The Shaping of American Theatre Education

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Theatre education in the U.S. will not be described successfully by following a linear chronology because at any given time we find old practices coexisting with the latest technique, emphasis, or fad. Yet some kind of historical perspective is necessary in order to understand our virtues as well as our plight. I have used the word "fad" because at one time, in the 19th century, the teaching and learning of theatre was almost entirely a professional and craftsman like process, but after the advent of the Moscow Art Theatre and the influence of Stanislavsky, our education has become increasingly faddish! Every new emphasis or technique has been snapped up with an unquestioning fervor that can only be described as religious. Our theatre education is best understood as a kind of marbleized or free-form mixture of influences first stirred up in the 1920s. There is also little profit in discussing our theatre education as though it was a translation of concerns from one educational institution to the next. This approach leads us to the vaguest or the most uselessly obvious of similarities.

The one thing that can be affirmed without contradiction is that we have developed the largest and most varied theatre education program the world has ever known. No country ever had as many theatre schools. No country ever attempted to train more students in the skills of the theatre. And if theatre education measures its success by the percentage of students it places in theatre professions, ours has been one of the least successful programs known in history. It is fortunate for our students that theatrical skills are of use in most walks of life—the head of the United Steel Workers Union was trained as an actor at Carnegie Institute of Technology and one of my classmates trained at that same institution became the head of one of the larger trucking concerns in California.

The most astonishing fact about this educational phenomenon is its relative youth. Prior to the 1920's there were few theatre schools or departments, and the education in these first institutions was composed of a mix of traditional or conventional technique rooted in the practice of professional theatre. The newer

Stanislavsky approach began to establish its grasp on our education during the 1920s but its grip was not yet very strong. The teaching of playwriting was determined predominantly by the conventions of the well made play, and this was treated with the most careful doses of Ibsen and even smaller prescriptions of Strindberg and German expressionists. Instruction in scene design and lighting opened up much more rapidly to new European influences due to the Art Theatre movement and the work of such men as Robert E. Jones.

The explosive growth of our theatrical education began in the late 30s as the Group Theatre taught us all how to act believably. In a very short time after the end of WW II we confirmed our essential identity as realists. Our playwrights joined forces with the actors in our passion to mirror ourselves with photographic accuracy. Oddly enough, this movement left designers to be even more free and less literal, realistic or photographic. Think of the sets for *Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* and compare them to the kind of acting that those plays required and you will understand my point. This "romantic realism" dominated our stages and controlled our educational objectives for close to 25 years—from the early 40s to the early 60s.

It was at this time and under these artistic objectives that our educational programs multiplied like frenzied lemmings. We had theatre departments in most major universities as well as colleges and junior colleges—we even had them in high-schools. Drama academies and professional schools also proliferated. The identity we discovered at this time provides us with our most recognizable dramatic features and virtues up to the present moment. Stanislavsky became our messiah but few messiahs ever had such contentious apostles . . . Strasberg vs. Adler vs. Clurman vs. Lewis vs. Chekhov vs. Meisner! Their disagreements over the correct approach to Stanislavsky proved to be artistically invigorating; many good actors studied under three or more of these warring "bearers of the Russian flame." These apostles inspired an even larger generation of academic evangelists, each of them endeavoring to convey the impression that not only had they studied the Messiah's system under the tutelage of his "favored apostle" but that they too had in a state of inspiration communed with Stanislavsky, so that their own evangelical modifications of known Stanislavskian practice had the Messiah's imprimatur.

The world of theatrical education experienced yet another upheaval during the late 50s and the early 60s—an upheaval that moved our focus away from "accurate imitation" towards the vitalities of spontaneity and the heat of ecstasy. Viola Spolin aroused our interest in improvisation and "truth in acting" began as a consequence to be measured almost exclusively in terms of spontaneity. It was not to be wondered at that the Happening emerged upon the scene almost simultaneously. This was the age of the spontaneous and the honest, when the

sexually liberated student was experimenting with all manner of mind-altering drugs and techniques.

Close on the heels of this development came the "discovery" of Artaud and the enthusiasm for spontaneity that we attributed to improvisation fused with another form of "emotionalism": the apotheosic ecstasy advocated by the brilliantly mad Frenchman. It should be noted here that although Grotowski's theatre was no simple extension of Artaud's, the ecstatic aspect of his productions increased our enthusiasm for this objective. Theatrical "seizures" were sought by means of disorientingly violent situations, and rituals that tended to be more confrontational than imagistic. This was not a theatre of precise technique and the faithful imitation of life: it was the expression of "impassioned theatre folk" who placed all their faith (or most of it) into a Gnostic reliance on the powers of ecstatic ritual or the arousal of ecstasy by means of disorienting shock and awe.

