

“Bloody Music”

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Theater spills its bloody music in words, signs and images. It has no patience for old-fashioned ways, it says. In the age of post-post-reproduction and post-post dramatic theater, a play is regarded as a quaint object, of some fascination perhaps to academics, scholars but more so to student actors looking for new scenes and monologues for auditions, and therefore, as mere means to careerist ends. Theater ensembles and companies and, occasionally too, auteur directors conduct interviews with sources on topics trendy and not and fashion performance scripts from them, or turn video games into interactive theater meditations or turn to old movies for inspiration for theatrical deconstructions/re-constructions. Plays sit on the sidelines beholding their own oblivion and wonder where they fit in the larger social scheme. Some plays are conceived as divertissements, others as alarums for causes large and small, others as provocations within the field and others still as private ruminations for public view. Silly plays, serious plays, tired plays, fighting plays, whimsical plays and dangerous plays nevertheless abound underground in salons, barrooms, living rooms, vaults and on stages indoors, outdoors, traditional and not. The next and next playwright is touted by mainstream media sources as the possible voice of a new generation. Quickened by the lure of movie and TV deals, the next and next playwrights often abandon the theatrical ship which gave them birth, only occasionally perhaps to return to the creaky dramaturgical models afforded by the conventions of the stage. Theater is slow, some colleagues say. There is so much happening in the world, and there is no way to fit the world onto the stage anymore; the world's gotten far too big.

It is true that sometimes plays feel outmoded as a form capable of addressing the complexities of life in the era of mediatized globalization and post-colonialism, even though power relations and economic gains that originally defined empires and their colonizing arms persist through corporate multinational transactions, in the control by outsiders of precious natu-

ral resources, the globalized flow of human resources and in the military operations that enforce and guarantee such powers. Plays are poor objects governed by laws of space and time. How could a play even begin to take on the world?

Argue then for plays as journalism, but plays need go beyond journalism. To merely report the fact of a situation isn't the stuff of a play. A play is a poetic act: a written score for performance that imagines the potential of what could be between and amongst human beings in a local or world situation. A play is a feeling expressed through a series of signs, some written, but mostly intimated, evoked, released into the air of the page in hope of being discovered in and out of live and virtual bodies, physical stages and hyper-stages. The role of the playwright, thus, is to chart the bodies of performance on a metaphorical plane with an awakened desire to engage and negotiate the problems and demands of contemporary reality.

How ironic then that the way to do so more and more in the last ten years has been to re-connect and re-engage with ancient classic texts. The effort to challenge and/or interact with the canon—to re-see the role of the chorus, the messenger, the protagonist, antagonist and central predicament of drama—has invigorated playwrights to reclaim the epic nature of the stage, to call it back, as it were, from the prosaic interventions of watered-down versions of nineteenth-century realistic drama. Of course, this desire to reclaim the epic qualities associated with the classics has fueled many dramatists over the ages. It seems that for every rise of one “-ism,” another devoted to the neoclassical always surges. On the one hand, there is the disdain for the conventions and structures of classical art and its sense of order, symmetry, rising and falling action and formal language. On the other, there is the embrace of the ragged, “misshapen” dramaturgy of real life, the imbalance of structural sensibilities, unpunctuated episodic action and plain, stuttering, broken language torn from its anchored roots. These two identifiable, broad strains in dramatic writing and in dramatists' approach to theater-making circles as much around the form of drama in and of itself as it does around the interest in how to integrate and manipulate different ways of seeing. How to make theater that charts the influence, thus, on perception that has occurred due to the rise over the last ten years of new and sophisticated communication technologies?

Spattered on drama's ground floor are swirls of markings—verbal, visual, aural, sensorial—that are indicative of the passion, rage, creative joy and anger used by dramatists to re-animate the stage (writ large). New and old tools used:

Televisual and cinematic storytelling devices,
 collage and cut-and-paste techniques for structure,
 modes of appropriation and verbal and aural sampling,
 allusive hyperlinks and/or footnotes as part of the storytelling world
 (in stage directions or enacted),
 the authorial presence un-disguised and brought front and center
 (the Tristram Shandy effect yet again),
 re-enactments of real live stories,
 the audience involved as active co-participant/co-actor of the event,
 interactive popular game models applied to conventions of dramatic
 storytelling,
 modernist reformations of language and its uses,
 space/time collapse and the merging of stories told across temporal
 planes,
 influence of graphic novel framing transferred to techniques of the
 stage.

