

Telling Lies and Selling Truth

Hollis Huston

The theatre is philosophical, and it is a philosophy. If we artists of the theatre don't know this, we don't know what we're doing. To conceal this truth is to repress our own power, and deliver ourselves into the hands of diverse enemies. Who is fooled except ourselves? We are accused throughout history of being mere rhetoricians, and of making the worse appear the better cause. Wickedness, after all, sells tickets, and good news gets bad ratings. Our enemies, therefore, try to speak for philosophy and against its enemies, as if we were not members of the philosophical commonwealth, and as if they were not merely envious colleagues.

To say that the theatre is philosophical is to say something about its geography: on what continent of thought may it be discovered? To say that the theatre is a philosophy is to say something about its politics: with what nations of thought does it dispute that ground, and for what? To understand either claim, we must become philosophical, for to speak of philosophy, of what it may and may not do, of what may or may not comprise its walking tours, is itself a philosophical enterprise. There is no real danger for theatre artists in this activity, though Plato pronounced exile upon us; for the war between philosophers and poets, already old when Plato enlisted in it, is misnamed. There is a war, but it is among philosophers. The Platonists are the political arm of the royalist faction, and their cause depends on exclusivity: only they are to be called philosophers, lest the king should be forced to stand for election. They have revoked the credentials of their rivals not for any

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failure as philosophers, but for their success. The idealists didn't want to compete with them.

Keep your eyes on the form, and hang the content! the theatre *is* philosophical and *is* a philosophy, but not when it speaks philosophy; for what it is and what it says are two different things. Philosophy spoken by characters is poor philosophy, and suspect as theatre. Not even Shakespeare's characters believe the royalist politics they speak, left over as they are from John of Salisbury some three centuries before; O'Neill's paraphrase of Freud has the clink of cocktail shakers about it; Sartre's disquisition lacks the force of Ionesco's enactment; and it is not discussion which is philosophical in the theatre, but action.

In what realm of philosophy does the theatre lie? Ontology? a good guess: for the theatre is usually taken to represent something: it *is not* what it represents, but perhaps what it represents *is*. A theatrical convention, like a language, is intended to resemble the structure of existence. It is a machine for generating conceivable imagery. We are supposed to know that what we seem to see in the playhouse does not exist, but we are also supposed to be affected by the resemblance between what we see and something else we do not see. Not everything that can be described in a playhouse is true--and a play, by definition, is false--but any successful representation is a plausible, well-formed image. Fasten your eyes to form, and refuse the seduction of content. None of the particular imaginary places depicted by the stage are in question here, but rather its surmise on what kinds of place can be depicted.

Since the theatre can never coincide with truth, however, it is at least one step removed from ontology. It is meant to resemble truth in its significant aspect, but can never be true; a theatrical convention, therefore, is an educated guess as to what kind of thing truth might be if we stumbled over it in the dark. We are, of course, in the dark--we shall never see but darkly, through the glass. The stage, therefore, is a credentialing procedure for knowledge, which we need because we shall never see face to face. On stage, we know that the Ding-an-sich will never make an entrance; we work purely with the objects of perception, which were made in order to be perceived. A theatre, therefore, is perhaps a model of knowledge or, to speak philosophically, an epistemology. It does not tell us what we know, but it shows us what kinds of things could be known if they were true.

When two cultures develop conflicting theatrical conventions, their imageries declare war on each other. Different model, different episteme. The conflict is not merely artistic, but philosophical; not merely philosophical, but political. If we ignore the philosophy implicit in theatrical conventions, we are susceptible to confusions about the theatres which use them, and the societies which invent theatres.

