

# STONE WASHED THEATRE

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Many contemporary actors, and even directors themselves, are quite unaware that the profession of the stage director has only existed for a hundred and fifty years or so. That is a very short time in the long history of theatre, really just an experiment. It is time to recognize that, in many ways, it is a failed experiment. Too much has been sacrificed to the gods of efficiency and authenticity. The modern, manufactured, director's theatre is cursed with an emptiness of style.

I remember my first pair of blue jeans. They were stiff and crunchy and mysteriously blue like a bottle of milk of magnesia. They screamed their newness and begged to be abused. Only a long relationship with a pair of teenage legs would make them comfortable. And that was what it was all about. Flesh would make history and denim would record it! Every leap, every stride, every slide on a subway bench. Turnstiles, brambles, motorcycle seats. The keys, the wallets, the knees. The ever curious pelvis. Sometimes the jeans came off more than once in a day. Eventually it was all there, written in the faded fabric. The achievement was clear. More than comfort, the jeans had acquired style!

Alas, things are different now. You can go into a shop and buy a pair of jeans already broken in. The manufacturers call them "stone washed jeans." Very fashionable. Faded in the wrong places though, without regard for activity or anatomy. A parody of the real thing. False rags. An insult to the poor. They tell no stories. Empty jeans, no matter who's wearing them. No style, no style at all. But it's an old problem, and especially in our profession. Western theatre has been making the same mistake for over a hundred years. We've been selling the public Stone Washed Theatre.

Yes, the modern theatre has lost all understanding of style. It has tried to replace the real thing with an imitation, and that recent invention, the director, has been engaged to oversee the whole deception. The situation looks bleak. But, as I will explain, it is still possible to return to the source.

The trouble began around the time of the Industrial Revolution. Before then there were no directors as we know them today. Playwrights, yes, practical leaders, yes. But no sharpshooters hired to pull the whole thing together, to impose a unity of style upon a production. Why? Perhaps because style was just not a consideration. This is not to say that there was no manifestation of style. It was just not conscious, not something to be isolated from the rest. To ask an actor of an earlier time to explain his style of theatre would have been as meaningless as to ask an Australian aborigine to interpret his own religion. If you live it, you don't see it. At any rate, there was no need for a director. The institution that held a company of actors together and cradled and fed their evolving style was the family. And style belonged to the family. It was not something to be manipulated from production to production.

Of course it was a long slow process. Molière's group played hick towns in the provinces for fifteen years before hitting Paris. Eventually the Industrial Revolution would speed things up.

Now industrialization is not about men using machines. It is about men using men as machines, about alienating them from their work so their labour can be manipulated efficiently. Church, State, Family, Recreation and Work all get put in different boxes. Industrialization is in fact the militarization of work. Chains of command are formed. The act of creation is split apart. Design is separated from production. The person at the drawing board does not pull the lever on the conveyor belt. The managers become generals and the workers become soldiers and work becomes an enemy to be conquered, instead of a source of expression integrated into the rest of a person's life. Unfortunately, industrialization is also a great romance. And where it isn't heroic, at least it is efficient.

Music was the first to succumb. The symphony orchestra and conductor were invented, the perfect metaphor for a harmonious factory. The captains of industry could sit in the concert halls and feel thoroughly flattered. It took a bit longer for theatre to fall, but it is not hard to imagine the first director, some bright young fellow sitting in the audience with a notebook and pencil watching some traveling company passing through his town putting on an amazing performance, the fruit of twenty years of living and loving and fighting and farting together, and this fellow saying damn it, give me some actors and six weeks of rehearsal and I could do that too. And no doubt he did. But not quite. Something would have been missing. Like the difference between a bowl turned by hand on a potter's wheel and one stamped out by machine in a factory.

The ascendancy of the director received further impetus from another parallel romance. This was also the time when a grave robber in a pith helmet could first call himself an archaeologist and force history and prehistory to give up their truths to science. The past became not a foundation to build upon, but a ruin to excavate and reproduce. Our noble Victorians began to ask themselves serious questions like did Shakespeare's Romans wear togas or tights? I call this the Romance of Authenticity. Don't misunderstand me, "authentic" is a useful word, especially in the sense of having integrity, being true to itself. But it is almost always used in the theatre to mean being true to something else, some other distant reality, hidden in the mists of history or separated by the hugeness of geography. In this sense 'authentic' is a contradiction in terms, a dead-end street of infinite length. Theatrical illusion always involves a partnership between the creator and the observer. So why waste so much energy on an authentic imitation? "Darling, your Cherry Orchard was most authentic. Especially the cherries." The point is that an 'expert' was needed to manage the difficult question of authenticity. A great imitator.

