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An Interview with Barrie Stavis

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Barrie Stavis lives in an apartment in New York City's upper east side. He and his wife Bernice are surrounded by green plants, their collection of paintings and sculpture, and Barrie's collection of duck decoys. What follows is a starkly reduced version of five days of very intense talk (the transcript runs 186 pages)—talk which, as Stavis said repeatedly, led him into painful, difficult, and exciting territory, and led him to see connections between his life and work he had either not seen, or not explored before.

Larner: Albert Einstein said somewhere, "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence...these are the features of the Jewish tradition that make me thank my stars I belong to it." Where does your passion for justice come from? How does that arise in you, and does it connect in some way with yourself as an artist?

Stavis: I have to tell you that you hit upon the absolute essentials of my life. There
are four things that I carry with me in my pocket diary. The first is the Ten Commandments. The next is a statement from Jill Tarter, project scientist for NASA. She says that with four hundred billion stars in our galaxy and a hundred billion galaxies in our universe the odds are good enough that similar outcomes will have transpired elsewhere. The next, Canon Streeter: "Science is the great cleanser of the human spirit. It makes impossible any religion but the highest." And, speaking of Einstein, the fourth one I keep with me is Einstein’s statement: "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties could comprehend only in the most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men.” Well, in this sense too, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men. I consider myself a very religious man, though I do not adhere to or believe in any of the ritual forms. So when you talk with me about Einstein and his love of knowledge and his Jewishness—that’s where my art stems from: I’m in awe at what we might know and what we might do, and I’m the eternal student. Every day I’m out looking into or studying something.

In conjunction with this, a whole mystical feeling about the beauty of the world and the scientific awareness of the universe. In the New York Times today (March 21, 1994) there’s an article about the discovery of a force tugging on the Milky Way, probably from something 300 million light years away and 100,000 times as massive as our own galaxy, which has 400 billion stars. So, whirling around a fifth rate star
in one galaxy on a planet which is 25,000 miles in circumference and about 7,500 miles in diameter, we lack a sense of proportion about where we are and who we are and what we are. So we have this violent contradiction between the reality of the universe, our finiteness, and our noble capacity to learn, retain, imagine, build. These are the things that animate me constantly.

**Larner:** You wrote a play on the Old Testament Joseph for the first time in the early thirties.

**Stavis:** I did a play called The Sun and I which is an earlier version and vastly different from Coat of Many Colors. It interests me that Chekhov did the same thing with Platonov. Years later you really learn how to use the materials properly that you’ve struggled with in an earlier time. The Sun and I had a production in 1933, at Colombia University, where I’d been studying playwriting with Hatcher Hughes, and then it had a production by the Federal Theater in 1937/1938, at the Adelphi Theater which is now a parking lot on 52nd street.

**Larner:** Then many years later Coat of Many Colors, which was written in the sixties, was staged in Provo, Utah, in 1966 and published in 1968. You were sixty years old when the performance took place.

**Stavis:** Yes, I’m a late bloomer. It gets worse. The first professional production happens in 1987 in Debrecen, Hungary. I still haven’t had a professional production of The Raw Edge of Victory. It’s been published in English and Spanish and had three or four false starts, but no professional production. It had an amateur production in 1976 in Midland, Texas. I’ve always said that the middle name of every artist should be Patience. Coat of Many Colors was a completely new
I didn’t even look at *The Sun and I* before I did the first drafts of the new play.

**Larner:** Were there other elements of the Joseph story that had centrality for you? There was the idea that this man was persecuted by his brothers, that he was singled out by them....

**Stavis:** Because he was a poet and a dreamer. And because he had that special vision. I had one brother. He was six years older than I, a brute of a man, who tormented me as a child, kicked me, beat me, and always threatened me if I said a word of it to my father. I’m not even sure if I told my father he would have done anything because my brother was the oldest son, and in Jewish tradition the oldest son is the apple of one’s eye. My brother was aggressive and blustering and later on in life became a businessman and very close to my father. And here I am this rather thin, stumbling person and really a misfit in my family.

**Larner:** And so, you feel that your brother in some way understood that you were different?

**Stavis:** Of course, the whole family....the whole family....I was the iconoclast, the outcast.

**Larner:** So your father and you didn’t get along because he was not only orthodox, but a dictator who didn’t want to listen to your questions and objections. And you wouldn’t stop questioning and objecting.

**Stavis:** It’s more than that. I had the great desire to be an artist, a writer, and you must understand his background. He was also afraid of the Sabbath thing, that you have plays done on Saturday and on Friday night, but that was only part of it. He came to America in the year 1888, the year of the great
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blizzard. He lived a terribly difficult, penurious life as a salesman on the East Side. He worked for the whole immigrant family, which consisted also of his younger brother and his younger sister. To him security meant everything. What kind of a life am I getting myself into? This was absolutely foreign to him and dangerous. Yes, he was a dictator, but he was protecting me by trying to get me to become a businessman. As he said, "You can write in your spare time." The idea of devoting your whole life to an artistic endeavor was absolutely not only foreign but fearful to him, and dangerous to me. And in point of fact, look at the kind of desperate life that I did lead for many years as an artist. Can you imagine if he had any idea of the kind of crazy, dangerous plays I write? If I wrote within the framework of conventional theater and had easy chances for production, maybe I could be forgiven because then I would be a success. But to write my theater, he would have died three times over.