Example: the classical and neo-classic ideas of unity, as they are played out in dramatic and theatrical convention, describe not merely different truths but different criteria of truth. The difference is all the more poignant for

being accidental: the Italians thought they were following Aristotle precisely where they most essentially transgressed against him. In both epistemologies unity signifies truth. For Aristotle, an incoherent image could not be philosophical, and therefore could not take aim at the regular motions that flow beneath shifting surfaces; for the Renaissance, an incoherent image would be an offensive reminder of the medieval barbarism that separated them from the wisdom of the ancient world. The great difference is hidden by a common word--"unity." The word has references that are continents apart. Only by looking at the practice of two different philosophies do we see their mutual hostility. Aristotle and Castelvetro, side by side, strain the world through their sieves, retaining "unified" things in their exemplary collections, and allowing incoherent things to wash through. But their exemplary collections are totally different! They have retained, from the same sample, different objects! The difference is in their sieves: the holes have different shapes.

For the Greek, unity is a sensation, naively recognizable by the senses. The unified and therefore beautiful object must have "a certain order in its arrangement of parts," and "a certain definite magnitude."¹ The required order is nothing arcane, but a rule of thumb that anyone can apply: the "several incidents" must be "so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole,"² which is only to say that when you've taken away everything you can, what's left is unified. The proper magnitude is known by the naked eye: a thing is big enough if it can "be taken in by the eye," both in its whole and, from the same point of view, in its parts. A "very minute creature" does not show its parts at a glance, while a "creature of vast size" does not reveal its whole to the eye, therefore neither aspect is unified, or beautiful. Translating his spatial intuition into the dramatic dimension of time, Aristotle therefore said that a plot "must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory."³ In other words, the unified work defines a moment--a self-enclosed nugget of time. Nothing technical here: the distinctions are of quality rather than quantity. No special status, expertise, or equipment is needed to make such distinctions. Unity is to be sensed, not measured.

"Till the epoch of Pericles, the time of day was estimated merely by the length of shadow," writes Spengler of Classical culture, "there was no exact subdivision of the day."⁴ Theatrical unity exists in time, and to describe a temporal unity is to beg questions of time itself: what do we know about time? how do we know it? The Renaissance mind was suspicious of naively sensed time, which would not answer its questions. The Italian critics, in their prescriptions for literature, were performing a rationalization (read "mathematization") of space and time. The age that would soon measure acceleration was devising, in its practice of representation, the mental software which could describe such investigation. Modern physics was born in the description of changes in velocity, in the graphic representation of distance as a function

of time. Time, therefore, was to be made quantifiable, continuous, and infinitely divisible. There are no bumps, no nuggets, no moments, in the time of classical physics. The time of Scaliger and Castelvetro is *clock-time*.

It is crucial, though often difficult, to remember that not all time is clock-time. As David Landes, the historian of clocks has put it, "it is not 'natural' to want to know the precise time."⁵ The very notion of a "precise" time is an insult to the senses, for sensuous time is always accurate enough for any sensuous concern. Sensuous time may conflict with clock-time, but there can be no inaccurate sensation of time. If I wake, it's time to get up. If I yawn, it's too long.

Unity was for Aristotle a naive sensation (It's cold! Wear your wind-breaker). But for literary critics of the Renaissance, such an important concept could never be naive (Is it cold? Check the thermometer). They were members of an elite with a grudge against popular culture, and anyone who saw things naively was in their view unqualified to look at all.

For Aristotle, unity is unified: it is plot, the soul of the drama. But the unity of Scaliger and Castelvetro is fractured into three parts. Unity of action, which Aristotle spoke of at great length, doesn't interest them because it can't be quantified. But time and place, to members of an intellectual vanguard dedicated to the mathematization of space/time, call for isolation and subjection to measure.

The Greek's almost casual observation that tragedies "keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun,"⁶ looked to Castelvetro like a proscriptive mathematical limit, a limit that on the one hand requires a scientific explanation, and which on the other hand acquires from that explanation the force of absolute natural law. "The time spent in performance is the same as the time spent in the actions themselves;" therefore plays cannot "represent more events than those which occurred in the space of time required by these plays," nor can artists make spectators believe "that many days and nights have passed when the sensibly know that only a few hours have elapsed."⁷ Scaliger, in like mind, complains that Aeschylus "has Agamemnon killed and buried so suddenly that the actor has scarcely time to breathe."⁸

Clock-time didn't exist in Aristotle's world. An "hour" was an inexact concept in a world that told time by the sun, for the length of each day on the sundial is different. To measure small units of time, or measure events by reference to them, would have been in his world both impossible and scientifically useless. Time, for Aristotle, is sensuous time, inseparable from his unified theory of beauty, i.e., unity. The Italians, by their division of his theory into quantifiable components, show themselves to be of another age and another epistemology; we know that their space/time was different from Greek space/time because they describe different ways of coming to know about it. Classical dimensions are made up of distinct moments; neo-classical dimensions are continuous, calibrated, and infinitely divisible.