Even the actors have lost the sense of themselves as the primary source of style. They have been encouraged to become the neurotic, dependent servants of the director. Nowhere is this more evident than in my dear old England, a country where insincerity (read "Brit Wit," in all its remote, understated brilliance) has become a point of pride and the hallmark of sophistication. The actors are fed an enriched diet of sycophantic flattery. They respond like neurotic spaniels waiting for head pats, cheek kisses and the ubiquitous "Darling you were marvelous. But..." Of course the results are technically brilliant. What else could they be?

What exactly is this hollowness of style? Well it is easy enough to recognize up there on the stage, but difficult to express here in words. I will try to illustrate. There is something we are all familiar with,

the hollow delivery of an actor who is performing material that exceeds his own intellectual capacity. He is not necessarily a bad actor; that is not my point. He may well be an excellent actor. But there is an imbalance, a mismatch. The ideas he is attempting to express are imposed upon him. As a good actor he will attempt to hijack them, possess them, make them his own. But he will never succeed if he cannot first understand them. What actor wouldn't have difficulty playing Albert Einstein discussing quantum theory with Niels Bohr? Another example: an actor playing a character who is telling a joke. If the actor himself is not possessed of a sense of humour similar to that of the character, the joke won't work, it doesn't matter how professional he is. These examples are crude but analogous to the equally absurd practice of imposing theatrical styles upon an actor instead of deriving them from his play-making instincts.

Then why do these modern directors spend so much energy on applying style to their productions? The obvious answer is that this is an age of superficiality when even the individual is expected to project a constructed image. But it is also a result of the increased dependency of the actor upon the director. A common, false reason for stylizing a production is to create a safe shell for the actors. This is a big mistake. Acting should be dangerous. It should absolutely matter if the actor is 'on' or not. Often the director, designers and technicians conspire to build a big fat lifeboat for the actors that will float but not sail. Something is very wrong when a production is better than the actors in it.

There are very few examples of real actors' theatre in the west. And I don't exclude alternative theatres, which too often produce superior, highly obedient human marionettes in the name of actors' theatre. Ironically, even more than the establishment theatres, they are prone to the kind of personality cults that support despotic directors. The ability to suspend disbelief is one of an actor's greatest assets. But it is also a liability, and one that directors frequently take advantage of. In both establishment and alternative theatre the actor's necessary quality of suggestibility is being abused.

It is a vicious circle. The more neurotic and dependent the actors become, the less they have to offer, and the more the director feels obliged to substitute his intellect for their intuition. He tries in vain to invent something that, if only he knew where to look, he would see is already there. Inside any group of actors, at a primal, biological level, a theatrical style is lying there waiting to be revealed.

By now you may be wondering if I am some kind of Neo-Luddite advocating a violent return to the Stone Age. Actually, I don't think it is necessary to assassinate the director. Just cripple him and park his wheelchair very close to the edge of the stage. And make him look closely at some of those traditional, naive styles that clearly never needed an inventor.

Nobody invented melodrama. Nobody invented mumming. Nobody invented commedia dell' arte. Although naive, the integrity of these styles cannot be questioned. (I call them naive, not just because of their simplicity and popular origins, but because the characters portrayed are immediately recognizable at the beginning of the play and change very little by the end. The Slasher, the Zanni, the Evil Villain all share the same characteristic: they do not learn from their experiences!) Although these styles are lacking in intellectual maturity, there is much to be learned from them.

It is not enough to simply reconstruct these styles. The products of such attempts are always empty shells. Rather, they must be rediscovered with respect to the social energies that originally gave birth

to them. This is more than just a matter of understanding the historical context, because these styles are timeless. Their development becomes easier to understand when one recognizes that each of them corresponds to a specific human relationship commonly found in everyday life. These everyday relationships are in fact the very source of the conventions and passions that initiate, shape and propel the respective styles. Although there are many contrasting examples of these kinds of human relationships, as we will see, they share one essential characteristic: there is an asymmetry, the relationship is divided into an active and a passive component. One can already recognize the actor and the audience.

Commedia dell' arte is a sport. And the name of the game is "one-up-manship." It is the competition between the actors that keeps this improvised form alive. But it is a ritualized competition grounded in the love of the family. To understand commedia, you must understand that to steal the food off your brother's plate is an act of love. Yes. Because he should have been looking. And everyone else was. There is a deep mutual trust concealed beneath the chaos of a large Italian family at dinner. But it doesn't just happen in Italy. I have seen two young men trading rap-rhymed insults on a street corner in New York. Apparently unemployed, they didn't have much else to do, and neither did the approving crowd that gathered to watch them. Known as the "Dozens," it's a change from break-dancing, and cheaper than crack. It was an extraordinary improvisation, and they had it down to a fine art. "Well your uncle, he don't wash his socks." "Hey your sister ain't no Goldilocks." They didn't miss a beat, and they remained the best of friends while aggressively scoring points on each other. Of course anything can happen in New York.