Larner: So you came to understand him later?

Stavis: Oh, much later. In retrospect I understand that he was concerned for me. At the moment that it happened I hated his intrusion, and yet in many respects was powerless.

Larner: So you saw him as denying you? As taking away what you wanted most?

Stavis: As a villain!!!!! As my enemy. I had to write, and he was trying to prevent me.

Larner: Yes. And for you then that was a matter of justice.

Stavis: Yes, of course. But remember too, this overarching need for me to express artistically what I
felt about the world. There is nothing that can stop that. I told you...there was just no question that I would be a writer and that it would be plays.

Larner: *You went to the theatre as a child?*

Stavis: Oh, yes. My family went to the East Side, the Second Avenue Theater, and I went too. I saw Adler, I saw Tomaszewsky, and I saw many of the stars there. It was a very easy thing to move from that to.... I used to see burlesque. I used to play hooky one afternoon a week from high school and go to burlesque, which was all around Brooklyn at that time. I went to the movies constantly and to the theater.

Larner: *So going to the theatre was accepted among the orthodox.*

Stavis: Going to the theater was accepted, with reservations, but it was accepted. I remember one time when I was probably eighteen or nineteen... they had matinees in those days on Wednesdays and Thursdays. So I saw a Wednesday matinee and another play in the evening, and then a third and fourth play Thursday and Thursday evening, and finally two more on Friday night and Saturday night—seven plays! You bathed yourself, you saturated.

Larner: *How could you afford it?*

Stavis: There was a place called Gray’s drugstore. This was on 42nd Street, in that little triangular building, and Gray’s Drugstore downstairs had the equivalent of TDF [Theatre Development Fund—the TKTS booth] cut-rate tickets. There were guys behind the counter hawking them. Now the price for a second balcony in those days was 55 cents, so for 28 cents [half price] per ticket I could see seven plays in four days, all
for less than two dollars. At that time I was earning two and a half, three dollars an hour tutoring “backward” children. I was highly paid. I was good and this is what I demanded. I was passed from one doting mother or fond parent to another. I might have taught fifteen/twenty hours a week. I really devoted myself. I wanted those kids to learn. So much of me is a teacher thing. I have knowledge and I want to pass it on.

Larner: *I'm trying to imagine the young Barrie Stavis going to the Yiddish Theater with his family. What was so important in the theater?*

Stavis: The closeness, the magic, the immediacy, the communion of the audience. To me the theater is a temple. Forgive me if its corny, but that's it. That's why I go so crazy and get so outraged at the hucksters and fakers and users. To me it's a desecration. When I see these inept playwrights, these fake romanticists, these opportunists, I go mad with fury. Esthetic and spiritual. Esthetic because I'm outraged at what's done, and spiritual, again because I'm outraged at what's done, at its misuse, at its pandering. It is supposed to be magic and communion.

Larner: *You've told me that you learned a lot from the Bible.*

Stavis: Yes. The cruel way, the ironic way in which the Bible tells stories have always affected my writing. One of my favorites is the story of the woman whose husband died, and she said to her husband’s father, “Give me another son, so that I may have children,” which was the custom of the time. The father dillied and dallied. So she sat at the crossroads where he went in the spring to tend his flock. He stopped and lay with her, and he said he would give her a kid in return when he came back. But she demanded his staff
as a token. When word got out that she was pregnant and they were going to stone her, she said, “The owner of this staff is the father of my child,” and then the father said, “You are more just than I.” That kind of irony and that kind of reversal of expectation has always meant a great deal to me in my work. I try to make my characters surprising, not predictable.

Larner: *This is another story about justice, or at least about claiming your due, getting what you want.*

Stavis: This idea of social justice runs through my training as a Jew. All through the Bible it talks about justice, about kindness, about fairness, and this runs parallel with my secular life. During the depression I used to buy an apple for a nickel, a lot of money in those days, from a certain vendor every day. Not that I believed the apple-a-day thing but I liked the fruit, and he was a nice guy. This was 1930 or 31. We chatted, and he described how one day he was so hungry that he lost control of himself, and he ate his own stock. He ate ten apples, one after another. He said he knew he shouldn’t be doing it because he needed the money to buy necessities, but he just couldn’t control himself. He was so hungry, he had a shrunken stomach, so the apples bloated him horribly. These images stayed with me.

