

The Threat of Lucidity: An Evaluation of the Relationship Between Dramaturgy and Performance at the American Players Theatre

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In 1978, "actor Randall Duk Kim, Charles Bright from the staff of the Kennedy Center, and New York actress-director Anne Occhiogrosso began planning a theatre and acting academy dedicated to researching and performing the classics." (APT, 1) The directors articulated a dedication to production of the works of classic authors, principally Shakespeare, "in their original, uncut versions." Since its opening in 1980 the company, the American Players Theatre¹, has succeeded in its research and production goals, and has developed a reputation for textual accuracy and lucidity, but it has consistently failed to "perform" successfully--to enact and give life to the very plays it has examined in such detail.

The problem, it seems to me, lies in a basic lack of understanding about the relationship of dramaturgy to production, of knowledge about the text of a play to clear perceptions of the living reality of performance. APT's productions have all been "accurate," but that accuracy has been achieved at a cost of vitality. While the theatre was able to reproduce the language of the playwright, it was unable to find a contemporary parallel for the relationship between the play and the audience, or the actor and the audience, or even the actor and the character, that would have reproduced the reality of the theatre experience for which the script is a "blue print." The company has been unable to discover what Michel Saint-Denis calls the "true representation of reality [which] requires transposition and style." (34)

Why is it that so many theatres, especially those who want to avoid what were called "concept productions" in the sixties and seventies because they feel such productions were a distortion of the playwright's intent, present such self-conscious and museum-like displays of works instead of vital performances? Is it because they have begun to rely on the text, the "permanent" part of theatre, as the only reliable part of this transient art; or is it that they have almost

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completely missed what is really permanent in classical plays, mistaking that which was contemporary in the past for that which is contemporary for any age?

I am not suggesting that it is possible to divorce any play from the culture of the playwright, nor that it is a good idea to ignore study of the social milieu in which the play was written. How else can we understand the way in which the audience related to the structure and the content of the play? I am not, as well, suggesting that every play must be "updated" if it is to reach a contemporary audience. What I am calling for is an examination of *how* the play means in front of any audience, and the building of productions upon that core of understanding. Such a process can lead to performances which are true to the nature of the text, which are less constrained by slavish devotion to tradition or (even worse) reverence for the past, and which can subordinate concerns for accuracy to expressions of a work's vibrancy.

I am reminded of the current trend in music towards performance of the classics on the original instruments. Recordings of such performances are frequently lackluster, not because the instruments are "primitive" nor because the musicians are incapable of reproducing the sounds represented by the score, but because the relationship between the player and the instrument is no longer meaningful, and the performances, therefore, have no style. In the same way theatres devoted to producing the classics should not be concerned with making them live again as they did in the past, but with being representatives and creative interpreters of their life in the present.

American Players Theatre provides us with a veritable case study of the problems of companies which approach the classics with a reverence for the playwright and a concentration on textual exegesis. Its productions exhibit such symptoms as lack of focus and attitude (or of concept), lack of concern for visual presentation and actor training, inability to develop character through an understanding of subtext, and inability to use rhythm and variety in its enactments.

Before examining several of APT's productions as a way of illustrating the difficulties caused by such misdirected concentration, it is important to note that we are considering a particular theatre that, while guided mostly by its directors' philosophy, has still been molded to a great extent by their personal strengths and weakness as artists as well. Randall Duk Kim is a fine actor, protean in his ability not only to play a wide variety of characters, but to respond instantly and fully to each on-stage event. Much of the excitement he generates is derived from his ability to surprise and yet most often prove his actions correct for the moment. His weakness, however, seems to be his inability to find meaningful ways to connect those moments, to

allow what has preceded to inform what is to follow, so that character development is apparent. For example, his 1986 Hamlet, buffeted by events and responding almost like a child with total concentration on the instant, was quite moving and clearly unable to sustain any patterned behavior, let alone finish a murder. However, his 1987 Hamlet was consistent, but only in his anger--a very poor choice for a character who cannot realize a goal, and one that precludes development.

