye alluded when he characterized the stuff of realism as being what's there, after all, when we say "this, at least, is." What is real is inherently ironical, because it simply does not explain itself, does not cooperate with grand meanings, does not create fulfillment, and when it creates disaster, does not recompense us with any transcending vision. Frye's view was heavily influenced by Ibsen's conversion of the well-made play into the ironical thesis or "problem" drama, by the Theater Libre and its tranché-de-vie experiments at the turn of the century, and by the stark social documentary plays of the European Twenties. Frye connects these beginnings of our contemporary realistic practice with its older roots in ancient irony. "Realistic" plays are set in recognizable, relatively ordinary places, and are acted out amidst the clutter and mess of material life. If they are alloyed with dreams, fantasies, memories or wishes, these are used to intensify the irony of the ineluctable present.

This irony is traceable to the very roots of drama. In tribal sympathetic magic, when the shaman dons the mask of the god, its effectiveness in making the magic, in controlling the god and the world the god controls is directly proportional to the effectiveness of the mask in imitating the god. Thus the power of the imagination in imitating, in making visible something unseen and unseeable out of what is literally done and seen, is the power that makes the drama real, actual, tangible, effective.

What is important for Shepard, Mamet, and others is an uncomfortable irony that comes through the surface of speech and action, especially when that surface is crafted to be comfortably familiar. As in a penetrating film documentary, it is the very conventions themselves, so wedged to the surface of events, that show us the depths that are not immediately visible.

In the last 40 years, the drama of the avant garde, now mixing with the mainstream, has absorbed newsfilm's sense of cinematic style — by paring down means to pierce the heart of a bedrock reality. Though the drama, adapting the means of newsfilm to its own ends, brings a certain irony back to our perception of film realism, the reductivity of newsfilm, the insistence on surface, exacts its revenge. In Shepard and Mamet, what the irony of realism reveals is a world of people whose values are stunted, whose concerns are disconnected, whose possibilities for growth and change (or in Shepard, even of decay) are surgically removed. They make us understand fully the words of Shepard's Beth in A Lie of the Mind: "Pretend is more better. Pretend fills . . . Ordinary is empty." Brecht distanced us from theatrical structures to show us that reality is alterable by human means, that we can make choices in our lives just
as artists make choices in the theater. The inverse applies: the more we “take charge,” the more we choose to shape our circumstances, the more “real” our lives become (the less they are the products of the inventions of others — manipulators, advertisers, dictators).

The work of Barrie Stavis holds before us a conviction that we can change the myths, that we can rebuild them, that we can defy their destructiveness, reductivity, manipulation, and enslavement. Similarly, we can embrace the rough edges and the dauntingly complex problems, accept them, work with them, appreciate the difficulties they represent and still move firmly through them. The persistence of his heroes in wading into real-world complexities tells us that we are not necessarily victims, not necessarily trapped in the nasty details of our lives, bound to our past, or limited by those large and frightening forces that have shaped the society as a whole. In short, we still have the power of vision, the energy of creativity. We have choice, freedom, and dignity, those fundamental qualities that Havel ferrets out of his prison experience and brings to the Czechoslovakian people as the primary moral staking-posts, the standards to be used in reshaping the political and social life of a nation.

Why are Stavis’ plays not more popular in America? Why does the heroism of protagonists not inspire audiences to demand their presence on the stage? The explanation is surely not a simple one. Several points suggest themselves in this context. We are used to identifying our heroes as heroes of the battle for self-definition. The great adolescent enterprise of separating from one’s parents and becoming a person in one’s own right has become the paradigm for all success in our society. Filling the emptiness with the right goods, discovering and exercising one’s own taste in acquiring a spouse, a house, a car, raising acceptable children — these are our new marks of adulthood in the age of the empty self. In the Nineties the independent woman of the fashion magazines and the Wall Street Journal is not the woman of independent ideas, but of independent means — the professional or businesswoman who acquires her own money, who exercises her own taste, loves power, and indulges fully in the pleasures and prerogatives her money brings. She does not challenge the myths and customs of the world in which she lives. Those who do are often condemned as “militant feminists” who would upset the existing order. This kind of world tends to be blind to the values a Stavis play contains, and the feelings about life it projects.

A feminist world, on the contrary, looks toward a society in which life is not decontextualized; in which social institutions are understood as the direct result of our own efforts and are seen as part and parcel of our individual values; in which the quality of our lives can be congruent with the degree of peace and freedom we
experience, not coterminus with the amount and kind of goods we can acquire. In my view the feminist revolution is the most fundamental revolution of our time, because it contains the clearest and most universal plea for the dignity of the individual, for the liberation of both men and women from the bondage of prejudice, cultural limitation and economic slavery. The cause transcends all races, classes and national interests.

