

Musings

David Young

Theatre is for me a humanizer. An equalizer--no one has ever mastered it completely. It is both an art and a craft--much that I am, such as I am, I owe to the theatre. It has been my education in many ways, both emotionally and intellectually. Theatre gives me a base, a reason for being--it helps to tell me who I am.

To give an example: Those of you who are over forty may remember the play *Claudia* by the late Rose Franken. In it, an actress by the name of Dorothy McGuire made her Broadway debut. Although it is not a play with the depth of *Death of a Salesman*, it has a very fine humanity about it. The play is about a young girl who, even though she is married, has not really grown up and has been unable to let her too close relationship with her mother go. She finds out accidentally that her mother is dying. At a dinner party she tries to let her husband know that she is coming of age--she says to their best friend, "Don't ever envy anyone, Julia. Just make the most of every moment while you can." This alerts her husband to the fact that she is aware of her mother's condition, and will, hopefully, be able to handle it in a more mature way. Simplistic, yes, but an universal truth. Obviously I don't need to tell any of you that one of the reasons that drama works, theatre works, as a humanitarian discipline, is that it is not threatening. It helps us all, audience and artist alike, to rediscover life's meaning with humor (hopefully), and lifts us out of ourselves. I find that with students and professionals alike, if they are able to solve a character's problem--some of their own problems are spontaneously released. Theatre allows the beauty

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that is within us all to come into focus and show. It then flows naturally into our relationships and reaches the people around us. For me, there is never any competition with others in the theatre. My only competition is with my own potential. I try always to extend that--to keep that going. Eldridge Cleaver said something that I think is pertinent to all of us, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

If theatre is a humanizer, it is also a creative process. Yet it is difficult to talk about creativity. It is more difficult to be creative and even more so to do it on command. That is part of the fun and the risk.

One of the risk-takers is Don Campbell, a music teacher from Texas. In his article, "Instructor to Musical Brain," published in the *New Age Journal* (1985), he discusses some of his innovative ideas. Campbell himself is a classically trained musician but found that the academic approach to music was frustrating. Upon returning from Japan, he began to study recent developments in perceptual research and was convinced that the key to nourishing creativity lay in "multisensory integration." "The more connections that can be made within the brain, the more integrated the experience," he stresses. "The triune model of the brain is of major importance to all attempting to teach creativity--or anything else, for that matter." This theory developed by Dr. Paul MacLean of the National Institute of Mental Health, advances the notion that the brain is composed of three separate units: the reptilian brain, which controls basic movement and survival instincts; the mammalian brain, which controls our limbic system and our feelings; and the neo-mammalian brain, or neo-cortex, which is the intellectual core of the human mind. Campbell points out that "most teaching engages only this last aspect of the brain." For example, in a class for learning-disabled students, the students were unable to write the letters of the alphabet, and were terrified of failing. Campbell instructed the children to walk the letters, trace them with their elbows, and move them with their entire bodies, creating the alphabet in rhythmic and musical patterns. The results were astonishing. Suddenly, the children knew with their whole bodies the patterns of the letters that their hands had been unable to write. Therefore, according to Campbell, "music and movement are the most obvious keys to the brain. Certain ways of singing, chanting, and moving create dynamic changes in brain waves. Using the whole body to learn opens the channels between the mind and body."

Another unusual technique that Campbell employs is to allow his students to tell their problems to a bowl of Jell-O. "It's like Zen; you just can't think in an ordinary way when you're talking to a bowl of Jell-O," he writes. Teaching the brain to learn a new pattern of

communicating--that's the key to enhancing creative power. The teaching team of Mark Olsen and Jane Hinders has discovered that the paths to spiritual awareness and performance techniques merge, and together cause creative sparks to fly. "We use T'ai Chi, meditation, Alexander technique, Taoism, the whole works," says Olsen. He is a professional mime who toured for years with the mime show *Mummenschanz*. Too often, people who teach the performing arts are more interested in instructing students on their selling points. They try to help artists find their mastership, to filter into the subconscious and use the entire being to invoke the power of creative impulse. Says Jane Hinders, "Theatre doesn't mean feeling good, it means becoming a mirror of everything that's human--freeing the performer's psyche and sending it out into the world." The traditional approach to performing can have a deadening effect on creativity. Performers are too caught up in the mechanical part of performing: training the voice and body while neglecting the spirit. Creativity involves exploring new relationships, whether with other people, nuts and bolts, or simply ideas. That means taking a risk, which is much easier in a supportive environment. If you dare to feel, however, you will be creative.

Martin Esslin explores this subject through a different avenue in *The Anatomy of Drama*. For example, he points out that the Greek word *drama* means action. It is, therefore, an imitation or representation of human behavior. Meaning that drama is *not* simply a form of literature. Drama should be regarded as more than a mere pastime. It is profoundly linked to the basic makeup of our species. This is true whether it is a play for children, a comedy by Noel Coward, a major drama by Lillian Hellman, or a Shakespeare classic. Bertold Brecht, one of the most famous contributors to the theatre, considered drama a scientific method and theatre as an experimental laboratory for testing human behavior.