Our theatre emphasis at this time was experimental, improvisational, ecstatic, ritualistic and anti realistic, and to such a degree that interpretative precision (what used to be known as "technique") was of little consequence. This was the era of Julian Beck and heyday of The Living Theatre with productions of such plays as *Paradise Now*. Academies and even such bastions of American theatre education as Yale experienced insurrections of students who had become impatient with the fundamental disciplines such as voice, speech, dance fencing, and the speaking of verse. It was at Yale that Robert Brustein gave the students a choice of acquiring a basic technique or leaving—they were not to "throw the baby out with the bath water." The interests of this period led us away from our adherence to realism toward a more symbolic and surrealistic drama.

Expressionism and Brecht were never very powerful influences upon our theatre. Expressionism had a much stronger influence upon design than it did on our playwriting and acting. Universities fervently endeavored to popularize Brecht virtually from the time of Eric Bentley's first anthologies. Brecht's messages proved to be more attractive than his techniques, especially among young students who were beginning to respond to the political injustices of our own country. During this period I jokingly referred to Brecht as the Neil Simon of Berkeley. However, Brecht's approach to acting had no lasting purchase upon our practice. His plays did confirm our fondness for episodic (as opposed to "epic") plotting, a fondness which had grown out of our love of TV and the movies. Ours was never the epic theatre that Brecht advocated (something of an allegorical nature structured on a moral or political exigency) but rather a realistic and psychological way of approaching dramatic narrative. There are few plays by American authors that reflect an understanding of Brecht's structural objectives and his methods of playwriting.

The symbolic and surrealistic influences on our theatre prepared us for yet other non-realistic approaches to the drama. If one has to give them names, they would be "conceptualism," "deconstruction," and "post modernism". These terms have precise definitions, but in the light of American theatre practice the concise definitions are relatively meaningless; one must employ their debasements in order to understand their uses in our theatre:

> *Conceptualism* has come to mean finding a symbolic staging or a change of historical period with which to "dress up" a play (usually a classic or older piece) and in order to make it "more accessible" to our audiences.
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> *Deconstruction* is a perfectly valid way of understanding a play by discovering its "buried" intentions, its hidden agenda. This process was considered a necessary step in the directorial analysis of any text long before the term deconstruction was coined. However, more often than not this approach fuses with the desires of conceptualism to lead directors to a kind of reckless face surgery that destroys the countenance of a play by superimposing the "subterranean agenda" upon the features of the play, often destroying the complexity of a work by simplifying it in an inartistic manner. For example, any intelligent reader knows that there are two tragedies within *Midsummer Night's Dream*—how, then do we improve Shakespeare's play by extinguishing its comedy, costuming all the lovers like monks and nuns, and making them scream hideously at the juice of the flower?
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> *Post Modernism* has become little more than a critical sanction behind which the director is allowed to make a random conglomeration of effects, juxtapositions of historical periods, and bizarre settings without having to justify a connectivity of significance.

The resulting theatre has a kind of circus quality and its demands upon actors are far different from those made by most of the authors of the past. Actors must be able to eliminate logic from their process in order to frolic through the arbitrary changes required of them, or to play against the grain of language, or to ignore a whole line of thematic concerns that does not please the "genius" of the director.

By affecting directors, these tendencies have affected our teaching and thus come to affect the skills of our actors who presently encounter much difficulty when confronted with the demands of period plays and classics. They even have

difficulty interpreting plays from their immediate past such as those of Tennessee Williams. Most of us have long since wearied of the invidious comparison of our actors with those of British, European and Canadian theatres; but these comparisons will persist as long as we allow our educational requirements to bend to the breeze of every fad that comes along without first grounding it in a philosophical understanding of "imitation" as Aristotle and Plato understood it (I refer to both Greeks since they had justifiably opposite views of the artistic phenomenon).

Problems in the teaching of acting

In the first stage of the development of our educational theatre (before and during the 20s) most teachers were recruited from professional theatre. They were directors and actors and tended to teach from their experience rather than from any formally elaborated system. A great deal of their emphasis was upon voice, diction, "gesture" and oral interpretation. However, the instant theatre education entered the world of the universities (something unheard of in Europe at this time and, in many countries, even to this day) the objectives of our education became more complicated. One might even call them schizophrenic. Theatre Departments had to justify themselves not only by mounting good productions and training students in the ways of the art, but they had to comply with the intellectual demands of the academic world. Courses in history of the theatre, theatrical literature and theory were demanded of the fledgling departments and expected of the drama students. There is nothing wrong with this—certainly the vapidity of much late 19th century theatre testifies to the lack of such training.

