

Theory, Practice and Modern Drama.

The relationship between practice and theory has always bedevilled drama departments. All too often the two elements are implicitly conceived as polar opposites: performing versus criticism, doing as distinct from thinking, body versus mind -- but, put like that, the practice / theory question reproduces the dualism that characterizes Western civilization as a whole. So perhaps the split merely mirrors our cultural conditioning, in which case the debate is unresolvable as long as our social context remains unchanged. In the more limited area of drama-teaching, of course, it tends to be a trade-off. The balance between theory and practice shifts depending on intended outcome, with conservatories focussing exclusively on training in specific skills at one end of the spectrum, and primarily academic analysis at the other. Both extremes seem insufficient to the contemporary view. Indeed, drama departments specifically evolved in order to integrate theory with practice, reflecting the holistic nature of theatre as a form of expression that combines all the other arts and involves intellectual activity as well as emotion, equally on the creative level and in audience response. However, this holistic concept is itself a peculiarly twentieth-century definition. Although the "gesamtkunstwerk" comes from Wagner, few theatre people before the modern period would have considered what they did in these terms.

Gordon Craig, for instance, recorded that when he began acting in the 1880s he learnt his trade from watching -- and copying -- older actors, which was the standard apprenticeship. He also remarked that the only direction he received was whether to enter stage right or left, and that he never had an idea of a play as a whole since all he saw were cue-scripts: texts that consisted solely of his own lines, together with the concluding words of the speech immediately before. Although by the end of the 19th century a great deal of attention was spent on elaborate scenery, costumes -- like interpretations of leading roles -- were often handed down, with Craig wearing the same black velvet doublet for Cromwell in an 1892 performance of Henry VIII at the Lyceum, which Henry Irving had used a quarter of a century earlier in 1876 as King Phillip in Tennyson's Queen Mary. In the same way, an actor tackling a classic role would look back to how Kemble or Kean had presented it. Despite the celebrated ensemble acting of the Meiningen Company, there was little in the way of holistic vision on display at even the leading London theatres. Theory -- of any kind -- was also conspicuously absent.

In fact one could say that there was no theoretical dimension to drama at all before the 20th century. Aristotle may have been the great exemplar of academic theorists. But there is little evidence that The Poetics had any influence on the way Greek tragedies were written; and

although his rediscovered ideas conditioned the works of Dryden and the French neo-classicists, they were more often used simply as an intellectual stick to beat playwrights who had quite other agendas, and continued to ignore Aristotelian principles. Think of Sidney's Apology, and its complete lack of effect on Marlowe, let alone Shakespeare. Then, ever since Diderot there had been calls for greater realism in the theatre, but these also had little effect on stagecraft. In fact, up to the modern era the most characteristic writings related to theatrical practice were studies of rhetoric, which abounded in the 17th and 18th centuries, and were designed as much for political orators as for actors. These generally focussed on setting down "rules" for gesture, as with Riccoboni's treatise on The Art of The Theatre: for example, "In lifting up the arm, the superior part, ie. from the shoulder to the elbow, ought to be first elevated: the hand ought to be the last part in action". However, some could be seen as early forerunners of contemporary communication and reception-theory, like The Art of Acting by Aaron Hill, who offers prescriptions (in heroic couplets) for representing "the passions". In his model, the job of the actor is to transmit heightened emotions to the audience through a form of bio-feedback, which requires authentic feeling to reach the degree of intensity where the same emotion will be experienced by a spectator. Typically, even though Hill was a friend of Garrick, and involved in every aspect of 18th century theatre -- author of some 10 tragedies, with titles like The Fatal Vision (or the Fall of Siam) and The Fatal Extravagance; manager of Drury Lane; author of a weekly journal of theatrical commentary and gossip -- Hill's aim in publishing the Art of Acting was to gain support for a School of Oratory, whose aristocratic pupils would be trained for parliament, not the stage.

By contrast, the 20th century is the age of ideology. Theory has dominated every aspect of life, from eugenics to relativity -- even history has become historiography -- and the theatre has both reflected and promoted this theoretical atmosphere. Of course some of the major currents had already appeared by the 1860s: Darwin's theory of evolution / the economic theories of Karl Marx -- or in theatrical terms Zola's call for naturalist drama. But, even though the Communist Manifesto had already reached a sixth edition in 1890, it was only in this century that theory (on all levels) became a determining social factor. And it is worth noting that all the ideological constructs that shaped modern, as well as post-modern perspectives share a common denominator: they are theories of radical change. Social historians like Raymond Williams use "keywords" to encapsulate movements; and one I find particularly appropriate is offered by Warren Susman in a book called Culture as History:

"Transformation was a key word in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, becoming significant not only in the world of science...but in the world of history and social science as well. History increasingly had to confront the changing of forms in which experience was expressed -- often rapid change because of technological

innovation." ¹

One might add that the whole concept of transformation was even more central in the arts. In previous periods theatre's function might have been seen as re-forming manners or moral excesses (as with 18th century comedy) -- but that implied restoring a status quo. Now, as theatre became politicized, the aim of playwrights and directors was the reverse: to trans-form society. In addition, signalling a new concern with the relationship between medium and message (long pre-dating MacLuhan), to transform the stage itself. Indeed, attempts to change the nature of performance can be seen as the defining mark of modern drama; and in almost every case the transformation has been fuelled by or based on theory.