When a fine play in a first-rate performance coincides with a receptive audience, a concentration of thought and emotion is formed. This leads to an enhanced degree of receptivity and emotional intensity, to a higher level of spiritual insight. Such an experience may be akin to a religious experience, or becomes a memorable highpoint in an individual's life. As Albert Einstein put it, "The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art."

Acting draws people to the creative and humanizing side of the art more than any other branch of the theatre. Colleen Dewhurst, one of our finest actresses, was quoted in the New York Times as saying, "When I started acting as a kid it was, 'I like theatre', then it was 'I love theatre.' Now it's more than that. I don't even know myself anymore. I think that the theatre is a purification--for actors

and for the audience. It's telling the audience, almost subliminally, where you and they are at this time."

Life-styles shown in the theater inevitably become a potent influence on the manners and styles of the times. Unconsciously, we tend to reflect in our own lives and attitudes the accepted mode of behavior observed in the theatre. How do courting couples know what to say to each other when they are in a situation together for the first time? They have to find the right words to break the ice, to declare their feelings. Theatre offers them *many* possibilities!

R. Kerry White has this to share in his illuminating article, "Selling Art in Education." Acting is fundamentally concerned with creative social relationships. The actors must create a relationship with the character. Then, through the character's eyes, the actor engages in relationships with other characters. The actor must also attempt to manage relationships with other actors with similar interests and problems. There is a need to subordinate personalities to the creative task. In a performance, a community is formed by the acting group. The ensemble then engages the audience in a dynamic communal relationship for the duration of the performance. This experience broadens everyone's perspective on their social lives and allows actual practice in working out relevant problems.

Constantin Stanislavski studied the techniques of many actors that he considered geniuses, among them was the Italian actor Tomasso Salvini. Salvini had the ability to play a part night after night and make each performance a new experience. While vacationing in Finland in 1906, Stanislavski, began to analyze his own experiences as an actor and a producer, as well as what the "geniuses" had in common that made them truly great actors. It was then that he began to discover "the method." According to Stanislavski, "The greatest joy an actor can experience is the ability to speak the thoughts of another person on stage, to be able to put himself entirely at the service of someone else's actions as if they were his own."

An actor organically grows into a part. The dictionary definition is:

or-gan-ic (or gan' ik), adj. 1. characteristic of, pertaining to, or derived from living organisms. 2. characterized by the systematic arrangement of parts; organized; systematic. 3. growing and developing in the manner of living organisms. According to Stanislavski, the play is divided into small portions containing one feeling; the feelings are then generalized and reduced to three or four definite feelings for the major portions of the play; and those are further reduced into one feeling. The physical nature of the actor must be centered on what is taking place in the soul of the

person that he represents on the stage. Communication between actor and audience is indirect and unconscious. The remarkable thing is that in either case the communication is reciprocal. In art, nothing is impossible. (From the introduction to *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*, Faber Publishers, England.)

To paraphrase Tom in the introduction of *The Glass Menagerie*, "That's the acting background of this story." Of course acting is not the only place in the theatre that you use humanizing and creative techniques. Directing is the art that seems to need the most uplifting at this writing. To quote Alan Schneider: "A director has to be a combination traffic cop, tourist guide, choreographer, lion tamer, trial lawyer, magician, psychiatrist, baby-sitter, and con man" (not necessarily in that order). If acting is doing, then directing is sharing, coming together, molding, and conducting. A good director is like a fine orchestra conductor. He allows the author to shine through and the actors to sing. He lets actors discover what is taking place behind the words. Quite often we talk about feeling instead of simply feeling.

It is for this reason that technique must get lost in rehearsal so that characterization may take over. To quote Gerald Freedman, "Directing is problem solving, and a director should not, and cannot, know all the answers on the first day of rehearsal. Miracles are possible, but you must be cautious. Your work (art) is life. Enter into it with an open heart and an open mind. Concept is a framework to make things clear or unclear. Find out what the play is really about underneath. Enter into the life of the play for ideas, for your concept."

A technique that some directors are using (including myself) is meditating for inner stillness to extend Stanislavski's "method." One of the most solid practitioners of meditation is Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti has observed that the act of meditation will, in itself, bring order to the activity of thought without the intervention of will, choice, decision, or any other action of the thinker. As such order comes, the noise and chaos subside and the mind becomes generally silent. Thought arises only when needed for some genuinely valid purpose. Then it stops until needed again. In this silence something new and creative happens--something that cannot be conveyed in words--that is of extraordinary significance to the whole of life and the artist. Krishnamurti does not attempt to describe this verbally but asks those interested to explore it for themselves. In this way, one is constantly learning, and out of this learning comes insight into the general nature of the process. The insight is then tested. First,

one sees whether it holds together in a rational order, then whether it leads to order and coherence.

In conclusion, I would like to share the words of the late Brooks Atkinson, well-loved drama critic of the New York Times, with you. "Theatre civilizes. It encourages beauty and dreaming. Theatre almost always begins with a vision and ends in performance. It makes strangers in the audience into a community of believers."

Washington, D.C.

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