Roger Blin

and Twentieth-Century Playwrights

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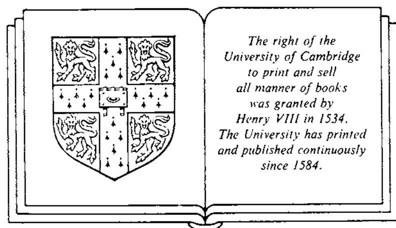

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Introduction

To write a book about Roger Blin is a rash undertaking. There has been no extended examination of his work, since his modesty did not permit it. He kept no documents and made no director's notes. Even worse, he claimed that his direction aimed to be invisible, disappearing behind authors and actors. To include him in the context of Directors in Perspective is therefore a challenge, since Blin never had the opportunity to sustain his work continuously. With no hearth or home, with no theatre at his disposal where he could develop an audience, he worked here and there, waiting for a theatre that would agree to accept difficult works before they were understood.

Nevertheless he has contributed importantly to contemporary theatre. Discoverer of Beckett and explorer of Genet, Blin gave his support to young authors, fought for a new kind of dramatic writing, insisted on treating subversive subjects. He made his choices without bluster but without concessions, and he stuck to these choices tenaciously, ignoring tradition, fashion, and beaten paths. It is hoped that this book will break the relative silence surrounding this shy and solitary artist who refused worldly honors and disdained superficiality in order to dedicate himself to true communication and deep friendship based on mutual esteem. His sensitivity gave us today's theatre.

Even when he did not desire to be provocative, Roger Blin was a subversive agent: he did not fit into a mould; he is difficult to capture; he cannot be summarized by a formula. He thus questions the very basis of theatre. A natural doubter ("What's the use of your research?"), obstinate in his refusals ("What I do is not important"), he inspires a re-examination of conventional ideas.[1]

What is a director? Is his function a necessity or a usurpation? There have been many different conceptions of the director. From assistant to an actor in the difficult birth of a character, we have moved to a tyrant imposing personal ukases on a whole company. The exponent of poor theatre – four actors, a board, and spectators – has given way at times to a technocrat anxious to try many heavy-handed methods. From a simple mediator between the author's text and his interpreters, we have arrived at the idea of the director as "star" and even "superstar." How did this happen?

In 1878 a French work on theatre assigns the director the task of blocking movements of the actors and placing the properties on stage. This function

"owes a great deal to Beaumarchais, to intelligent stage managers, to playwrights such as Dumas *fils* and Sardou."[2]

In 1885 another French scholar defines the director as " the stage manager specially assigned to directing," who controls the actors' movements and watches them rehearse.[3] This scholar distinguishes between human and material mise-en-scène. The director should respect the period of the play by choosing properties, planning the disposition of space, taking care of lighting and sound effects. In the theatre hierarchy, the managing director is on top – both an administrator and an artist – in charge of casting, repertory, and day-to-day notes. Under him is the director who gives orders on stage; and finally there is the stage manager who helps the managing director and looks after the stagehands. In many European companies the First Actor was the director; he was in charge of rehearsals, sensitive to the hidden life of a play, active in evoking that life for the other actors. This practice, based on enthusiasm for a work and closeness to the actors, might involve personal quirks on the part of those who played to the limelight, and this sometimes unbalanced a production.

For the Naturalists, the director insured the theatre's truth to life. At the Théâtre Libre, Antoine was influenced by the Meiningen productions (for a homogeneous ensemble and for crowd scenes) and by Zola's theories. The latter's *Naturalism in the Theatre* inspired Antoine to set naturalism on stage; in his *Conversation on Mise-en-Scène* (1903) Antoine insisted on the importance of the director in furnishing the proper background for the action, determining a "true" setting, and demanding true feeling from the actors. He therefore went to great pains to establish the exact milieu in which the characters would live – the material aspect of directing. For the non-material aspect, he focused on rhythm, on interpretation without hyperbole, and on the lighting which he called "the soul of the mise-en-scène."