In commedia, the character mask that the actor has been given to wear is analogous to the hand of cards one receives in a poker game. For each character there is a given set of strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and limitations. Like the cards, in a sense the characters are not the important thing, but serve primarily as a vehicle for the play between the actors. When training student actors in commedia I often ask them to break character very quickly in the middle of an improvisation by raising their masks. They do this when they both realize that one has scored a point over the other. For just a flash they re-establish eye contact with their partner, then pull the masks back down and continue. The important play is between the players, not between the characters. Musician Bob Marley has said that reggae is football. Capo comico Carlo Mazzone-Clementi has said that commedia is football. When sane, intelligent athletes expend large quantities of energy kicking the shit out of a piece of leather, it is not just because it bounces. The ball, like the mask, is an alias.

In the case of Melodrama there is an inborn appetite to indulge in extremes of emotion while still maintaining a subtle distance. Listen to a conversation overheard in a small café:

Oh what a day this has been. I woke up this morning and found my cat dead on the pavement. My favourite cat, the one with the long, sensitive whiskers, flattened by a truck. I couldn't just leave her there, I had to scrape her up with the kitchen spatula, fried egg still on it from breakfast. Poor Twinkles. She really kept down the mice. So I buried her with full honours in a plastic bag at the bottom of the garden. If you think that was bad, the worst was yet to come. I missed the bus, I was late for work one time too many, so the boss fired me. I felt so miserable I called my girlfriend at work. Damn her! You see, I'm not supposed to call her at work. We had a fight and

she broke off the relationship. Oh what a day. Yes, I'll have another cup of coffee. Nice of you to listen to me. Of course I'm allergic to cats anyway. See this rash...?

What a performance! Compare this to the actor who has just been cast in a new role:

I got it, I got it! An amazing role. There's a ten minute death scene. They stick three daggers in me and I fall about the stage in exquisite agony telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth for ten sublime minutes.

Why would anyone want to die so badly, and why would anyone want so badly to die?

Even the darkest emotions become sweet as long as there is a receptive audience. Particularly fear and self-pity. Most emotions will contribute to the individual's survival when expressed simply and openly. Self-pity and fear are the notable exceptions, they have to be kept secret. That is why they cry out to be ritualized. And is why they are, as Eric Bentley puts it, "the alpha and omega of the melodramatist's job."

There is a power in verse. The power of the mask worn upon the face of language. A power that is invoked not only by the poet, but also by the child playing in the street.

What's your name?

Mary Jane.

Where do you live?

Down the lane.

Oranges and lemons

Say the bells of Saint Clemens.

As the children play they are transported by a rhythmic correspondence of speech and movement. The words dissolve into sounds and are reborn with new meanings. There is a clear and magical definition of the playing space, born of the action, not imposed by any architecture. And although those who stand outside it are only watchers, they are also necessary.

Children the world over know how to transform space with the power of verse. And so do the ploughmen and guizers of the English Mummers Play. As one of the few surviving fragments of pre-Christian European culture, this ancient pagan ritual is more closely related to a Native American brush dance than to Elizabethan theatre. But one must first understand mumming to understand how to play Shakespeare, just as one must understand commedia to understand how to play Molière.

Mumming is Shakespeare in miniature. The rich mixture of comedy and tragedy, the integration of songs and dances, the all male cast, the historical characters, the boasting, the bawdiness, the preoccupation with the death of a loved one, and even the power to return from the dead. Above all, mumming is a reservoir of that same vitality so necessary to prevent a production of Shakespeare from becoming just another empty shell, a vitality familiar to every child: the madness and magical powers of a person who speaks in verse.

I have given three examples. There are many others. In each case the essence of a style is recognizable in a type of audience/performer relationship observable in daily life. One participant is active and the other is passive. Wherever one can find such archetypical relationships, there is the possibility of developing an organic theatre style. The question now is how can actors, writers and directors leave themselves open to these possibilities?

We need a new approach to training the actor. We must allow the actor to rediscover his own power: the source of style is inside him. He only has to listen to his heart, to trust the intelligence of his body. The training should be a celebration of the instinctual need to perform and make-believe. It should preserve the child-like reasons for becoming an actor in the first place. Good training in physical and vocal technique is completely compatible with the above. But the actor's instrument must remain responsive to the social and cultural influences within his milieu.

Style should not be taught as an academic subject. The intellectual energy of the student should be directed away from the invention of style towards questions of content. A simple formula, really: approach style through the body and content through the mind and let the actors learn to make the connections themselves. Then style will follow content in an organic way.