Unfortunately Kim has become accustomed, it seems to me, to making decisions without the assistance of a clear headed director. As much as Anne Occhiogrosso worships Shakespeare, she also worships Kim, constantly placing him center stage and showing little concern for meaningful composition (let alone picturization) and no sense of character relationship. While I do not wish to blame the difficulties of APT on co-director Occhiogrosso, she is in my opinion a less-than-competent director and, unfortunately, a worse actress. Yet, her very limited vocal and physical ranges do not begin to account for the lifelessness of her portrayals of characters as passionate and vital as Gertrude or Maria in *Twelfth Night*. She seems to feel that the language, if all of its sounds are audible, will do the work--the reductio ad absurdum of a concern for textual lucidity, a concern that dominates even APT's best work.

The theatre opened its 1987 season with the *Hamlet* mentioned above. The production, co-directed by Occhiogrosso and Theodore Swetz, floundered, failing to focus on the central issues of the story and the major questions about the characters. As a result, the audience heard every line Shakespeare wrote--the production was accurate in those terms--but the presentation was in many ways monolevel, without necessary subordination of the major to the minor ideas, and without builds in intensity. In contrast to the often flat recitations of Gertrude and Steven Helmke's wooden Laertes, Kim's Hamlet railed with as much emotional intensity against Elizabethan children's companies as he did against Gertrude or Claudius. There seemed to be little understanding of relative significance and little variety in the level of emotional (or even poetic) motivation--the flow of character and plot development was sacrificed to the historical explication of the text and to a clear but unsatisfactory decision about Hamlet (again, clarity prevailed over emotional reality). Kim's attempt to invest that studied analysis with emotional power confused both the actor and audience. In a play which has remained so vibrant because it raises disturbing questions, this caused confusion rather than illumination, and prevented the play's rich ambiguities from affecting the audience.

Much of the production, as a result, was plodding, bogged down in dialogue without a clear sense of purpose or drive. Each scene

stood alone, each word was delivered as if its denotative meaning was the essential, but it became all too easy for the audience to forget about Hamlet's dilemma.

In some ways, the production attempted to avoid interpretation. This was clearest in the staging, frequently shoddy and repetitive, revealing a concern that each actor position him or herself so that they face Hamlet, but little else. Yet what APT seems to have forgotten is that even when an attempt is made to let a play "speak for itself," it is speaking through the sensibilities of Twentieth Century directors and performers to a Twentieth Century audience, and will therefore generate Twentieth Century responses.

Fascinating, from this perspective, was the implication of the ending, in which Hamlet dies in the throne and young Fortinbras, who is presented as a military man to the last, has the body removed from its place. The final image of the military man as a hopeful figure removing the bodies of the ineffectual (and rather scheming) intellectual as well as the dishonest and evil past king, is a rather disturbing one, yet very striking in spite of the fact that there is no reason to believe it was intentional. This kind of accidental statement is a likely result of a concentration on historical rather than thematic "accuracy."

The relationship of dramaturgical study to directing should be one which assists the latter to plumb the depths of a play and not just to polish its surface. The artistic staff of APT has a carefully articulated theoretical approach to Shakespeare's plays, but one cannot stage theory. It is rare that I have seen a production at APT that is informed by a unified directorial vision, a clear sense of how the meaning, passions, and production values of an individual play coalesce into a vibrant performance.

The second production was, in some ways, even more disturbing. APT's very popular *Comedy of Errors*, directed by Swetz and, perhaps more importantly, costumed by Budd Hill, used masks, outlandish costumes, and a physical style based on that of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. This play, rife with elaborate double entendres and indications in the lines of much physical activity, should have been allowed to explode with the energy of its characters' wit and lust. Unfortunately, Swetz's direction concentrated on the most obvious physicalizations while almost ignoring the humor and bawdiness of the language. Again, concern for meaning in a superficial way prevented elucidation of the script. (The only laughs, except for those earned by Christian Lebrano's Dromio of Ephesus, developed by him in the verbal tradition of Shakespeare's great clowns, were for the slapstick antics of minor characters.)