And then there is another image, again in the depression. I was going to Columbia University at night taking courses, but my job was downtown. The place I worked at was 18th Street and Fourth Avenue, now called Park Avenue East. I came down during lunch time and there were hunger marchers going to Union Square which was two blocks south of where I worked. Now, these hunger marchers occupied a full square block and Union Square was the equivalent of Hyde Park Corner in London where people gathered,
agitating for whatever their cause might be. Hunger and jobs were a big cause during that time. There were maybe four hundred/five hundred people marching, and they were singing the Joe Hill song, “The Preacher and the Slave.” It is all very vivid. That night I went to the library and looked up the poet who had written this wonderful, acerbic and witty song. I went back to Union Square and listened to the guys and slowly there began to be a political awakening. That combination of social justice and political awakening slowly began to come through. That is what started me looking at the Joe Hill material.

Larner: You finally quit your father’s business in 1936, and The Sun and I was produced in 1937 at the Adelphi. In 1937, on the basis of The Sun and I, you were offered a lucrative contract as a screenwriter in Hollywood. You turned it down, then took off to Europe again. Why?

Stavis: I’m not sure why. The civil war had started, and I didn’t know how I would get to Spain, but I knew I had to go. I became politicized during the depression, but much more so during my time in Spain. I came into Spain deeply committed to the idea of social justice and, because of the depression, to the idea of a fair shake of the dice. But I had no idea how you might achieve these things politically. So I went into Spain as an innocent liberal with socialist tendencies, and I came out of Spain with the deep notion that one must act politically. It was the most important experience of my life.

Larner: How did you manage to go there in the middle of a civil war?

Stavis: Now, the whole Spanish thing was half accident....lucky me....really lucky me. What hap-
pened was, on the boat to Europe I met Alexander Calder—you know the Calder mobiles. Sandy Calder lived in Connecticut, as I recall, and he and his wife and daughter, and his big sheep dog, were on the boat going to Paris to work for a period of time. It so happened that the night before he had seen The Sun and I at the Adelphi Theatre! Accident! When he heard I was the author of the play he said, “Please look me up when you are in Paris.” When I got to Paris we became very, very dear friends, and I used to visit him frequently. I think the address was 262 Rue de Veaux Girarde. In the back of the house he had built a forge, and I would have the most wonderful time watching him turn and bend and twist these mobiles which in those days were barely accepted. He was a big, heavy, sweaty man with a kind of strange, high Boston accent, somewhat nasal. His great big sheep dog would be looking out and watching the sparks fly. It was Sandy who introduced me to the painters crowd, and to Hans Richter, who was a great cinematographer, but equally important, a political man in the Weimar Republic. It was Richter who I transformed into the character of Karl Hoffman in The House of Shadows.

Larner: Who else did Calder introduce you to?

Stavis: Calder told me where I could rent a room, a house in Meudon Val Fleury, just outside Paris. It was owned by Pedronella Van Doesburg, widow of the Dutch architect Theo Van Doesburg, the founder and editor with Piet Mondrian of Der Stijl. Theo Van Doesburg had designed the house, which is now famous architecturally. I met the artist Hans Arp there, and visited him in his home nearby. Also Piet Mondrian. The people who lived in Pedronella’s house, at 39 Rue Charles Infroit, became the basis for the characters in The House of Shadows. Pedronella was my Josephine. The life in the house and in the play are wildly differ-
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ent, miles and miles apart, and yet one sprang from the other.

Larner: *All this time you were looking for a way to go to Spain.*

Stavis: Yes. The more I heard about the civil war, the loyalist, socialist republicans against the Nazi-backed fascists, the more I wanted to go. I met the architect, Luis Sert, who later went to Harvard. One time we had lunch together, and I said to Luis, "I want to go to Spain." He said, "How serious are you?" I said, "I'm very serious, or I wouldn't take your time." So he said, "Let's talk in a week." A week later he said, "It's all arranged." Now what happened was that I was to leave one morning from Paris and take a third-class train to a town close to the Pyrenees. I was to get off and follow directions to a bistro where I was to order a glass of wine. At a certain time the back door would open. It did! I was told to walk right out and there would be a car waiting for me. Quickly we went up through the Pyrenees. When the road crossed to the Spanish side, the driver gave a certain honk with the horn and the French guards turned away while they smuggled me into Spain. Spain was the chrysalis—chrysalis is the right word. I think it was the single most important experience in my life.

Larner: *Give me an example of the work you did when you got to Spain.*

Stavis: I was a correspondent. But I also wrote plays—*Refuge*, about people in a bomb shelter during the Barcelona Horror, and another one called *The International Brigade*. I wrote an article on the Barcelona Horror—March 16, 17, and 18, 1938. The Germans would load up their planes with bombs and gas. They would fly over Barcelona and drop the bombs
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and then go to Ibiza and load up again. This was a constant round, and we had no anti-aircraft that could reach them. They flew 2000/3000 feet above the range of our guns, dropped their bombs, and when they saw the puff of smoke from the explosion, now over half a mile away, they would flap their wings. It was really an experiment by the fascists to bomb a city to oblivion. Well, they failed, and they failed in London and they failed in Leningrad. But the dead in Barcelona during those three days...this is what I wrote about.

Lamer: You make it sound like you were fighting the war yourself. You say "we." Do you still feel very strongly about the Loyalist cause?