The modern theatre would benefit greatly if closer ties were established between writers and actors. It is rare that an actor even gets to talk to the writer of the play he is acting in. I would like to see more writers enter into character research with actors before anything is written. Playwrights should not be afraid to take their characters from the actors they are working with. Modern writers are often afraid that their work will lack permanence if they write for specific actors. The history of theatre proves otherwise.

Even in modern times many writers have been able to meet their actors half way, because they were lucky enough to be working closely with actors whose life passions corresponded to the content of their writing. Unfortunately there is a familiar pattern. As the writing gets better known, other companies want to perform it. The new actors usually don't know from deep in their guts why they are doing this or that hot new play. The director compensates by intellectualizing, and the results are boring.

This is nowhere more obvious than in politically motivated theatre such as Brecht and Fo.

If you have an actor who has a passionate desire to teach, to raise the political consciousness of the audience, then you don't need to contrive elaborate rules about 'Verfremdung'. It is ridiculous to ask an actor to shatter an illusion just because "that is the way Brecht is supposed to be done." Professionalism is not enough. The actor must be so genuinely committed to exposing the truth behind the illusion that, if anything, you have to restrain him from jumping out into the public. Now we're back to the old question of authenticity. Sure, everybody knows that bright lighting and white curtains are authentic Brecht. But if you really feel it, like a pain in your gut, just why such stark effects had to be used, you'll find for yourself even better ways to deliver an action that will lead to action.

I have seen the work of Dario Fo played in a big national theatre by talented professional actors. They had all the raw talent and facilities they could ask for and yet the results were pathetic. Out of its

original context (i.e. not performed in a factory nor acted by politically motivated actors nor played to an audience that identified with the issues) Fo's writing becomes banal, no better than the better grades of American television situation comedy.

I must emphasize that this is not a criticism of the writing itself, but of actors and directors who are unable to meet the real demands of the writing. They are unable to find the psychosomatic condition that gives the text a biological right to existence.

Is there after all a place for the director in the theatrical process? Well perhaps, but the role needs to be redefined. Modern theatre is trapped behind five walls, all of which need to be destroyed. The first is the wall between the actor and the actor himself, his instrument. This is a relationship full of paradox, and so difficult to solve without falling into narcissism. The second is the wall between the actor and his material, his character, his text etc. Here the work begins with identification and transformation, and leads to questions of responsibility and a sense of ownership of one's creation. The third is the wall between the actor and his partner on the stage, the other actor. To really listen, even while under the pressures of performance, takes great courage. The other actor must be allowed to be more than just a piece of stage furniture that happens to talk. Next is the well-known fourth wall between the actor and the audience. As Brook says, the essence of theatricality is "Of course it is not real." To respect the audience is to recognize them as active participants in an act of the imagination. And finally the fifth wall is that between those people who go to the theatre and those who do not. If the fifth wall is to crumble, the other four will have to fall first. The director is ideally situated to oversee this process as a gentle coach and audience of one.

The director's relationship to the production should be that of a midwife to a baby. He should not try to be the parent. He should not be afraid to trust in the interplay of influences within the group. He should be the "reluctant director," striving to make himself obsolete, ready to give up control and never forgetting that he is a new participant in a collective process that is much older than he.

In allowing the style of the production to evolve from the social and cultural energies of the ensemble, the director must recognize that even he is not exempt, for even the dramaturgical tools he most takes for granted are conditioned by his own culture. A director from one culture might look for the conflict in a dramatic situation while another might look for the "Ah-ha." While the Russians and the Americans send their characters chasing after objectives and superobjectives, the British make their play clever games of power and status, and the Germans present the image of a truth while hunting down the truth of an image. While the French analyze the understandings and the misunderstandings, the Italians amplify the moments of discovery and recognition.

The only substance that can fill out the empty form of a theatrical style is the actor's passion. Passion is a heightened sense of being alive, a kind of madness. It is a mistake to equate passion with emotion, although strong emotion is certainly the quick and easy way to find passion, as we have seen in the case of melodrama. But passion can also be found in the sport of commedia and in the earthy rhythms of the mummers. Whether you put a mask on an actor's face or put rhymed and metered words in his mouth you are doing the same thing. You are making an exceptional demand. You are asking him to leave behind the convoluted psychology of naturalism, and enter a world of passion. Exceptional, yes, but the knowledge of how to do it is inside every actor.

Alan Bolt, the Nicaraguan director, insists that in spite of centuries of European cultural domination, indigenous Central American theatre is not dead, but dormant, lying in the hearts of the people, waiting to be released. There remains an inner tradition, a secret knowledge that never has to be taught. This ancient passion is a wellspring of style that only needs to be rediscovered. There is no need for smart invention. Who but the makers of stone washed jeans would try to engineer passion?