I must note here that Lee Elmer Ernst as the bewildered

Antipholus of Syracuse was also very impressive. His vocal work was varied, often conversational, yet clearly indicating his sense that there is danger underpinning the confusion in and around him. Shakespeare is a poet and playwright whose language, while brilliantly witty and beautiful, is almost always a more-or-less direct expression of feelings. Ernst in this play, and again as Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, is able to strike that emotional chord without losing either the comic appeal of his roles or the poetry of his lines. In fact, he seemed to be the only indication of the danger, the impending death of the twins' father, that undergirds this play and gives it a certain intensity. Once again APT seems to have lost the play's atmosphere and texture in its dictionary approach.

The major strength of this production, though, is the creation by Swetz and Hill of the populace of Ephesus to witness the events. While each character is little more than a technical device to move the plot in the script, in this production there is an attempt made to give each some "individuality" by making each a fully elaborated stereotype through particularized "lazzi" and indicative dress--from the elephantine merchant to the Courtesan with huge breasts and protruding navel. Each character was allowed to supply an additional "joke" that enhanced the strikingly well drawn sense of activity in Ephesus in this production. But again, the concentration on the precise rendering of each piece overwhelms the effect of the whole. Director Swetz was not as adept at using the group as he was at directing the individual townspeople, and so the ensemble did not cohere and the twists and turns of the plot were buried in the elaboration of the moment and the individual.

Unlike the first two productions, the 1987 season's first new entry, *Twelfth Night*, was as consistent, well-conceived, and well executed a production as I have seen at American Players. Directors Sandra Reigel-Ernst and Fred Ollerman seem to have found the real meat of this play, one of Shakespeare's funniest and most challenging comedies.

One of the things about which APT has been justifiably proud over the years is its music. For six years composer Tim Schirmer has provided introductory and incidental music that has always been an appropriate adjunct to each production. In many ways *Twelfth Night* is the most musical of Shakespeare's plays, not only because of the famous opening invocation by Orsino nor because of the songs that are part of the play, but because the shifting of identities, attitudes, and even love is almost a dance in itself--a grand processional during which the devotion to a force outside of the dancers determines the rhythms, patterns, and pairings. The performance I saw at APT was a wonderfully realized dance, informed by Schirmer's music,

choreographed with an eye toward the whole story by the directors, and often well executed by the cast.

Although this play, like *Comedy*, begins with a shipwreck and lost twin, the atmosphere of the play is very different. No one in this play is challenged, faced with great obstacles; no one is particularly honest or reasonable--and yet each character so devotedly pursues his or her own desire for an ideal that they become fools, more comic than scornful, overwhelmed by the consequences of their own, often inexplicable, actions.

One cannot help but get the sense watching this production that control passed out of the hands of the theorists. The dialogue, rather than being explained, is often almost sung. The portrayals show an uncharacteristic lack of caution. A case in point is Alexandra Mitchell's Viola, who makes certain we know that her Cesario is in no condition to control anything, especially Olivia, who has thrown herself at Viola's alter ego with absurd passion. Somehow Viola has stepped into the dance with the wrong partner and never seems to be able to maneuver into the right pairing. Her asides to the audience become very funny at the same time that they are desperate pleas for help.

Asides are a particular difficulty for APT because the group's concentration on correct script analysis often ignores or creates a barrier to the unpredictability and possible "incorrectness" of audience interaction that was so much a part of Shakespeare's theatre. There is a vibrancy and immediacy in the improvisational sense of shared creation that Viola's contact with the audience provides. In addition, there is a respect for the audience that the company's normal concern for "lucidity" and absolute clarity denies. It is somehow condescending and self-congratulatory to indicate to the audience that the theatre-makers have the right answers and have made all the final decisions. Again, a dramaturg can serve as audience representative in terms of elaborating on ambiguities--pointing out the cluster of meanings around a generally accepted sense of understanding that is far richer and more satisfying to audience and actors alike than the antiquarian and studied stuffiness of much of APT's work.

Paradoxically, another area in which the relative freedom of performance shows itself is the ensemble work of the clown-like retinue at Olivia's house. Karl Redcoff (Sir Toby Belch), Steven Helmke (Aguecheek), and Theodore Swetz (Feste) form as tight a unit as any group that APT has ever put on stage, not because they were unified by a particular theoretical stance, but because they were allowed to react fully to each others' antics. Their interplay is lively and very funny, and their plot to trick Malvolio is gleefully malevolent and vindictive.