Stavis: Living in the house in France, my experience in Holland, and these experiences in Spain—all of this together focused into a political, social, leftist awareness. We all knew that if we didn't win in Spain, there had to be a world war. But it taught me so much about my art. It taught me about power and about power manipulation. I couldn't have written any of my plays without seeing how power operates or how truth operates, how truth can be a commodity to be used, as necessary, for a political or an authoritarian purpose.

Lamer: Refuge seems to be soaked in that immediate experience, and in the feeling of being helpless in the face of huge power.

Stavis: Refuge was first performed, just days after I finished the play, in a refuge, a bomb shelter in Barcelona, and during the time of the performance there was a raid! You want living theater in actuality? Well, there it was! Then I began writing The International Brigade in London, a full-length play. It was schematic. There was a Frenchman in it. There was a black American, an Englishman, a German, and an-
other character I don’t quite remember. Their forces have been badly destroyed and they have fled, deserted. The play deals with their intermingling with a young blind girl and an older girl, how they deal with their retreat, and how they decide by the end of the next morning to go back to their army. Immediately after that I did notes and all kinds of things on *The House of Shadows*.

**Larner:** So work on *The House of Shadows* begins in London in 1938. Let’s go back further. Where does Lamp at Midnight begin?

**Stavis:** When I was 16/17, I saw an etching of Galileo having just recanted before the inquisition. Even then I said, “How could he do it if he saw it himself with his own eyes? How could he do such a thing?” That same daguerrototype stayed with me. He is standing off on the lower right, and on the upper left you have a whole group of Inquisitors. And the caption says, “Epur si muove” (But still it moves). That’s utterly ridiculous! If he had said that, he would have been clapped right back in prison again. If he had just recanted, he can’t say, “But still it moves!” So all of this was germinating in my mind. How could anyone have written *epur si muove*? Why did he recant? That was just a question in my head, of which I have 500 roaming around all the time. I kept asking what happened then, and how. Now the first drafts of the play were enormous. They would probably take eight hours to do. Gradually, gradually, the whittling down took place, through dozens of revisions.

**Larner:** Do you remember when you started?

**Stavis:** Yes. As I came back from Spain, I was writing. In Paris, in London, on the boat, I was writing all the time. I got back in July, 1938, and got a Yaddo
fellowship. Then I went to teach a course on the Living Newspaper in a worker's school in Tennessee in the summer of 1939. So in fall, 1939, I began again and finished a draft before I went into the army in 1942. I was all gung-ho about destroying fascism. I was in the army until 1945 and got very ill from overwork. I was recuperating for most of the next year. Then I went back to work on the play.

Larner: Back in 1981 I called you a "Prophet in a Passive Theatre." I was referring to your use of the theatre as a forum for large moral and political questions. But now it seems the position you took regarding Galileo's actions, and which was subsequently taken by Galileo scholar Stillman Drake, has been vindicated by recent Vatican announcements.

Stavis: Now, there is no question of who is right and who is wrong because of the fact that the church has opened up in recent years and has done their own examination of the case. Two years ago they admitted that they were wrong, that the document on the basis of which Galileo was made to recant was either forged or simply a memorandum by some overzealous clerk, as I mention in my play. So, yes, the position that I took when I wrote the play was vindicated by the findings of the church.

Larner: It occurs to me it wasn't just the opposing scholars, like Arthur Koestler, who turn out to be wrong, but also Bertolt Brecht. Your play opened in New York virtually right on top of his in December of 1947.

Stavis: What had happened was that the American National Theater Association (ANTA) had selected Lamp at Midnight to be done in its new Experimental Theater program. On a Friday, my
director, Margaret Webster, and myself visited Robert Breen, who was executive director of the Experimental Theater, and we had agreed on the production dates of the play and when it would go into rehearsal. Philip Bourneuf was to play Galileo and that was all set. Monday morning someone called me and said: "Barrie, did you see today's Times?" and I said "No," and they read an item to me which said that the Experimental Theater was going to do Brecht's Galileo with Charles Laughton. They had done a small production, not really well received, in California. The Experimental Theater thought that taking their entire production and bringing it to New York would give their theatre a sure and solid footing.

Now about six or eight months earlier, David Heilweill and Norman Rose came to me. They were going to form a new theater which was going to be called New Stages, and they wanted to open with Lamp at Midnight. I told them I had an agreement with the Experimental Theater to do the play. They said, "Do you have a contract?" and I said, "No, its a verbal agreement," and they said, "We would like to discuss it with you." I said, "I'm afraid I can't do that, I have a verbal agreement."