Stanislavski remained close to the actor, and based his directing on that. External directing was useful to him only insofar as it aided the spiritual creation of the actor. For him, the director was the mediator, helping the actor. As the revolution against Naturalism progressed – Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism (and the Russian Revolution) swept away the old society with its theatre – the godlike director grew even more powerful. Analyses of the written work were developed within both a literary and ideological context. Some directors emphasized stage technology and others followed the path opened up by Appia, Craig, or Copeau. Adolphe Appia established a hierarchy of the elements of staging – the actor, space, light. Edward Gordon Craig insisted on the director as artist who coordinated all the elements of a production. With Appia and Craig, imbalances were supposed to disappear and be replaced by a governing concept that would orient the. work toward perfection.

Jacques Copeau tended to be ascetic, preferring his bare boards to any kind of decoration. "We don't want to overstress the importance of sets and props."[4] For him the mise-en-scène was "the totality of movements, gestures, and attitudes; the harmony of faces, voices, and silences; it is the whole stage production stemming from a single mind who conceives, regulates, and harmonises it. The director invents and then maintains a secret bond between his characters, which is made visible – a mysterious series of relationships without which the play fails of its expression, despite excellent actors."

Five young theatremen of the next generation – Jean-Louis Barrault, Julien Bertheau, Sylvain Itkine, Raymond Rouleau, Jean Servais – formed a collective, the Company of Five, and issued a manifesto in 1936: "For us the director is the coordinating agent of the work (script and subject) and the elements of production (set, costumes, music, actors, and stylistic unity). He should be the main interpreter of the thought of the author, endowing it with theatre reality through his technical knowledge and authority."[5]

Theatre is a complex art requiring the collaboration of artists and technicians of different disciplines. It is often said that there are several plays and not a single work; there is the one written by the author, the one that the actors perform, and the one that the audience perceives. Today we are conscious of essential differences between a written text and its performance. But the author does not always see it this way. He may see a single reading of the work – his – and he imposes his phrasing and rhythm (which he dreams of being able to score musically), his esthetic conception, his understanding of the contents. In 1908 the Russian author Alexander Blok complained that he was dispossessed and betrayed: "The director is that invisible person who steals the author's play and then shows him to the nearest exit . . . Then the director takes it upon himself to explain the play to the actors, to the stupefaction of the author who later comes to see his play on stage."[6]

Futurists and Dadaists attacked language by denunciation and disarticulation. In the twentieth century the primacy of the word was threatened also by the importance given to visual elements. Erwin Piscator thought that the mise-en-scène was a science "that arises from the spatial division of the stage, from its plastic components; it is translated by the play of light as much as by intonations of the actors."[7] He viewed theatre as a way of offering historical and sociological perspective.

Whatever the political or esthetic allegiances of directors, whether they are influenced by Brecht, Artaud, or Grotowski, contemporary directors may be divided into two categories. There are those who create a new work out of the author's play; they bend it to their viewpoint, considering it a reservoir of possibilities, from which they choose one. (Thus we speak of Planchon's rather than Molière's *Tartuffe*.) They subdue all elements of the production to their viewpoint – actors' interpretation, deployment of space, conception of

costumes, rhythms, etc. The whole is thus unified, and the result is often brilliant, even if an author is sometimes made to say what he never said. The viewpoint may be too personal, or a past author may become too contemporary, or a modern play may be bent away from its original meaning.

There are directors who object to this practice. They are more modest craftsmen, and are less concerned with carving a reputation for themselves. Often actors themselves, they continue the tradition of actor/head-of-a-company, helping colleagues perform a play, without any other intention than presenting it to the public in the best possible light. During rehearsals they offer the actors an outside eye to guide them. These directors know actors' problems from within, which is not always true of the other kind of director, who may be an expert in imagery.

These actor/directors also have visual imagination, and they too can exploit the resources of a sophisticated technology, but they do not make that the *sine qua non* of their production. They do not use such apparatus in a brilliant display that may smother the author's words; they do not shift the author's intentions; they do not indulge in a discourse parallel to the play; they do not make an exegesis based on the play. First and foremost, they bring the work to the stage. This necessary and sufficient process makes of them indispensable but discreet mediators, responsible for all elements of the performance, which they choose and coordinate. If they succeed in putting the work on stage, they do not yearn to be called "creators." They are men of the theatre who produce the plays of the authors. They leave it to the audience to draw their own ideological conclusions. Often playing in their own productions, these directors confront the work directly, without any other intermediary than their own sensitivity.