Kim's Malvolio is the most complex and fully drawn I've ever seen. It is not surprising that he should be so successful in the role of a loner who operates on a different level than the other characters. Kim usually dominates the stage when he is on at APT. It is not so much that he overshadows the other performers, but that none of them seems to challenge him on stage, to attack their roles as if they were equal to Kim's. The reverence the company evidences for Shakespeare seems to extend to their leading player. In addition, part of American Players' search for clarity seems to have led to a focus on a central character and treats all other characters as functionaries, included merely to provide impetus to the protagonist. Even the blocking is often contrived to promote this view. One of the things that has always struck me about particularly successful productions of Shakespeare is that the directors are able to use the bodies of the performers to modify the look and feel of the space--to create an environment, a visual composition, that frames and enhances the central action. APT seems to feel that if the actors are looking at the protagonist (i.e., if they form an onstage audience) then the language will suffice. Responses from the ensemble are, therefore, often distant and hollow.

When Malvolio is on stage, though, even when there are others present, he does not really make any meaningful contact with them, so he can play without having to wait for their responses. For example, when the clowns hide to watch Malvolio find their letter, they banter among themselves and form a very funny backdrop. Kim, in ways alone on stage, pulls out all the stops and gives an inspired performance as the lust for power deep inside the devout puritan surfaces with a vengeance.

I cannot leave this production without mentioning Budd Hill's superb costume design. Here the costumes do not define the characters, but seem to grow organically on them. The cod pieces and other elements of overstatement are a clear recognition of the bawdy comic tradition out of which this play arises.

Twelfth Night was a truly vibrant production, not because it included every comma in the first folio (*Hamlet* did that), nor because the overlaying elements of costume and music were clever (that was true of *Errors*), but because the play was performed openly and fully for the audience. The accuracy for which APT strives cannot be museum like or antiquarian, and it must not be, as so much of APT's work has been, so obviously self-conscious. What needs to be reproduced accurately in a classical production is not the surface, but the underlying life which speaks to and responds to an audience.²

For its fourth and fifth productions, the theatre experimented with guest directors and non-Shakespearean plays. *School for Scandal*,

directed by Jewel Walker, director and teacher in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's professional actor training program, was not very successful; and Chekhov's *Ivanov*, directed by Phoebe Brand and Morris Carnovsky, while offering some interesting moments, was so poorly received that APT gave away tickets to several performances.

The production of *Scandal* illustrated all too clearly some of the major weaknesses of American Players' approach to the building of a repertoire and a company. This play, documenting the art of reputation shattering and the highly structured, if somewhat roccoco manners of Eighteenth Century high society, is also about a social system that was so prissy that it was unable to deal with any honesty with sex, and yet was so attracted by sin that it thought about it constantly. In other words, the characters are driven by the lure of "action" in spite of the fact that no one can, ultimately, have illicit sex. It is, therefore, full of language and wit, but promotes an underlying traditional morality.

Ironically, while searching for a way to actualize the verbal action of the play and to prevent the production from becoming static, director Walker had to confront, and often put on stage, some of the real weaknesses of APT's acting company and training methodology. For example, although Walker is more adept at composition than APT's regular directors, the company members are so habituated to settling into a pose that they were frequently unable to move from one picture to another with any grace and had great difficulty forming a cohesive and responsive unit.

Secondly, Sheridan's play demands a great deal of consistency in the style of delivery so that contrasts between the scandal mongers and the few honest characters--or the few moments of honesty that otherwise duplicitous characters exhibit--are very sharp. Within that stylistic consistency there must be great variety in vocal work--it is the language and the sound that is supposed to be entertaining here. The APT company members have not, however, been well trained as an acting unit, nor are their vocal skills as good as they need to be. Because of the company's constant focus on text and not on performance, APT has failed to develop the acting potential of its members. (The turnover among members who do exhibit great potential is depressingly high.) As a result, there was a great deal of stylistic inconsistency, from Steven Hemming's appropriately overplayed Sir Benjamin Backbite (delightful in every way, as are all of Hemming's performances. He may be the most promising member of the company.) to Terry Kerr's sedentary Mrs. Candour, who stood or sat stock still and shrieked her lines.