In Stavis' plays, while not concerned directly with the feminist perspective, we experience precisely this kind of liberation from a variety of rigid dogmatisms. We observe those in power upholding their dogmas as right, true and eternal, while the dramatic action shows us clearly that those dogmas are actually self-serving constructs, enmeshed with a political system and its need to maintain itself through social control. The Catholic Church upholds its Aristotelian heritage as immutable dogma in order not to suffer public contradiction. The United States shoots down John Brown and his band without making a move to alter the institution of slavery against which he fought. That this happened in 1859, with the nation on the verge of civil war, illustrates poignantly how deeply we will cling to our assumptions even in the face of the most vivid evidence that we must see anew, and make changes. Our present slothlike behavior in the face of imminent ecocatastrophy is only another example, even more outrageous, of those repeated social disasters Stavis has taken it upon himself to chronicle.

There are always good reasons not to act. If the Egyptian royalty had agreed with Joseph, they would have had to defy their own reactionaries, spend huge resources, and risk thousands of lives. Joseph could after all, have been wrong. They were realists.

JOSEPH. . . . Pharaoh, join with me. Together we are invincible.
PHARAOH. Perhaps. But then, perhaps not. How can you ask me to take the risk?
JOSEPH. Singlehanded I can't fight the Sacred Crocodile and her army.
PHARAOH. Why not? I give you a free hand.
JOSEPH. But no support.
PHARAOH. None whatever.
JOSEPH. Why? Why?
PHARAOH. All we Pharaohs stay on the safe side.
JOSEPH. If the gods of Egypt were anything but wood and stone they would surely die of laughter.
PHARAOH. Better for the gods to die of laughter than for me to ignore the precedent set by my ancestors."
The Church saw Galileo's discoveries as arbitrary opinions dissenters could use to arouse an ignorant populace (which the Church had worked to keep in ignorance) to rebel from the coercive power and control of the Church. Acknowledging that certain objects are visible through a telescope would, in their view, destroy the social order they saw themselves as ordained by God to maintain. They were realists.

POPE URBAN VIII. [to Galileo] .... people are saying that if the earth is only one among several planets, it cannot be that any great salvation has been planned for it, that perhaps God has begotten not one, but many sons, sending one to each of your planets! ... Your telescope is burning glass setting Europe on fire. Your book shakes the structure of Christian society.26

POPE. [to the tribunal of Cardinals] .... All that remains before we adjourn is for you to sign the sentence. Firenzuola, pass the quills to their eminences27 ....

BORGIA. Your holiness .... [a]fter we have signed, will this document receive your official ratification? POPE. You know as well as I that were I to sign this document I would be placing the future authority of the Catholic Church in grave danger ... Let us imagine that in the future Galileo should be proven correct. Heretics and infidels would point the finger and say, "An infallible Pope speaking ex cathedra has signed a false document" .... But assume that this tribunal alone signs the document and it proves to be in error. The infallibility of the Pope is not involved and Roman Catholic posterity will show that this tribunal was in error as men, but not as an institution. Thus, by employing caution and foresight, we avoid the thorns that beset our path, yet pluck the roses.28

The police establishment and the courts who convicted Joe Hill were trying to preserve the public order, prevent violent revolution, and preserve the existing economic order. They were realists.

MOODY. Do you think this is an ordinary strike? Do you think these are ordinary strike leaders? They want everything. They want to change the entire order of our society .... We stand on the threshold. The golden age of America. The nations of Europe
need our steel, lumber, copper. What are they buying it for? It's for guns they're buying it. For cannon. For battleships .... Two years — three years — and all Europe will be in flames. Their death promotes our life. At the moment they are destroyed, we are ready to step in and take mastery of the world.29

General Gates, Alexander Hamilton, and the other conspirators against Washington were trying to maintain the new-found strength of the independent American government as they saw it. They were trying to maintain the integrity and reward the service of the loyal soldiers and officers who had fought the revolution and stuck by the Republic. They were realists.