For Claude Régy, a well-known French director, the mise-en-scène means timing words in space: "One has to discover for each text how to extend words. Starting with the text, one has to listen for what whispers through our own unconscious [of actor or director] so as to prepare the ground for working on the unconscious of the audience."[8] An actress like Emmanuelle Riva increasingly appreciates "a mise-en-scène that does not call attention to itself, one in which the director does not display himself."[9] Moreover, there are discoverers and diviners who have a nose for new kinds of writing, who reveal what will be appreciated tomorrow, and who set on stage – the acid test – disturbing works that may become the classics of future generations.

It is clear that Roger Blin belonged to this race of discoverers and craftsmen. He was an actor helping other actors; he was a servant of authors, hostile to dramaturgical analysis and to overdependence on technology; he was a diviner, discovering authors who may (or may not) become famous; he directed very few works of the past. That is why speaking of him means

simultaneously speaking of the authors he produced, the designers who placed his conceptions in stage space, the actors who shared his adventures, and the collaborators who took part in his productions. Continually helping others, concealing himself behind others, Roger Blin would not have permitted a study that focused on him alone. He belonged to a theatre in the process of being born, to a living and continuous stream that burst forth daily, and it is this stream that we will try to capture in its flow, with Blin at the center.

Stubbornly discreet, he makes analysis difficult. He rarely confided in anyone, or only peripherally; he communicated few specifics, or only jokingly; he did not plan his work methodically; he tried to produce an invisible mise-en-scène. Thus he seems a priori to destroy any impulse to study his work, since his hand cannot be seen in the production, or, if one does catch a glimpse of it, revelation would destroy Blin's intention.

Although memories and documents help constitute the basis of analysis, and can be integrated into an organized approach, they leave us perplexed before Roger Blin, who, by his temperament and behavior, denies the very possibility of a structured study. Coherent but visionary, logical but poetic, conscientious and yet not averse to a certain madness, he remains on the frontier of the intangible. He gave no instructions to those whom he was supposed to direct; he let things happen. Like a gardener, he brought to fruition. An alchemist, he titrated and weighed.

He raises doubts about our few criteria of theatre research. For that very reason it becomes essential to track what escapes us in theatre; what makes the theatre spring forth as theatre, independent of critical theories. Seeking to theorize about his practice would disguise its spontaneous, empirical, uncommented aspects. The alchemy of stage creation may derive from personal sensitivity, experience, meetings, external circumstances, intangibles, as much as from organized intention and profound reflection. That osmosis is difficult to capture; everything need not make sense.

It would be heresy to apply linguistic or semiological methods to a study of Blin's productions. He always bristled at "barbarous" words invading the theatrical discourse; he rebelled against theatre research itself; the important thing was to create theatre. However it should be possible to show "the primacy of listening" (to which semiologists are so attentive) in Blin's productions, where the technical apparatus never overpowered the actor. In a space that was deployed as cleanly as possible, without projections or complicated machinery, "without sand, water, or smoke" as he phrased it in 1983, gestures are discreet, and in the performance of the actors one senses "the tension between spontaneity and the control of signs," which Patrice Pavis calls "writing based on impulse."[10] An ideology was always in the

background of Blin's choices, but one cannot imprison his creations in rigid codes, or claim to decode them by the projection of arbitrary ideas that would have displeased him. He feared that critical analyses would ossify the living performance. He detested the German dramaturg who was supposed to prepare his mise-en-scène scientifically; he caricatured him humorously as a man between fifty-five and sixty years old, with a head "shaped like a violin,"[11] who conceives the mise-en-scène at home and arrives at the first rehearsal with three hundred pages of notes to which everyone must conform. He positions himself in the middle of the orchestra and bellows orders from afar, through a microphone.

It is obvious that this is a prejudiced description which reflects the aversion of an impulsive craftsman to the director who claims to be in possession of the truth and does not work out his production in the warmth of the stage. A man like Brecht would not correspond to this description, since he was at once a theoretician and practitioner, and not a functionary of the intellect. For the director who displays his knowledge and power, Brecht substituted someone who entertains a dialectical relationship with the work, who arouses and organizes "the productive activity of the actors."[12] In 1963 Blin was hostile to the dramaturgomany that was beginning to be the rage in France. He appreciated Brecht; he detested Brechtians.