Now, back to the day of the article in the Times. That was Monday. Peggy Webster and I had talked specifics about the production with Bob Breen on Friday. Unless they made the switch to Brecht over the weekend, Breen knew about it when he was negotiating with me! I tried to reach Bob Breen, and each time he was busy, busy, "Call me back," and this went on for days. At any rate David and Norman came to me the next day or the day following, and said, "We still would like to open our theater with your play." I said, "You've got it!" and within days Boris Tumarin from Moscow was introduced to me as the director they would like to have do the play. He had read the play, he adored it, he wanted to do it.
New Stages consisted of about 120 people, each of whom chipped in $300.00 dollars, a lot of money in those days, because they were disgusted with existing conditions. Many of them were making their living as radio actors. Many were professionals of one kind or another who were fed up with Broadway and were looking for some kind of egress out of the Broadway syndrome.

Larner: So what theatre did you use? And what was it like to put the play together on the stage for the first time?

Stavis: We were at 159 Bleeker Street, which is now Circle on the Square. The acting company was mostly on a volunteer basis, and we started rehearsals in about two weeks. The theater had been a movie house of sorts, and it had been closed down for years. The company as a group volunteered to clean out the theater. We found newspapers down in the cellar from 1930. We cleaned out mice, rats, cats, everything. We were able to beg and borrow new seats. David Heilweill was the lighting man. You must remember this is the second round of the off-Broadway movement. In the days of Eugene O'Neill, George Cram Cook, and Susan Glaspell, it was burgeoning, as was the Provincetown and others. Then the whole off-Broadway movement sank into disrepute because of the vanity productions, people getting together $500 and doing these terrible productions that no one would go to. Then Lamp at Midnight, historically, started the second round. It preceded Circle in the Square’s production of Summer And Smoke by about five years.

We had to paint the walls on the day the show opened. Now usually you paint walls from the top down, but what we did was get a fast drying paint and we painted from the bottom up so that at least up to the shoulders the walls would be dry by the time the
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audience came in at night. There was a huge crew and we all painted. It was an enormously wonderful and interesting cooperative effort. It was an indication of the terrible times that many of these people were having as radio hacks. They wanted to get back to theater. The Brecht piece opened at the Experimental Theatre on December 7, and we opened on December 21. When the notices came out, they compared the two plays. The promotion man, Reggie Dennenholz, put a bunch of these comparative reviews together in a four page mailing piece which was very laudatory for Lamp at Midnight.

Larner: How long did the play run?

Stavis: The idea for New Stages was that the first show would play four weeks, and the day after opening night, the second play would go into rehearsal. It would rehearse for four weeks while the first show had its run. Then the theatre would have a dark week during which time the second production would be rehearsing on the stage, and it would open a week after the closing of the first play. Well, Lamp at Midnight played to sold out houses in this 299 seat theatre for four weeks. Then they extended it for two more weeks, but had to close to sold out houses in order to get the next play on. By the way, this is exactly what happened in 1993 at the National Theater of Chile in Santiago. They had expected to play fifty performances and played thirty more before they had to close it in order to open their next production, which was rehearsed and waiting. Now they are going to play forty more this year. The play is fifty years old, and it just keeps going along.

Larner: Though there may not have been as many productions as you’d like, and certainly not as many in America, it seems you’ve enjoyed a lot of good

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productions and enthusiastic audiences over the years.

Stavis: You saw the videotape of the Santiago production and the huge applause. That is the way the play is received generally. I'm very concerned if I don't have an enraptured audience. I'm spoiled in that respect. I expect it. I saw five performances of the play, and what you saw on tape was repeated five times. Vast applause and then a standing ovation and cheers. By the way, that's what happened opening night in 1947. One of the critics said the applause was so great that in the second half of the play, they were applauding at the end of scenes, holding up the production.

Even after all that enthusiasm, my next production took a long time to come around. It was The Man Who Never Died, and that was done off-Broadway by Irving Strauss at the Jan Hus Theater in 1958. But the play had been finished in 1953 and published in 1954, including the 120-page introduction which I titled, "Notes on Joe Hill and His Times." After that volume came out in 1954 there were translations of it almost immediately. I know there was a German translation in 1955 or 56. There was a Chinese translation published in 1957. As I recall, there were eight translations of the play in fairly short order and there were some productions. In Germany, it was done in Leipzig in 1957 and ran for three years. It was done on radio in many places. In Moscow, it was done about two or three times a year and played something like 30 times over the years. It was done in Berlin in 1970 as an opera, with music by Alan Bush, and in 1979, the Joe Hill centennial, it was done on a huge tour in Sweden, in Budapest, Hungary, and in Russia. It's had two productions in Tokyo, been on radio and television in Sweden, and in 1993 had a lovely production in Sudbury, Canada—a joint production of the Cambrian Players and the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, celebrating their 100th anniversary. This was the second time the
MMSW has done the play!

**Larner:** Do you think the Russians did the play so often because they thought it was anti-American, or at least critical of America?

**Stavis:** I imagine *The Man Who Never Died* was perfectly wonderful for them in terms of it seeming to be anti-American, but I've never seen it as an anti-American play. I see the play as an extremely patriotic American play, where justice does prevail, but not in a conventional way. I remember speaking to someone in Italy when the play was published in Sipario. I was very distressed with one of the critics who had seen it as an anti-American play, and this Italian man said, "But of course this is a patriotic play." Anti-American? That's precisely what I'm *not* doing! I'm a goddamn big critic, but I consider myself a patriot of this country.