It is interesting to note how unfamiliar many of the performers are to contact with, and meaningful response from, the audience. For

example, Gary Martinez's entrance as the aging Sir Peter Teazle was delightfully campy. His mincing step, comic posing, and persnickety, crackling voice provided much fun and created what seemed to be a fully realized character. However, as he earned laughs from the audience, he began to mug unabashedly and became far more concerned with showing the audience how clever he was as an actor than with his character. His ability to interact with an audience had not been exercised because of the preoccupation of the actors with the text, and he seemed shocked and confused by the demands that an active audience made on him.

On the other hand, Lee Elmer Ernst as Joseph Surface, carefully created a presence on stage. The problem was that so many of his lines were so oddly interpreted. When he should have shown real concern or worry for his social position, he lapsed into an almost silent film melodramatic style--appropriate for the line, but only if had been in a different context. Without any real understanding of his situation, Joseph's scheming and his venomous use of others is less desperate, and therefore less disturbing to an audience, than it should be. Once again, the propensity of the company members to view each line as an analytical unit spoiled the thematic and performance continuity of the play.

In many ways none of the actors seemed to settle into her or his role comfortably. There was a profusion of accents, many of which changed during the course of the performance. The cast put on their elaborate costumes and wigs, but did not "wear" or use the clothing as if they were familiar with it. The timing often changed rapidly--particularly during asides which in this instance disrupted the flow of the performance instead of making connections between the action and the audience.

There was value in the production, particularly in the sparkling moments provided by Paul Bentzen's Sir Oliver, and a most crystalline presentation of the logic of duplicity and seduction that develops into the hilarious screen scene, but nothing was sustained. Even Bentzen's character, who clearly established and maintained a different relationship with each of the other characters, and yet pulled his identities together well into a warm, if somewhat self-righteous purveyor of good, somehow lacked any sense of purpose (in spite of the fact that his goal is very clear in the script).

There was no connection to the subtextual or social complexities of the play. There is a reason that the scandal mongers exist and that they derive a perverse pleasure from causing pain, and there is a reason that Sheridan organized his play in this manner. In APT's own "Players News" there is an explanation of the play as a balance of humor, wit, and sentiment. But little of this balance was apparent

in the production, and so performances--and in fact the entire evening--rang rather hollow.

APT's fifth offering, *Ivanov*, was, to me, an unwise choice from the outset. The play, Chekhov's first serious full length, written in 1887, shows all the signs of immaturity one would expect in even a great playwright's initial endeavor--particularly a degree of melodramatic over-statement and self-indulgence not found in the sparse yet multi-faceted masterpieces of his later works. APT justified its choice by claiming that its growth as a company would be fostered by tracing the growth of playwrights and performing their works in more-or-less chronological order. (The company had presented several of Chekhov's one acts before.) This attitude is appropriate for a curator, but not for a performer.

Once again, outside directors were forced to confront the acting company's weaknesses and, in this case, its founders' attitudes. As *Ivanov*, Randall Duk Kim gave a performance that varied from truly exciting to rather strained. The character himself is playing the role of the hopelessly lost idealist, constantly proclaiming his own weakness and misery. Kim is able to invest many of these speeches with a sense of real pain, but in the scenes when *Ivanov* tries to explain why he is emotionally destitute, an explanation that is unsatisfactory in naturalistic terms in the script itself, Kim seems to be consciously searching for a level of explicit meaning that Chekhov neglected to put there. He seems to be searching for a consistent emotional motif that can be clearly applied to every moment of the play.

A major problem with this production is the portrayal of the two characters with whom *Ivanov* is most frequently in contention. As Sarra, *Ivanov*'s consumptive wife, Occhiogrosso is unable to maintain either a physical sense of deterioration or an emotional sense of loss. Steven Helmke as the young doctor who believes he sees the truth but is totally blind to human value, is superficial and wooden. He rants and recites, so unsure of himself on stage that at every possible moment he had to hold on to a piece of furniture.