GATES. . . And to prevent an uprising against a civil authority, brutal and hard of heart, and against a public, vicious in its indifference, you take these soldiers and cast them adrift. You give them furloughs . . . breaking up the Army, bit by bit . . . And a few weeks after these soldiers and officers are home, they will receive their discharge papers. Separated from each other by distance, . . . they will have no recourse, no power. And this unclean and treacherous deed, General Washington, in secret and in stealth, is what you are doing to this Army which you have commanded for eight years and which has finally achieved the victory. Shabby treatment indeed!30

Stavis' heroes are not ordinary realists. On the contrary, they change the fundamental reality of the society in which they live and offer a new vision of what is possible, and then move to actualize that vision against all the resistance, gritty difficulty, and deadly opposition the society can offer. That Washington defied General Gates and his co-conspirators must have seemed to them maddeningly perverse in a man who was at once a landed aristocrat, a slave-holder and the commander-in-chief of the army. Washington drives straight toward his goal — a republican government independent of the military — ignoring or putting aside even the most pressing considerations of justice (like slavery) that he believes will distract from that goal and jeopardize its achievement.

WASHINGTON. [to Hamilton] . . . . And I do believe sir that if the powers of Congress are not enlarged and made competent, then all the fine young men
we lost ... ; the widows who mourn; the houses destroyed; the crops burned ..., all the desolation, the grief and agony of war, will have been for nothing. I acknowledge we face this risk. But I tell you, sir, we have embarked upon an experiment in government .... A republican government where the military takes its direction from the civil. And today, when we have come to a critical moment in our nation's course, you counsel me to turn my back on eight years of fighting for republican principles and to seek a military solution. Sir, what will happen the second time the military and a group of politicians try to impose their will on the civil? Or the third time? How long can any government withstand such battering and terror? I will not set that first example ...

HAMILTON. You have not mentioned the slaves. Was this an oversight or deliberate? They represent one quarter of the population.

WASHINGTON. We are talking of citizens, not property. The situation of the slave is deplorable, but it cannot be helped .... We have more pressing problems at hand. We cannot let the question of slavery interfere. Not now.

HAMILTON. Perhaps if they, too had power — and eloquent spokesmen.

WASHINGTON (very quietly). We will hold this nation together — and it will be a republic. And while I command the Army, it will not be used to terrorize the civil government.31

These heroes, flawed but strong, especially gifted, are the visionary realists who reveal the unseen, who unveil the unknown, who actualize the ideal. Stavis' great contribution to our theater is his ability to show us realistic portraits of heroic action, of strong people making social change. Stavis shows us one way to change the conventions of realism to accomplish this on stage, suggesting that we can use this example to find a way to change the conventions in our society, its values and its powers. The struggle is not the search for the self, but the effort to see beyond the limitations of our own culture and penetrate the prejudices and assumptions that govern our every waking moment. We can see that morality is worth little without courage and conviction, without learning and vision, without the special force to pierce the armor with which society surrounds its
inner sancta, protecting them from scrutiny and challenge. We do not have to be victims of the intellectual and spiritual conventions, the social institutions, the economic system, the power distribution, or the common view of human nature, all of which captivate our times. Nothing is more certain than change, and nothing more vital than the courage to comprehend it, to direct it in positive, humane ways, to repossess our own actions, our own responsibility for the integrity of our lives.

Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are taking a fresh look at the work of Barrie Stavis, performing his plays in the most prominent theaters and publishing them in new editions. We in our turn are taking a fresh look at those societies, at their customs, perceptions and sensibilities. As we do so, we ought also to bring back to the American stage one of her longest-laboring sons, one who has had the courage and persistence to dramatize for us the values, the moral vision and political courage that made this country possible, and to which, in an appropriately ecological age, we will have to return.


3. Most recently, I heard Brecht's theories dismissed in this cavalier manner by Valery Staroboutev, Soviet dramaturg and critic, in a lecture given at Western Washington University, July 11, 1990.


6. Id. at 600.

7. Id. at 602.

8. Id. at 603.

9. Id. at 602.

10. Id. at 603-4.

11. Id. at 607.

12. Id.


14. Id.
15. It is interesting to note that Joseph's flaw in *Coat of Many Colors* can be seen to be his arrogance, his failure to understand that he could not merely do as he wished with the people because his vision of their welfare made sense to him. On the contrary, he should have considered what would help the people feel some measure of freedom, dignity and power in making their way toward the developments Joseph had in mind for them. His failure to do this made him vulnerable to the manipulations of Vashnee, Pharaoh, and Potiphar. See John Lewin's introductory essay in the Barnes and Company edition of *Coat of Many Colors*, New York, 1968.


18. See also Sidney Kingsley's dramatic version of the Koestler novel. The play was published by Random House, New York, 1951. In Stavis, only Joseph in Egypt approaches the Koestler-type vision, realizing in the end that he has mistreated the people he was trying to help.


20. *Id.* at 608.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 609.


31. *Id.* at 26.