**Larner:** Have you ever felt you were in danger as a playwright?

**Stavis:** Living is dangerous. Writing is dangerous. Art is dangerous. Every day you put your life on the firing line. Every day you die and the next day you become a phoenix. You rise again and enter into the struggle and you say, "Oh, not again!" Except sometimes its OH!! AGAIN!!, with pleasure.

**Larner:** What was the shape of your quest for justice in the late 1950's? What were you seeing then as being most important?

**Stavis:** Freedom.

**Larner:** Meaning what?

**Stavis:** It meant freedom of the press. It meant
freedom to speak. It meant equality before the law, and it also meant economic freedom, though in my writing that came out primarily in *The Man Who Never Died*. But always the plays deal with questions of freedom. And always in a historical context. How does the world run? How is power achieved? How is it maintained? What is it used for? And in behalf of what? Or in the name of what?

**Larner:** What is real humanist freedom?

**Stavis:** First of all, we are not free in principle or practice. There are masters and slaves. There are rich people and poor people, and the rich people have all the opportunity and all the power. The poor people, one way or another, are subservient.

**Larner:** OK. But what distinguishes what a capitalist would call economic freedom from the freedom you're talking about?

**Stavis:** One is the economic freedom to do what one wishes to advance one's own position. The other is the economic freedom of a poor person or a disadvantaged person who says, "I want to have a larger share of the capital goods of the world. I want your share to be diminished, and I want to share in the power of the running of the world."

**Larner:** This sounds like a cry for equity, for justice in the form of fairness, for freedom from oppressive circumstances.

**Stavis:** Yes, but it's more than merely freedom from oppressive circumstances. It's for a fair shake of the dice. It's for freedom. In fairness, there is the power to be free. In *The Man Who Never Died*, we want a living wage, we want to be free of wage slavery. In *Harpers*
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Ferry, we want to free the slaves. We're dealing with a fair shake of the dice. We're dealing with equities.

Larner: Other than with your father, were there times in your life when you keenly felt inequity.

Stavis: For others, all the time. So many places in the world, including here. And of course Spain in the late thirties and Russia all through, including in the early nineties. For myself, in the McCarthy period, when I was denied a passport.

Larner: Why did they take away your passport?

Stavis: I don't know. Maybe because I was published in the New Masses. Maybe because I was produced by Federal Theater. Maybe because The Sun and I was looked upon as a radical play. I just don't know. And in a way it is very strange that I have never written to the FBI for my records, but I haven't. In a way I couldn't care less. Maybe the fact that I was published and produced in Russia, and in East Germany. Maybe the fact that I got money from an arm of the Russian government, namely the Writer's Union. It was only after Paul Robeson and others won their cases in the Federal Court that the strictures were loosened. When I was living on East 53rd street, BC [Stavis' wife, Bernice Coe] and I had this one room apartment. I was writing about 11 o'clock in the morning, and the bell rings. I have the chain on, I open the door, and two very beefy young men said, "We're from the FBI. We'd like to talk to you." So I said, "I don't want to talk to you." So one guy put his foot in the door, and I said, "Look, mister, you're on my property, and if you don't take your foot away, I'm a pretty muscular guy, and I'm going to bang the door closed... So he pulled his foot out, and he said, "But we want to sit
and talk to with you a little while.” I said, “I don’t want
to talk with you,” and I banged the door shut. Then I
called my cousin, Morton Stavis, who, as you know, is
a big civil liberties lawyer. I told him what had
happened, and he howled with laughter. He said, “If
the rest of my clients would do the same thing, I’d be out
of business.” So obviously I was on their subversives
list. Maybe it was because of the money I received from
the Soviet Union, but it was very gratifying to get that
$900. In those days it was a lot of money for us. When
it came, I said to BC, “We’re rich!”

Larner: So much of this sort of thing happened
again in the sixties and early seventies, for those who
protested or opposed the war in Vietnam. It seemed like
such a terrible revelation to realize that our government
could harass and even arrest us for our ideas. Some­
how, you’ve always brought your ideas, not directly into
the political arena, but into the theatre.

Stavis: For me theater is a forum, so it’s
immediately political. As Hamlet says to the players
when he talks about holding a mirror up to nature, it’s
the “abstract and brief chronicle” of the times. Theater
is that, and more. It’s the most vital forum for moral,
political, spiritual ideas, for philosophic thought, and
for human conduct. It seems to me to be superior to
prose works, even to the Iliad and the Odyssey. When
you look at Shakespeare, Moliere, Chekhov, or you look
at Shaw, they have audiences infinitely broader than
any prose work, or poetry. Now television and movies
could be more pervasive forums, but I raise questions
about the quality of the material. There are bold
political works, social works, like Schindler’s List. But
most films and plays that are being shown in New York
are romantic and foolish. I’ve said this over and over
again to whoever will listen. However, you have
exceptions like Angels in America, which, as I see it,
has quite a number of problems, but that doesn’t matter. It is a bold, imaginative, idiosyncratic play. It has a vaulting imagination. And it is highly partisan. Plays should be partisan, should take positions, advance concepts and criticisms of society. So when I say theater is a forum, I say this aware of the narrow pedestrian limits of thought in most contemporary playwriting. You know Neil Simon’s plays, Wendy Wasserstein’s *Sisters Rosenzweig*, Terence McNally’s *The Perfect Ganesh*—I remember in another interview specifically picking Wasserstein and McNally, and talking about how dreadful their plays are.