He preferred to act like an actor among actors. He worked like Dullin who was unable to finish an instruction: "You see, it's a little more . . . a little less . . ." and the actor understood. Or like Giorgio Strehler, more often on the stage than in the auditorium during rehearsals at the Piccolo Theatre of Milan. Rather than theorize, Blin jumped to the stage to demonstrate, without wanting to be imitated. He might take a metaphor from current life to clarify a situation, often he said nothing at all; he let the actor stray into an impasse and take note of it himself, then helped him to change his direction. Sometimes he found the actor's choice better than his own, and he adopted it. At the beginning he imposed nothing, although he maintained his basic convictions and his respect for the author. Blin was modest, considering himself a simple link in a chain, and he wanted his contribution to remain invisible. He proceeded by feel using the maieutic method of Socrates, and then disappeared.

Kind and timid, he was very firm in his refusals. He could say NO like no one else. NO to work by command. NO to stars who wanted to commercialize his undertaking. NO to a bourgeois repertory. NO to a painter who would simply design sets. NO to those who distorted the thought of Artaud, his friend. NO to all compromise. This stubbornness in refusal was used by director Sarah Maldoror when she cast Blin as the main character in her television production of Victor Serge's *Hospital of Leningrad*. Blin was a fearless man who sailed against the stream.

In this study he is quoted as often as possible. When he did consent to explain what he did, he revealed a keen, often corrosive mind. His thought was in advance of many of his contemporaries. Thirty years ago he seemed like a braggart with his *Godot*, and yet . . .

Even in his most recent productions there was no trace of the corporeal expression that is so widespread in contemporary theatre, causing actors to train on the floor. Aside from the paralytics or buried people of Beckett, Blin's actors' bodies are vertical, standing or seated; they are relaxed, but they are carriers of words before being expressive bodies. His revolution is elsewhere – in his ideological choices and his rejection of the classic tradition.

Like a tightrope-walker who ventures out on the stiff rope and triumphs over his discomfort, Blin revealed and brought to the stage works and authors who resist the usual *données* of theatre. Beckett is reserved; he slips away, almost hides his characters from the audience, and muffles their discourse. Genet proclaims his indifference to the public or his desire to mistreat it; he forbids the performance of his plays. Blin nevertheless succeeded in thrusting them upon the world. He knew exactly what to take from texts that seem more suitable for radio; he kept their musicality even while grappling with the individual problems of each production. In form he avoided realism. In content he was anchored in social reality. Impervious to fashion, to the snobbery of artistic movements, he may seem anachronistic when compared to certain directors, but he was actually abreast of recent experiments, ferreting out the unknown, ready to take new risks.

Although Blin never belonged to a school or a party, he enjoyed the company of the Surrealist poets. He was a friend of Antonin Artaud. He admired Soviet and German Expressionist films. He participated in the subversive theatre of the October Group; he supported causes like the Popular Front, the Resistance, and the Algerian Revolution. His commitment was personal. He didn't make a tribunal of the stage. The revolution that he sought in the theatre was the destruction of old forms and the inauguration of new writing. He denounced bourgeois art; he was eager to find new plays and new artistic forms. His taste spanned a wide gamut, from the mysterious abyss with its anguish, to the devastating laugh that denounces a rotten society. Blin fought for progress in the theatre, so that its form and content would correspond to the struggles of today's human beings. He therefore expected from playwrights a language that destroys bourgeois convention; he welcomed a questioning spirit and a sense of mockery. He had a taste for poetry; for him dramatic language was essentially literary but not esoteric. His choices are clear; neither Claudel, Giraudoux, nor Molière, but Strindberg, Adamov, Beckett, Genet. Draftsman and painter, visual and visionary, he had plastic gifts, a sense of color and lights; he sought beauty but not estheticism. He was enthusiastic about vocal research, about the

musicality and resources of the human voice; he acted on radio, and he was interested in concrete music.

He was convinced of the centrality of the playwright, who brings to the production the yeast, the contents, the written form. Blin tried to be the servant/stage manager who transfers this written text to the mouths of the actors, in the simplest but most functional scenic space, under a light (in all senses of the word) that will show the play to best advantage. He refused to load the text with his own ego, his personal neuroses, or any kind of supertext. (In life as in his productions, his ascetic tendencies caused him to avoid useless luxury; he hated expensive machinery, gadgets, and mere techniques.) He relied on the actor rather than on sound effects. He was furious at the waste of money in subsidized theatre, when a successful production was taken off just because the program scheduled a specific number of performances. He told me in 1978: "In the old days they didn't close a production when it played to 75% capacity." In the world of show business, he remained a craftsman.