These new demands upon theatre education made departments respectable in the eyes of academia but eventually they led to the development of a new species of theatre practitioner: the Educational Theatre Artist. This species at first was comprised of persons with PhD's in some other field who loved theatre and knew enough about it to direct or act; and on these grounds they were allowed to teach both academic and practical disciplines. It was not long before the new species began to perpetuate itself by awarding academic degrees in drama as though MA's and PhD's could help one in the casting office. To put this into a time frame, one of my professors at Carnegie Tech in 1946 was considered to be an intriguing oddity, something like an academic/theatrical platypus, for not only had he been trained professionally at Carnegie Institute of Technology and worked as an actor, he had for reasons better known to himself furthered his education elsewhere and acquired a PhD—he was one of the first twenty PhD's in drama in these United States.

Today's theatre training in colleges and universities is almost entirely dominated by Educational Theatre Artists. Professionals are seldom hired and when they are it is rarely in ladder positions but rather as guest artists; as professionals they are suspect in the halls of academia, and worst of all most of them lack the PhD and cannot easily be promoted by the standards of the university. Matters have come to such a pass that prospective teachers (for now we have regiments of young students who *set out* to be teachers rather than professional artists), in their quest for the Ph.D. seldom receive a thorough education in the practice of our art. These prospective teachers, know that degrees such as the MFA which once indicated a kind of professional preparation are of little interest to the hiring institutions. It's a PhD they need or nothing. The laws of tenure are implacable.

The schizophrenia of the academic and the professional has led to shoddy and permissive teaching of practical disciplines within the universities as well as an intellectually diluted teaching in the historico/critical courses (for many of the teachers view these courses as a kind of toll upon their secret practical or professional preferences and aspirations). In these days of tight academic money, Drama Departments all over the United States are beginning to reap the consequences of soft and fuzzy approaches to an art that is unforgivingly ferocious in its demands of precision, imagination and intelligence. The teaching of acting has always fared best in professional schools or academies such as Yale or Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie/Mellon Univ). Institutions like these also have vigorous directing programs. Their students do well in the professional world because of the precision of their technical training, hard grading in practical courses, and an allegiance to the fundamental techniques of our art, not to mention the network of "old school ties" which facilitate the induction of the graduate into professional circles. However, few of these institutions are what one would call bulwarks of intellectual and critical power—Yale is, perhaps, the most effective of all of them.

It is almost tragic that these two modes of education have led to a kind of mutual distrust. A person who holds the PhD and endeavors to enter the professional world would do best to keep it a secret. An awareness of his title would be enough to win the person nothing but the distrust of his fellow workers. The pathos of this situation is as profound as it is laughable. No art demands intellectual acumen as does ours, and no art is less forgiving of technical imprecision or emotive murkiness than ours. All that our educational efforts seem to have achieved is a separation of professional and academic theatre that is difficult to bridge, as most professionals will confirm.

Among the various disciplines that have suffered the greatest neglect in our quest for spontaneity and emotionalism (as opposed to accurate acting) have been

those of *speech* and *eloquence* (note that I am not referring to *elocution*). From the 50s to the present there has been a tendency to concentrate on *voice* and to ignore *speech*. The whole vocal/verbal aspect of our art was considered so insignificant it was no longer taught as a special discipline; what little interest was left in this discipline was shoved into our acting classes. I have seen acting classes already dangerously close to curricular formlessness devote inordinate time to the lowings and gruntings of *voice* exercises. *Speech* was subsumed into the *voice work* and was so cavalierly treated by the teachers that soon our actors were incapable of speaking a verbally dense play. One of the banes of our existence during what I call "the Brando period" was to direct truculent students who insisted upon the effective naturalness of their grunting and mumbling—and this in the midst of a Chekhov or Giraudoux! One instance will serve to illustrate the importance of *speech* in the academic as well as the professional world. When Bill Ball first came to San Francisco, he discovered that his company (*A.C.T.*) was incapable of speaking English with sufficient precision or uniformity to perform a Shakespeare. He was forced to hire Edith W. Skinner (the best speech teacher in this century) to give his entire company (the old and the young) lessons in speech and Standard Theatre Speech.

One shouldn't place all the blame for this lamentable oversight on our colleges and universities. Our primary schools have long since given over any concern for teaching our students to speak effectively. In English public schools one reads regularly and the best reader of a given class is chosen weekly to read for the head master. This kind of attention hasn't been felt in our country since the early 1930s. How can we expect students (who become teachers) and our teachers (who have become directors) to care for something so utterly suppressed in their education?