**Larner:** *Some people write for an audience. You do your thing and go find the audience that wants to watch it.*

**Stavis:** I was in the library, in the early fifties, I think, working on research for *The Man Who Never Died*, and directly opposite me was Waldo Salt, who was to write a fine musical on bridge laborers called *Sandhogs*, and much later a movie I like, *Midnight Cowboy*. I asked Waldo what he was working on. He said he was writing a television piece on scams, how people finagle someone else for money, called, “What Men Will Do For Money.” I think that is accurate. And then he asked me what I was doing, and I said, “My Joe Hill play.” He said, “What are you doing that for? You know that it will never be produced or published.” I said, “I’m doing it because I have to do it.” He said, “Why are you wasting your time? Nothing will happen with it.” And I said, “Waldo, they don’t need thought police for you; you are your own thought police.” We were leaning across a big table on the third floor. And he said, “You son of a bitch,” and picked his stuff up and walked away. He was working with the best way to survive. I was working in what was the best way not to survive.
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Larner: But shortly after that, The Man Who Never Died started attracting attention all over, and the Leipzig production opened in 1957 and ran for three years. Even though the production at the Jan Hus opened in New York in 1958 and ran for 150 performances to enthusiastic, full houses, still this three-year run must have given you some ideas about European audiences. Did you know anything else about the character of this audience or what it was they were responding to?

Stavis: Yes. In The Man Who Never Died, they were responding to a brave working class man who was being railroaded and executed. It so happened that fit the social patterns in East Germany at the time. But that’s only part of it. The other part was that audiences in Europe—and never mind the propaganda plays in the East—these audiences were, for me, totally different from the American audience. It was an infinitely more learned, more aware audience, an infinitely more sophisticated, endowed, equipped audience. They came with a bigger frame of reference. And I’m talking about the general audience, I’m not talking about the five dozen intellectuals which you will find in any American audience. I’m talking about the whole audience.

Larner: What is that bigger frame of reference?

Stavis: People had been going to state-subsidized theaters all their lives, and it was a basic part of their lives. As a result, and from their studies in school, they were well-equipped. They knew the classical repertory from the Romans and the Greeks on. All you have to do is look at the repertory programs of the time. That doesn’t mean that they never played thin, fluffy plays, or sentimental propaganda, or comedies, or serious contemporary plays. But it does mean that
Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Shaw were a part of their lives. Let me tell you. Many small cities in Germany had a small theater, a big theater, a children’s theater, an opera house, and a comic opera, all government sponsored, all playing repertory!

**Larner:** More than anyone could go to.

**Stavis:** Exactly. And you not only have a big choice in your own town, but within a radius of fifty miles, by quick train or by car, you can go to one of several other cities and taste five or six different theaters in each one, all on cheap tickets. So if you really wanted to see a certain play, you could jump on a train, see it, and be home that night. Theatre-going was a constant activity. Here theatre-going is not a constant activity, except for a small slice of the population, which rules out the working class, blue collar class, young students, young professionals, and many more.

**Larner:** But things are changing rapidly in Europe now. Subsidies are shrinking fast or gone altogether. Ticket prices are rising sharply. Huge, padded theatre staffs are being “downsized,” and middle-aged people are probably not raising their kids with the same theatre-going habit.

**Stavis:** That’s surely true, but I have been stunned by the fact that in Europe about half the audience will be under the age of thirty, even now. When Lamp at Midnight was done in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, about five years ago, I saw many performances over the span of three or four weeks, and uniformly this was true. And this young audience also jammed the bookshop which was adjacent to the theatre, which was filled with theatre books and other books of all kinds.
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**Larner:** *It seems to me* The Man Who Never Died was a natural for Eastern European audiences even before 1989. It depicts a conspiracy of corporation, state and church against the working man and the union. Because the villain is a capitalist, the play would pass the official censor. And yet the behavior of that villain would have been easy for the audience to associate with the oppressive bureaucracy, with the current government. It seems to me that without ever having any such intention when you wrote the play, you were speaking in their code.

**Stavis:** I think you're right. But if the play spoke in code only, it would have a respectable but short life, and would be forgotten. This happened to Herb Tank's play dealing with ships and stevedores, which had a production or two in East Germany and that was the end of it. *The Man Who Never Died* is gangbusters on the stage. It has an internal vigor and force, both technically and creatively, which surpassed the code. At the Riksteatern in Sweden it ran for three years and over two hundred performances. That's an enormous number for a small country. It wasn't the code.