The three major actors seem to have approached their roles as they approached the others--without an appreciation for the playwright's style, for his use of the medium of the theatre to give a particular form to his perceptions of reality. Their attempt to find a certain kind of realism denied form and artifice in favor of text. The approach led to performances "academic, comfortable, and bourgeois. Admirable in fragments but much of [them] congealed." (Saint-Denis, 52)

Yet as in *Errors*, when the company members confront one-dimensional characters whose dialogue has a nearly one-to-one correspondence with its real meaning (i.e., little subtextual depth),

performances were entertaining. Under the direction of Brand and Carnovsky, each of these minor characters became a contributing part of a comic picture of the aristocracy. The directors were not shy about making the most of the foolishness of the moneyed elements of Russian society. More than any directors at APT, they provided a visually stimulating, *peopled* stage--and one that was in constant yet meaningful flux. The scene of a party at the wealthy Lebedev house, for example, made the most of each actor. Even stillness here was active, and the scenes during the party, in which small groups enter and exit rapidly--arranging a marriage, proclaiming love, or just complaining about bridge hands--were exciting and clever. They drew a picture of decadence and drunkenness that was capped off by a delightful scene in which three men argued politics and the relative merits of their favorite recipes with equal fervor.

The cast, for the most part, rose to the challenge of creating characters who could be understood immediately as stereotypes and yet showed levels of intellect or emotion on occasion. Most impressive of these was Theodore Swetz as the alcoholic milquetoast Lebedev. Even when he was only waiting for his next drink he was as interesting to watch as when he made a futile attempt to save Ivanov by giving him a secret loan.

Karl Redcoff as misanthropic Shabel'skiy, hanger on at Ivanov's and companion to dying Sarra, extended his character's self-loathing to all of humanity in a wry, nasty, and very amusing manner. And finally, Stephen Hemming's performance as Borkin, the openly scheming overseer of Ivanov's estate, provided a vibrant picture of the rising commercial class, ready to take over society, but essentially mean-spirited and overly ambitious.

It was in the molding of this ensemble, and a clear recognition of the demands made on it by this nearly silly play, that the promise of invited guest directors was met. There was a sense of *play* here, of actors being allowed to fill out the characters suggested by the dialogue and action rather than being told to say words that were invested with the sanctity and absoluteness of scripture.

It is somehow ironic that the guiding forces of American Players gave the weakest performances in this production. It seems as if their determination of what constitutes a successful performance intruded on, was at odds with, the vision of the directors. This lack of flexibility, this ironclad definition of performance clarity, could be the downfall of the company.

At this juncture, APT's future is indeed in doubt. Because of financial difficulties it will have to trim next season to four productions and limit itself to directors from its own company. Kim is leaving and the artistic reins will be solely in Occhiogrosso's hands.

There is little hope that the company will have funds to hire badly needed vocal and movement coaches (the "academy" side of the theatre has been dropped, as has a rather unsuccessful apprenticeship program), nor that it will employ a dramaturg who can see beyond the words.

And yet, unless the company does modify its vision of what a successful interpretation of a classical play implies, it will continue to produce lifeless renderings. Its directors must find a way to accept and develop the script's potential to elicit a variety of responses from actors and audience alike, to understand the value of suggestiveness and ambiguity, and to find concepts for each production that encompass and give form to broader examinations of each play. They must, in other words, find a way to use dramaturgical principles to enhance understanding, not just knowledge.

I have a great deal of respect for the goals and desires of APT's founders and share their joy in the classics as living works of art. But they must learn to love and not revere them. Reverence demands distance--love, like performance, requires intimacy. Until APT's directors can escape from the former, they will never find the latter, and will continue to stage performances which may, on one level, elucidate, but will rarely re-enact, the classics with any vitality.

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Notes

1. APT is located in the hills outside Spring Green, Wisconsin, in a striking natural amphitheater. Its facilities include offices in converted farm buildings and a 700 seat, outdoor thrust theatre.

2. It is worth noting that in the only analysis of APT of any significant length or depth to appear in Madison, the closest city to APT, Bruce Murphy finds even *Twelfth Night* to be without directorial control. "There is something lacking at the core of this production, a problem that is emblematic of the company's entire body of work . . . The production presents audiences with a stageful of colorful characters, but it lacks even a glimmer of an attitude toward them. When there is no overall vision of the personalities, politics and plot of a play, you are left to make of it what you will." (25)

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