But what to make of all this play? It is interesting to note that the obsession with story and storytelling—with fabulation and its uses, misuses and abuses—remains central in the age of (seeming) non-narrative, and deconstruction’s erasure of the author. If one generation of dramatists seemed hell-bent on tearing the walls of storytelling conventions down, throwing character and narrative causal chains out the proverbial window, then a new generation seems equally eager to embrace genre tropes and modes of writing that reinforce identification with characters and their situations. Spectators, moreover, are being asked more and more to take on an “active” role in immersive theater experiences (usually in unusual non-traditional performance sites) that replicate to a controlled degree the interactive storytelling devices of video games. In effect, character and story are not held at bay or even at an objective distance but rather spectators are encouraged to dive into the parameters of a story and eavesdrop in plain view intimate, close-range goings-on of actors fully in character engaged in usually quite intense dramatic scenes.

The spectator has always been to some degree a voyeur. Part of the alchemical game of watching a play has to do with the strange suspension of disbelief that requires the audience to “buy into” the illusory fact that what is happening on the stage is real—that is to say, the fabulation that is enacted is actually occurring. The spectator, thus, is encouraged to witness (from a “safe” perspective) other people’s lives and to feel as if they are part of the

experience. The invitation extended to an audience in a conventional dramatic piece, especially in realistic works that do not necessarily disrupt crises of identification, but also in the case of usually unconventional (in style and manner if not always in content) immersive theater works, is one of complete one-ness with the Story. The *frisson* that ensues is part of theater's enchantment. The spectator is invited into a story and agrees to a sophisticated mental process that asks of him or her to believe for a suspended amount of time in the enactment as real. The spectator also is a voyeur of the story, taking pleasure in the enacted scenes of love, violence, power, seduction and tragedy. But if this *ludic* enterprise is indeed central to theater, and I believe it is, what kind of voyeurism are we willing to withstand for the sake of telling a good yarn? By immersing a spectator in the ritual of a rehearsed performance are we replicating the immersive ritualized experience of ancient theater as we so vaguely conjure it in Western historical and de-historicized memory? Or are we begging an act of voyeuristic participation from spectators inured to virtualized voyeurism in the twenty-first century? What, in effect, is theater's role in its vital civic and spiritual conversation with the public?

Intimacy and distance go hand in hand in theater-making. The intimate processes shared in the practice hall extend toward the refined give and take in a scripted or improvised performance by a company. Yet, there is a qualitative measure of critical distance required of the making of work. This critical distance—I hesitate to use the word “objective” because art making and viewing are necessarily governed by subjective faculties—further extends to the act of witnessing a work by the public. Whether immersion is demanded or not, the spectator-witness is inevitably placed in a position to regard the event in space. Perhaps the act of regarding occurs in retrospect, after being present with a work in action. Perhaps the act occurs during the performance itself: the double “eye” that identifies and also dis-identifies with the actions on display. What is it that the spectator sees? And what is it that the theater-maker wishes to be seen?

If the voyeuristic impulse is called up, as it often is in the theater, at what point does the felicitous delectation in a stage event turn into a moment of regard? When does voyeurism in the theater stop and take a sharp turn toward self-reflection and also toward a more global tuning in, as it were, to a more expansive spiritual consciousness? Many dramatists working in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, in an effort to reclaim what has been perhaps neglected territory in the wake of postdramatic theater and its exhaustive although exhilarating effects on dramaturgy (espe-

cially in Europe), are asking their local and immediate public to connect to the human bodies on stage. They invite their public to see themselves as they are, are not, and would like to be, and to then take a step back critically (often within the mechanics of the dramaturgy of the play proper) and reflect (but not necessarily judge) on what they’ve seen. A moment is held up, let’s say, for observation and then within that moment another moment occurs—the moment of letting go of the regarding stance, and acknowledging complicity in the observed moment/action on stage or further distance from it. Transformation, as old-fashioned and new-fashioned as it comes, stirs the stage. The dramatist wrests the moments to offer a burden of responsibility to the fictive truths enacted on the stage; each arrested moment begs the question: is the life (or lives) presented here mere product ready for your consumption or instead a life that shouldn’t be trampled upon? With the flesh-and-blood music of bodies human, animal, hand-made, and virtual, theater re-seeks an integrated society where border-less figures nevertheless must traverse real borders of social, political and spiritual consciousness to communicate to the world. The dramatist writes the score in blood, and the public, the spectator, need be pricked.