Period manners and comportment, not to mention knowledge of different historical moral and sexual mores, are a mystery to most of our young actors. Not too many years ago I was asked to direct a fine old American chestnut, *Holiday*. In one of its key scenes three couples dance together in what used to be the children's play room. Anticipating difficulties, I chose a waltz rather than a fox trot believing that it would be the easiest dance to teach if one of my cast members proved to be someone who had never before danced. At blocking rehearsal I explained to my cast where and when I wanted them to waltz and gave them a simple but precise pattern. When I finished I looked up into six vacant and intimidated faces. None of my actors had ever held or been held by another person and moved in a rhythmic manner to a given rhythm and melody. If they can't waltz what in heaven's name do they know about Victorian or Edwardian sexuality? How can they play Restoration Comedy if their understanding of Horner's sexuality is no different from their own notions

grounded in our recent "sexual revolution"? And, finally, how can these unlettered actors understand or play a Greek classic when they evaluate the ethics of the Greeks by watered-down Judeo-Christian standards? I wish I could exonerate these actors of mine by saying they were "academy" educated and, therefore, lacking in historical or sociological grounding, but I can't. They were all university trained.

Our theatre academies do a fine job of eliciting spontaneity, relaxation, and emotional expressiveness; colleges and universities are far from reliable in this regard. However, characterization is by no means a prized skill in the instruction of either the theatre academies or the university /college systems. Paul Muni was playing old men in the Yiddish Theatre at the age of fourteen; in contrast to this phenomenon I saw two "league auditions" (they have since been discontinued) and I was saddened to see how hard the instructors had labored to prepare their most advanced students to offer themselves to the professional theatre by playing almost exclusively silly bimbets and young studs. This is the reductio ad absurdum of type casting. But what can we expect if our TV and film industries (where most of our young professional actors make their living) refuse to look for actors as opposed to types? The saddest aspect of this didactic slough is the fact that our legitimate theatre is following the lead of the TV and film industry. Where and when are young actors to learn the ways and skills of the theatrical chameleon? I find this question almost too painful to answer.

I have mentioned Standard Theatre Speech but have not dealt with it in specific terms. Nothing could matter less in our professional as well as academic theatre training. Standard Theatre Speech was once accepted as a theatrical virtue for it permitted free interchange between our actors and those of Britain. This was a way of speaking that was spoken by actors of both countries as a "point of theatrical departure"; it is not based upon any regionalism but rather upon the avoidance of them. It provided actors with a cultural "center" from which to depart into whatever accent or dialect they desired at the same time that it gave them the controls to carefully and clearly speak their mother tongue. For example, when reading Shakespeare we find many specific indications of dialects and accents for all manner or characters, but in all of his plays there is a "category" of ladies and gentlemen who speak the "standard" of his day (it is of little consequence that his standard English probably sounded like contemporary Dublinese; what is important is our concept of "standard" in today's world).

Standard Theatre Speech was and is based on accepted pronunciation of our words as well as the rules of enunciation that enable us to utter English with clarity in a large space such as a theatre. But there came a time when our standards of the natural, spontaneous, and believable were determined exclusively by *familiarity*—and the actor was expected to sound like the boy or girl next door

regardless of the role played! Just recall the speech of Louis Calhern or John Barrymore and you have some idea of the usefulness and elegance of Standard Theatre Speech. On the other hand you must remember Tony Curtis endeavoring to play a scene with Laurence Olivier (who was speaking Standard Theatre Speech) in the film, *Spartacus*. Olivier asked something like, "And what do you do?" Curtis' reply was delivered as though there was some consonance between his role and his speech, "I'm a singggger of songggz." I find that reply one of the funnier moments of technical kitsch.

Through the 1950s the increasing scarcity of American actors capable of Standard Theatre Speech forced the film industry to hire more and more British actors whenever it attempted a historical movie. In recent years there has been a conscious effort to make a virtue of our deficiency by deliberately casting American actors with marked regional dialects in roles where they do not belong, as though our mode of speech did not signify our origins or culture. Those who saw the English production of *Amadeus* as well as the film are in a position to compare two actors in the role of Mozart, one of them incapable of Standard Theatre Speech. For those who saw only the film I suggest you compare the speech of the Salieri with that of the Mozart.

With the increase of Shakespeare festivals across the Middle West and the West of the United States it behooves us to consider our position on this aspect of our education. I will not entertain the racist nonsense that blacks and Asiatics are incapable of uttering Standard Theatre Speech (something I have heard repeatedly); any theatre tour of London would prove such suppositions to be bigoted nonsense and an indictment of our theatre education. It is our theatre education that is at fault for not preparing our actors in their basic and perhaps most important discipline—the ability to speak accurately and with the colors of intelligence and emotion.

In conclusion, I would urge all schools and theatre departments that are really serious about their teaching to examine Stanislavky's chart of his system available in Bobby Lewis' *Method or Madness* and to compare their curriculum with the chart's requisites. It is my conviction that any actor exposed to the disciplines indicated on Stanislavsky's chart would be equipped to meet the demands of any form or style of theatre within occidental culture. With this background students would even find it easier to adapt to the conventions of such exotic imports of form and style as we encounter in our various forays into Asian theatre. It has long since been time for us to revive a respect and commitment to technique in its full spectrum—emotional, physical, rational, and vocal. No faddish panaceas can replace such training.

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