Strindberg's post-inferno plays are the dramatic expression of his Occult Diaries and his research into Eastern religions. Shaw accompanied his plays with philosophical prefaces that almost outweigh the dramatic scripts (897 pages to 1125 pages in the Hamblyn "collected works" edition). Stanislavski's work is only judged to have become important when he developed a system, and defined it in a treatise. Even such anti-verbal movements as the Dadaists and Surrealists wrote manifesto after manifesto. Above all, there is the example of Bertolt Brecht, who not only developed a style of dramaturgy explicitly based on political ideology, but wrote extensive theoretical essays to explain and justify his plays -- and significantly, it is Brecht's theoretical writings that have had far more influence than his actual plays. The trend has continued in the second half of the century. Grotowski's productions in the 60s were a revelation, but it was his book Towards a Poor Theatre that served as a catalyst for the American avant garde -- while his followers, like Richard Schechner or Eugenio Barba, moved from performance to extensive writings on theatre anthropology.

One significant sign of the times is the emergence of theatre journals, specifically designed to promote a revolutionary vision: the most influential being The Mask, which ran from 1908 to 1929, and TDR (originally the Tulane Drama Review) in the 70s. Another distinguishing 20th century factor is the founding of theatre schools, which focus on research (not actor-training): Craig's School for the Art of the Theatre and the Dalcroze institute at Hellerau, Copeau's Vieux Columbier School and the Meyerhold Free Workshop, Grotowski's paratheatrical projects, Barba's School of Theatre Anthropology. In all theory is the starting point for performance -- frequently adapting concepts from other areas: biomechanics, eurythmics, psychotherapy -- and the aim is always a total change in the nature of theatre, the creation of a new theatre.

The norm, particularly for directors who are identifiably modernist, has been a combination of practical performance work with theoretical writings. Like Shaw, Copeau started off his

career as a critic. Piscator and Meyerhold wrote extensive theoretical essays to explain or provide a theoretical framework for their productions, just as Brecht did for his plays. Even a pragmatic showman like Peter Brook signalled his switch from commercial and classical theatre with a book; and its title, The Empty Space, sums up the wholesale rejection of the past, starting again from first principles to build something new, that has been a standard feature of modern theatre ever since Alfred Jarry.

Of course, there are some major exceptions -- artists who are quintessentially modernist, but who have written very little of a theoretical kind. For example, Pirandello with a just a single short essay to his name -- Beckett, whose early essays on Joyce and Proust have only tangential relevance to his drama, limiting his commentary to self-contradictory marginalia like "no symbols where none intended" -- or Robert Wilson, who has consistently let his largely non-verbal work speak for itself. However, each of these could be seen as extremely cerebral artists. The major theme of all three has been the nature of perception. Pirandello specifically labelled his comedy "philosophical". Beckett's minimalism, his increasing simplification and economy, as well as thematic abstraction are the hallmarks of a highly intellectual drama (as I have argued elsewhere). Wilson's architectural structuring of sound and movement, hypnotic stasis and deconstructed reality are exceptionally cerebral.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are a number of highly influential figures whose experience in practical theatre was almost non-existent. The major names here are, of course, Gordon Craig, Adolph Appia, and Antonin Artaud -- and their position as purely theoretical catalysts in many ways epitomizes the nature of modern theatre. Craig started out as an actor (as did Artaud). In fact during his 8 years with the Lyceum and on tour he gained a reputation as one of the most promising younger actors, then directed and designed a series of six productions -- three operas, a nativity play, plus one of Ibsen's early historical dramas and a Shakespeare for his mother, Ellen Terry between 1900 and 1903. But after that Craig withdrew from the stage, which he saw as incapable of realizing his increasingly abstract ideal. And apart from just two occasions when he was persuaded to demonstrate his ideas in practice -- the notorious 1912 collaboration with Stanislavski on Hamlet in Moscow, and a 1926 production of another of Ibsen's historical dramas (which largely reproduced effects of 23 years before) -- Craig deliberately restricted himself to exhibitions of his designs, and publishing. Artaud's theatrical experience was even more limited: some minor acting roles and three film performances, a production of Strindberg's Dream Play, two plays by Roger Vitrac and a small number of other short surrealist pieces, plus one of his own plays in which Artaud not only acted the title role but also designed the set and directed. Appia's work was still further removed from performance. His pathbreaking books on staging Wagnerian opera

were published over a decade before he designed his first full-length production, and over twenty years before his only professional productions: stagings of just three of Wagner's operas, all of which aroused strong criticism. Between them a total of six operas, eight plays, one dance drama, and nine or ten one-act pieces. Compare this, say, to Max Reinhardt -- for whom a typical year would have been (as it was in 1911) directing 23 plays, several in multiple productions, 4 operas, one festival drama and a mammoth spectacular pageant. In addition, neither Craig, Artaud, or even Appia, accepted their productions as a full realization of their theories.