With his beard or moustache, depending on his role or the particular period of his life, puffing at his pipe to hide his shyness, he was sometimes rough, his eyelids heavy like a nightbird. During rehearsals he evaded questions. He was somewhat withdrawn, as though listening for an inner voice, and therefore unreachable; people were unwilling to interrupt this reverie, which was thought to contain some kind of foreknowledge. Since Blin made communication difficult, he often obtained deeper reflection, and he inspired artists to surpass themselves. He said more by silence than by discourse; he incited everyone to seek within himself.

The theatre is serious and works itself out seriously. For him as for his friend Artaud, theatre can be a surgical knife or a plague attacking outworn traditions and respectable ideas – to the jubilation of innovators.

Unlike certain colleagues, Blin's horizon was not limited to the theatre. He liked to be with friends and speak of other things, to share the time in which we live. In the literary cafés of Montparnasse or St-Germain-des-Prés he was at the center of artistic currents, meeting painters, poets, writers; he took part in discussion. When he entered a theatre, he carried those currents within him, that spirit of poetry and that group life, those social demands and that political awareness.

Indeed, he was also a graphic artist, and produced over 2,000 drawings. His schoolboy notebook testifies to a precocious gift of observation and surprising skill. Youthful studies show animals, self-portraits, nudes from his period at the Grande Chaumière. Gradually, a style emerges in which creatures with very long human legs and bird-heads are endowed with wings for flight. A few paintings show vivid colors – shaded reds, violets, washed

out blue-greens. Boat hulls suggest departures. Then the graphics grow more complicated; they break down into many small tree-people and poisonous flowers among the animal forms. The people are composed of filaments and deformed bone-structures, of root-legs. Animals and plants combine in dreamlike ambiguity. The drawings turn into black gobs and splashes that then spread out into spidery lines; black on white, traces of dreams, frenzies. The pictures are experienced as exorcisms, screams. "If you know how to scream, you know how to draw," Blin joked while carefully inscribing date and signature at the bottom of a drawing he gave to a friend. The line quivers; it encloses bodies without legs, spreads curves, and produces fabulous hieroglyphics, black outpourings with a few color splashes.

Transferring his gift to theatre, Blin sketched several costumes. When intending to play Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, he drew long widespread arms, sparse long hair. A grotesque character emerges from ample cuffs at the wrists, trousers too short, shredded at the bottom and held up by falling suspenders. For *King Christophe*, Blin drew women's headdresses and shawls falling in folds; uniforms with tight-chested white jackets and black hats with red stitching. For *The Screens* he produced for each actor a sketch for colored makeup.

One suspects that he gave his designers suggestions to orient them toward a pictorial universe that he himself never managed to put on stage. Only his subtle lighting, with its nuances of grey, red, or pale yellow, like a painter's palette, gives evidence of his ability to offer an appropriate atmosphere for each dramatic action. His attraction to the works of Genet, Valle-Inclàn, and Ghelderode (whom he wanted to direct at the Gaîté-Montparnasse) shows an affinity with writers whose words express images as much as ideas, and who draw these images from the depths of their own revolt.

To speak of Blin's productions is not necessarily to speak of ideas, but to go toward the source of a subtle path to the intangible, of a crystallization of dreams, of pictorial vision, of intimate vibrations. Yet Blin did not create performance art; he remained loyal to textual theatre. Artist of both the verbal and visual – that is the duality of Blin, irreducible, unclassifiable.

In this study what becomes evident is the inner coherence of a man of the theatre who refused to have a program, an explicit theory, a message, a distinctive style, but who nevertheless was completely committed to his convictions, both in life and the theatre. In spite of appearances, this craftsman left nothing to chance; he was also a polemicist whose choices are significant because he introduced what is sometimes called the anti-theatre of Beckett, the bomb of *The Screens* shortly after the Algerian War; with Genet's *Blacks* and Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* he opposed racism; with *Minamata* he

stood up against industrial pollution and its criminal concealment, without abandoning theatrical form for agitprop. Roger Blin would have disliked this dissection. But I hope not to betray the very heart of his productions – their generous and sensitive life, his modesty of expression, the rigor and economy of his approach.