It is clear, therefore, that epistemologies are at stake in theatrical conventions. Yet the idea of the actor is dubious, and therefore we may ask if the theatre's aspiration to epistemology is legitimate. For what the stage presents to us is not knowledge, but something that seems like knowledge. Erving Goffman: "Whatever it is that generates sureness is precisely what will be employed by those who want to mislead us."⁹ We succeed in the theatre by seeming like truth rather than by being true. Hamlet called this seeming "monstrous," and William B. Worthen has traced this monstrosity through Elizabethan acting, comparing it to the modern anxiety about performing and becoming. In the Tudor period, "the actor's art coordinates two sharply divergent world views and sparks a bitter clash between the 'puritan' distaste for theatrical artifice . . . and a 'neoplatonic' sensibility that values all acts of creation as potentially godlike."¹⁰ There's a sin in acting, but where is it? in seeming what we are not, like Webster's Duke Ferdinand, or in failing to seem what we cannot be, like that rogue and peasant slave Hamlet? Stanislavsky, instead of justifying play, turned modern actors against acting and toward a tortured construction of inner integrity; for him the actor's sin, his "decline in to the inartistic and inauthentic," is "a slide into mere 'acting' instead of creative 'being.'"¹¹

If only being is creative, the theatre was doomed before it began. What is damnable about acting is that it displays the form of being and takes it in vain: how do we know it as the form of being? because it lacks the substance. If the mind entertains it, it is entertained falsely; and that is the peculiar truth of acting.

Is the theatre, therefore, a model of knowledge, or a model of knowledge's appearance? Perhaps a theatrical convention's import is neither ontology nor epistemology--perhaps it is the design of a magic lantern rather than a theory of light. Perhaps the theatre is phenomenology, and every convention an experiment that throws up appearances before our eyes like charming quarks. It's not easy to describe phenomena. Different experiment, different quarks. They're all real, but what do they really mean? Theatre is the rhetoric of imagery, not its logic; but the rhetoric of imagery is phenomenology, that branch of philosophy that Kant led us to.

Recall the Tudor painting on the ancient Round Table. King Arthur welcomes Galahad. But the servant who fills the plate before his king is half as tall as his master: the perspective is that of social class, of place in the divinely ordered scale of rank. The place in which king and subject intersect is hardly depicted at all, a mere frame in which the Round Table hangs like a decorative wreath. This approach to a romance shares the architectural method of the Corpus Christi plays, in which all scales of time and space are adjusted sensuously, to the measure of human concern: we can be simultaneously far enough away to take in the temple, close enough to see Simeon bless the babe. Pascal's anguish before the immensity of the universe is inconceivable in such a world; his pain is modern, and can arise only from the

contemplation of mathematized space/time, in which we cannot see at the same time both ourselves and the world.

On the other hand, in Serlio's city street which recedes towards an arch that frames a distant vista, it is the points of space itself which are orchestrated; God's ordination has been wreaked on space and time, which vanish in a vortex just behind the most distant obelisk. No people--this is a stage set which has not yet learned to embrace the actor, whose body dwarfing the triumphal arch at the fifth groove would have exposed the art of perspective as a mere philosophy, linear phenomenology. The stage is set for exploration, for physics, for economics, for anguish.

The subject fields of philosophy are not philosophically neutral. Ontology, epistemology, phenomenology: each presupposes that there is a particular question. Each question undermines and supplants the last one. Epistemology critiques ontology, phenomenology critiques epistemology. What is? how do you know? what does knowledge look like? You can't get to the first question directly; the last will be first. And the last first question is theatrical.