Appia at least achieved what he wanted in technical terms, but commented that the net result of his Wagnerian stagings was "the opposition has triumphed". For Gordon Craig, little of what he intended came across in production -- as he remarked about The Vikings "all seems to me as unlike... what I have always strived for in my work as possible", while the Moscow Hamlet "fell back instead of advancing", and Craig's attitude to working in the theatre became one of frustration: "it is hard to remain patient and silent while my imaginings are being messed about". Although Artaud tended to blame the public (and the decadence of modern society) for the failure of what he called his "aborted theatre", he finally came to admit that "There is nothing I loathe / And detest as much as this idea of a play, / Of a performance, / Because of the appearance, the unreality, / Attached to all that is produced and that is / Shown..." Live theatre always fell short of the ideal; and for both Craig and Artaud the only solution was the total dominance of the director. Artaud tried to develop ways of making performance "fixed in its least details" so that the presentation would be "as strict and calculated as any written work". Similarly, Craig's response had been to call for an Uber-marionette to replace the actor. And following the logic of this, Craig conceived a mechanical stage entirely under his control, where there would be nothing naturalistic, nothing accidental or unintended. A totally abstract theatre, created from the play of light over three-dimension moving forms, which might be seen as the materialization of pure theory.

Indeed, the fact that Craig's ideal remained an idea, and was never put into practice, gives it a particular theoretical value. But all theories are not equally effective. Take the work of Norman Bel Geddes, which in some ways was no less visionary than Craig's, and just as far-reaching in its attempts to change the nature of theatre. For instance, Bel Geddes spent a whole decade working on a projected staging of Dante's Divine Comedy, from 1921 to 1930, at the same time as Craig in Italy was working on a production of Bach's St Matthew Passion, which occupied him from 1914 to 1936. Though developed quite independently, both projects are directly comparable. Each required the construction of a special theatre, with a monolithic multi-level permanent set, massed choruses in neutral costumes that would merge

them with the scene, and extremely complex lighting. The stage forms were equally symbolic: Craig deriving his flights of steps, bridge over a crypt and high enclosing arches from church architecture -- Bel Geddes' rising concentric tiers, intersected by a central stairway descending all the way from on high, being based on the circles of hell and Jacob's ladder. Large scale models were built of each setting, on which movements and lighting effects could be worked out, and photographs taken using figurines. In each case the action was worked out in detail, with Bel Geddes creating a full production script, keyed to a grid laid over the ground plan, and dividing the 2 and 3/4 hour performance into 20-to-30 second sections, giving moves for each of the 1,000 performers with sound and light cues. Bel Geddes submitted plans for a "Divine Comedy Theatre" to the 1930 Chicago World Fair; Craig tried to interest Mussolini in sponsoring a "St Matthew Passion" festival. Neither were ever produced.

In fact Bel Geddes' plans were far more extensive than Craig's ever became, and extremely practical. He had experience in mounting performances on a similar scale, having designed the American production of Reinhardt's The Miracle, and in addition to the model plus dozens of photographs and over 60 scene-renderings for The Divine Comedy, Bel Geddes provided architectural blue prints and elevations, as well as detailed cost estimates. And he meticulously preserved every scrap of material, making an exact reproduction possible. Several exhibitions of his designs were mounted not only in New York, but in Amsterdam and Berlin, just like Craig; and he also mounted a course to teach his ideas, though not in his own school. In addition he drew up architectural plans for a whole series of innovative theatres, which experimented with radically new relationships between the audience and the stage; and though most were still-born, his design for a whole theatre complex with multiple performance areas was pirated by the Russians, and constructed in the Ukraine. Yet where Craig, along with Appia and Artaud, are all still well-known -- widely acknowledged as among the most important "makers of modern theatre" -- and each has attracted extensive academic study, Bel Geddes has sunk from sight. No scholar has judged Bel Geddes worth a monograph; and his name is barely remembered except by experts in American theatre history.