**Larner:** *Not in Sweden.* But in Eastern Europe, you gave them the luxury of listening to criticism of the regime under which they were living, in disguise.

**Stavis:** Yes and no. What the other interpretation could be is that I gave them the luxury of seeing an American playwright condemning his own regime.

**Larner:** Well, that's having the cake and eating it too! *The essence of code is that it speaks out of two sides of the same mouth.*

**Stavis:** Quite right. But as I told you, I consider
The Man Who Never Died an intensely patriotic play. There is no way to describe to you the enthusiasm of the audience in the Eastern countries with the productions of Lamp at Midnight. What you saw [on videotape] of the Santiago production shows the same enthusiasm—standing ovations that go on and on. Chile, too, was and still is a country under repression. Few realize that though Pinochet is no longer head of state; he is the head of the army. So here you have the general of the army, standing off against the civil president. And you have a very tenuous situation. And furthermore, the constabulary, which used to be an independent arm, is now part of the army. So this play in Santiago stunned the audience. It was parallel to the experience that I had in St. Petersburg.

Larner: You can imagine The Raw Edge of Victory getting staged there! It seems so unlikely, but maybe that will be the place it finally gets staged.

Stavis: Just last night I had a phone call from Santiago. They are going to be doing Lamp at Midnight in repertory with Chekhov's Platonov at the National Theatre. If that can happen, who knows what's next? Well... I told you patience should be the middle name of every artist.

Larner: Are there other developments in the Eastern European countries which are changing the audiences?

Stavis: There is no way to describe to you the effect on the Russian populace when they had the opportunity for the first time to see their parliament on television, in session, working. This began under Gorbachev. People would run home from work and stay glued to the television until two o'clock in the morning, then come to work the next day with their
eyes glazed. Mischa Schvidkoi, who used to be editor of Teatr Magazine and now is head or deputy head of the Russian ministry of culture, said to me very sardonically that the population of Russia is going to fall off because everyone is busy watching television. People were staggering in the street from lack of sleep, day after day.

Larner: It must be more exciting than the American congress.

Stavis: It’s the novelty of it. The privilege of it.

Larner: It would seem the time is ripe for The Raw Edge of Victory to be produced. Those who have read the play—directors, dramaturgs, managers—think quite highly of it.

Stavis: You saw a copy of the letter from Tolya [Anatoly Smeliansky, deputy director and literary manager of the Moscow Art Theatre] with reference to what [Yevgeny Yfremov [Director of the Moscow Art Theatre] says about the play. He says that formerly this would be something which would be a natural project for them. The government would pour large sums of money into it to make it a big, big, thing. Now they say it’s just beyond them, financially, and they’re right. After eight rehearsals with director Robert Sturua [at the Rustaveli theatre in Tbilisi, Georgia], they had to call it off because the country blew up and the currency collapsed. So what will happen in the future, I don’t know, but Sturua still wants to do the play. He still regards it as a major work. Every place I go, the people who read it consider it a major work. It now has a big underground reputation. But nothing happens. Maik Hamburger [critic, translator, dramaturg for the Deutsches Theater, Berlin] says
he’ll go anywhere to see a production of this play, and my response to him is, “So would I!” But he says, “When, when, when?” Bernard Dukore says, “It’s great about Lamp at Midnight. It’s great about The Man Who Never Died, but what about The Raw Edge of Victory? That’s the play we’ve got to see.” Well, so would I!! But it hasn’t happened. And yet, I’m terribly optimistic about the play. Crazy me. I think there’ll be a production of The Raw Edge of Victory in five years. I think there will be a production of House of Shadows within three years time.

Lerner: It seems we’ve come full circle. Your plays deal with tragic circumstances in an optimistic context. The work and the ideas of the hero survive his own demise. While your views of the world become darker, and the circumstances for production more difficult, your optimism somehow also survives. You have faith.

Stavis: I think it is observable in all my plays. My religion is a social religion dealing with the welfare of man on this earth, not in heaven. We have personal and social responsibility for our environment. I have hope, but I must tell you my outlook is very black and bleak, very dark. That hope has been set back by centuries, if not millennia. But I have a hope, a belief in the eventual emergence of man from this miasma, this swamp of ignorance, killing, shooting, murder, disease, horrors, starvation, AIDS, racism, sticking infants on bayonets in San Salvador.

Lerner: This feels so much like the atmosphere of Shaw’s Heartbreak House.

Stavis: Yes. Of course. We still haven’t recovered from World War I. Heartbreak House is a very important play for me. As I see it, the grandfather of
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The House of Shadows is The Cherry Orchard and the father is Heartbreak House. These plays portray societies on the brink of utter collapse and enormous unforeseeable changes in the future. And how do the people who are at that juncture in world history, in their own personal histories, how do they face the future and what do they do?

We are on the brink of horrific disasters and vast, vast changes. My worry is not about whether mankind will emerge from this miasma, but only about how long it will take and what it will cost.