So if every theatrical convention encodes a phenomenology, then all theatres agree on certain philosophical attitudes. Beneath any particular recipes for the generation of phenomena, all theatres agree that phenomena intervene between us and things, and that phenomena can be intentionally generated where there are not things to back them up. That's what actors do: as father's shade appears to Hamlet with compelling force, an actor makes the Dane appear to us, though the Prince of Denmark never will arrive. If this charade were Hamlet, 'twould be no actor.'

A great vaudevillian said that the main thing is honesty--if you can learn to fake that, you've got it made. In this fallen world, truth and a buck gets you a cup of coffee. To take effect, truth must project itself, and we poor forked creatures must put on makeup if we hope to be believed. Because every credential is an invitation to fraud, and the skill that makes truth heard can also project a lie, we sometimes think it blasphemous to act the role of truth; but sometimes we think it sinful to leave truth out of the play.

Yet anxiety about the theatre, and the problem which it poses, are not theatrical, but arise at those moments when we look at the theatre from outside, bearing the arms of a hostile philosophy. The theatre is not merely philosophical, it is in itself a philosophy. As long as we are in the theatre, truth does not intrude from outside to compete. Theatrical truth lives in the theatre, and looks tawdry only when we emerge into the daylight outside the playhouse; the philosopher should remember that there are some playhouses we never leave, from whose stalls the truth must have a certain look.

Perhaps there is a truth that is one and unchanging, though as an actor I doubt it. For the truth that holds you and me together across the dotted line is protean, many and mutable. I am what I am now in order for you to see me that way; you look because I have chosen the right look. But on the stage, no idea will last, and what was right just now is now wrong, even in the time it has

taken for me to tell you--I must transform myself, make a transition, become something else to keep the curtain from coming down, to keep that ripe tomato in your pocket and out of my face. Now I have changed, and what I present to you now has no link to what I showed before, but you will supply that link, the empty spot in my performance, and call it character. In Plato's terms, there may or may not be a sun, but the shadows in the cave have intelligence. Brecht: "The coherence of the character is in fact shown by the way its individual qualities contradict one another."¹²

The theatre is at least Kantian, in that it criticizes metaphysics. As long as we are in the playhouse, the Ding-an-sich can never appear to embarrass our imagery. More than that, it criticizes positivism and the myth of observation. Performance is our daily reminder that sight is a business transaction; not that we decide what to see, for there is, after all, a performer on the other side of this contract, but that we have agreed to see it, and what we see was offered with an eye to making us agree. What we see is created by and for our sight. Our sight causes it to be, and its being (like the fire-eater in a market-place) causes us to see. There is no criticism of this contract except to break it.

Acting favors becoming over being, mutability over constancy, transformation over process, change over stillness, time over space. The theatre is aristotelian rather than platonic, not only in that it is made out of actions rather than qualities, but in that it insists that the ideas of things, if we are to quiz them, must be in the perceivable world.

The answer, says the Platonist, is obvious. When we break the contract, leave the playhouse, climb out of the cave, we see things as they are. But modern politics suggests that we have only entered a larger playhouse, whose exits are not so clearly marked. Shall we gouge out our eyes, and smash the electronic ones? Even Descartes, who tried to sweep the table clean, found himself in a theatre, where the malignant demon might present false images. Until we learn where the exits are, the theatre will be a prolegomena to any future politics. We must know how to lie before we can know how to sell the truth.

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Notes

1. Trans. Ingram Bywater, *Poetics* (New York: The Modern Library, 1954) 233.
2. 234.
3. 233.

4. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), I. 15.
5. *Revolution in Time* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 25.
6. Bywater 230.
7. From Castelvetro's *On Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. Charles Gattnig, ed. B.F. Dukore, *Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974) 142.
8. From Scaliger's *Poetics*, trans. Frederick Morgan Padelford, *Select Translations from Scaliger's Poetics, Yale Studies in English*, No. 26 (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1905), reprinted in Dukore 138.
9. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959) 251.
10. *The Idea of the Actor*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984) 12.
11. 148.
12. Bertolt Brecht, "Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), par. 53, 196.