This difference in treatment is, I think, instructive. Like Craig, Bel Geddes designed operas, and a Hamlet (which he also adapted and directed), together with marionette plays, a symbolist play (Pealleas & Melisande) and a modern poetic drama. But his range was eclectic rather than intellectually consistent. He also designed lavish spectacles for an entrepreneurial showman like Reinhardt, several musicals (including Fred Astaire's Lady Be Good), and some hyper-realistic sets for naturalist dramas. For a time he even managed a Broadway theatre, and he was constantly producing plans for successive World Fairs, culminating in a complete

site-plan for Chicago and the General Motors exhibition building in New York (a futurama viewed from sound-equipped armchairs on a 1/4 mile conveyer-belt, which was constructed in 1940). In short, his aims were largely commercial; and he spent the last 20 years of his life as a successful industrial designer. Although his aim was to reshape society on the broadest futuristic level, it was therefore easy to see Bel Geddes as part of the system, instead of working to demolish it and build a radically new theatre. Perhaps most significant of all, while his designs were exhibited internationally, he published nothing. He wrote no books outlining his vision, not even an article to explain his principles.

By contrast, what marks the work of Appia, Craig and Artaud is (1) an explicit and total opposition to the existing system. In the case of the first two, this was limited to the theatre itself and primarily concerned with the rejection of naturalism. Artaud, who began his career several decades later when political ideologies were widely spread, extended his attack to the whole culture of Western civilization ("No more Masterpieces !").

(2ndly) Unlike Bel Geddes, all three focus exclusively on art. Even where social change is envisaged -- as it was implicitly in Appia's work with Dalcroze, or quite obviously with Artaud's image of "the Plague" and his attack on "the ideology of authority" in The Cenci -- their only tool remains theatrical performance.

(3rd) For Craig and Artaud, at least, the inertia of traditional theatre, its resistance to change, radicalizes their ideas, making their vision more extreme, so that in order to promote their new forms of theatre they have to abandon the stage. They become John the Baptist figures calling in the wilderness.

(Finally) All three articulate their artistic aims in print -- indeed in Craig's case the outpouring of words is staggering: 14 books and one autobiography, three journals (which he wrote almost single-handedly under various pseudonyms, as well as edited, with The Mask running into 15 volumes over 20 years, plus five pamphlets or portfolios). And for all of these innovators the absence of practical work brings out the theoretical quality of their publications.

Appia's proposals were perhaps the most concrete of the three; and as a result the effect of his writings was the most limited of the three. His ideas were picked up in Meyerhold's use of simplified setting, and music as a unifying factor in production, while his concept of rhythmic space was finally adopted at Bayreuth in the 1950s. Craig's writings were more visionary, and had a broader effect. His book On the Art of the Theatre and even more his journal, The Mask, were the catalyst for the whole "Art Theatre" movement, which proliferated over the first quarter of the century and provided much of the energy for early theatrical experiment. In addition, his designs, together with Appia's, initiated a revolution in

stage-lighting, where the atmospheric use of light became the controlling emotional factor of a performance. Artaud, who rejected logic and reason as "chains that bind us in a petrifying imbecility of the mind", is the most imprecise of all; and his essays, which are almost purely inspirational, became the core text for the whole counter-culture revolution of the late 1960s.

What made these three so influential was not just that they liberated the imagination, but the degree to which they provided a set of fundamental, indeed elemental principles that could be applied in different ways by other theatre artists. And their relevance continues, even if the ideas they promoted have now become so much a part of the cultural atmosphere that their source is unrecognised. For instance, improvisational theatre, the emphasis on process rather than product [that characterises "devising", among other things], and the use of performance as therapy derives from Artaud. In fact, all attempts to break down the separation between stage and audience can be seen as based in Artaud. More specifically, Craig's abstraction and aestheticism, his concept of plastic space, even his replacement of the actor with an Uber-marionette, are all realized in Robert Wilson's work. Significantly, there is no question of direct influence here. Though familiar with some of Craig's designs, Wilson's style was already fully developed before he read anything by Craig. But the statuesque quality Wilson imposes on his performers, the sculptured costuming and facial masking (particularly in recent productions, such as the Paris Madame Butterfly) that transform actors into archetypes, the rigid choreography and the avoidance of emotional display, all correspond to Craig's ideal. So do Wilson's architectural settings, in which structural elements are shifted from scene to scene to create unfolding patterns, and the way he orchestrates light, making it a concrete presence. Even the high-tech quality of Wilson's theatre is essentially Craigean.

Theory triumphs. It has become absorbed, inscribed in contemporary performance by osmosis.

Indeed, it's hard to see how (even if successful) their stage work could have served as a model, since so few people had the chance to see it. Appia's final Wagnerian production of Die Walkure in Basel only had four performances, Craig's earliest (and in some ways most striking) production of Dido and Aeneas ran for three nights, Artaud's single "Theatre of Cruelty" production (The Cenci) only lasted for two.

1. Warren Susman, Culture as History, 1984, p.234.