

I

Communication in drama

It is self-evident that a play must communicate or it is not a play at all. We must concur with Peter Brook's fundamental tenet that 'the choices [a dramatist] makes and the values he observes are only powerful in proportion to what they create in the language of the theatre' (*The Empty Space*, p. 35). It may not 'work' if it is a bad play as such (*The Cenci*, *The Family Reunion*, *Camino Real*, *Tiny Alice*) or if it is a non-play (*Prometheus Unbound*, *The Shadowy Waters*, *The Dynasts*). With such intractable material we are not concerned. Kenneth Burke has said, 'Drama is dissolved by the turn from dramatic *act* to lyric *staté*' (*A Grammar of Motives*, p. 441): and even this is generous because the *status* may never have been first an *actus*. But in some circumstances a play of little apparent value (*Titus Andronicus*, *The Rivals*, *The Colleen Bawn*, *Charley's Aunt*) can work well, and therefore is worth special attention. For we do not ask that a play communicate for ever; we do ask that a play communicate in its own time, through its own medium, for its own community. The task with plays great or trivial is to examine the line of communication, the transmission of signals between stage and audience and back again, the stimulus and the reaction, on the occasion. The first night of *Twelfth Night* in the Hall of the Middle Temple in 1602 should be no more interesting than its second night in, say, Tokyo.

Dramatic criticism, like any other, finds it hard not to be a generalizing activity, whereas the live theatre experience is always particular; criticism is docile or reflective or dead, whereas perception in the theatre is wild and immediate and alive: and that, of course, is when a play is actually communicating. Moreover, matching theory and practice is a very chancy business. On the one hand, a fine theory can be meaningless in the theatre – the time-honoured joke is 'When did you last have a catharsis?' On the other hand, something can work in the theatre which no theory can explain – like the provokingly unreal sound of the breaking string in realism's own *Cherry Orchard*.

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At least, an hypothesis in dramatic theory, unlike one in literary theory, can usually be tested. The ultimate question, *Does it work?*, can be asked. The signs on the printed page are signals for something to happen in the theatre, and we can check that it does with our own senses and perceptions, and sometimes with those of others.

Of what the eye sees truly supports the words heard, for a simple example, something of good compounded theatre may result. Thus, as literary criticism knows, Shakespeare has Lear increasingly use the language of animals, but he does this as he is increasingly encouraged to look and sound like an animal himself. Though he thinks himself a philosopher, on 'Off, off, you lendings!' we see him tear off his royal robes to look like Poor Tom, who has minutely described himself as a beast. When the King regains his mind and soul in the presence of Cordelia, he is wearing 'fresh garments' and the animals cease snarling, but only until we hear that terrifying half-animal 'Howl, howl, howl!' as he enters with the dead girl, mad again with anguish. All this we *perceive*: in the theatre, where the eye can reinforce the ear to compel attention to what Shakespeare seems to have determined must be inescapable. The theatre is the testing ground for the validity of words and images.

However, the proof of effective working in the theatre is endlessly complicated by the nature of dramatic experience. A play's meaning is not wholly what its author thinks it means, and Tyrone Guthrie believed that 'if the objective meaning of a work of art were known, there would be no point in its existence. It exists merely to suggest many ways in which an undefined truth may be approached' (*A Life in the Theatre*, p. 124). The image of meaning which the stage transmits and which a spectator may hope to receive is the product of what Kenneth Boulding would call 'a universe of discourse' (*The Image*, p. 132), a process of sharing messages and experiences. If a king or a beggar is a stable image within a community, the idea of a king or a beggar will be shared in the theatre. However, what happens *to* them may not be shared. For the drama must by definition be *doing* something, and although an abstract king and beggar may be stable images in print, the interaction of Shakespeare's king and beggar may be anything but predictable. An audience must contribute by responding to the stimulus if it is to enjoy its theatre, but the kind and degree of that contribution is never slavish. If it is rich and worthwhile, it is also alive and independent.

Nothing would happen unless the conditions for such experience

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were there. The miracle of theatre is that a community, an audience, has agreed to let drama happen. In the make-believe of a theatrical situation, the impossible, even the irrational, is feasible and free to take place by common consent. As Marshall McLuhan would have it, the medium takes charge. Those who go to a play are secretly seeking the experience called 'theatre'. So it is that the medium can have more force and importance for the individual or his society than what is perceptibly fed into it. It follows too, that the drama's medium calls for as much consideration as its content: we must know the theatre at least as well as we know the play.

As it happens, McLuhan has nothing to say about the drama, but he does leave us with two catchwords, 'hot' and 'cool'. A cool medium, he argues, is one in which the audience is encouraged to participate: perversely, he names television as his prime example of a 'low intensity' medium which must involve its audience. A hot medium is one of such 'high definition' that the audience is denied the chance to participate: curiously again, he names the cinema as the medium which requires the least effort of completion. Clearly, these notions are wholly relative. Bad television can be quite passive in its effect, and good cinema can be immensely active. What then of the theatre? To pursue McLuhan's terminology, no doubt the theatrical medium is icy cold, since participation is essential for its existence. However, it must immediately occur to the reader that a proscenium-arch play must be more hot than cold, and an open-stage play, in which the spectator has no choice but to be intimately engaged more cold than hot. Or more subtly, a tragedy in which the feelings are more highly defined is likely to be less cold than a comedy which usually manipulates its audience more obliquely. Or again, a soliloquy addressed as it should be directly to its audience may well be hotter than the low intensity action which surrounds it.

Drama calls for a virtually unlimited range of such responses once its conventions are working freely, and it is for criticism to examine closely how a play blows hot and cold. McLuhan does not consider the theatre as a medium, for all it is the most ancient of the arts, and the most durable. Yet long after typographic man is supposed to have been thinking by linear reasoning, that of words spaced syntactically upon a printed page, the theatre persists in communicating by a simultaneity of sensory impressions. Now as then, it demands that its audience perceive its configuration, its *Gestalt*, of impressions. In its long history, the theatre has been at one time or another to a

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greater or lesser degree verbal in its methods and emphasis, but it has always excited its audiences by the immediacy of its stimuli. Imaginative immediacy is characteristic of the medium, and again and again down the ages the theatre has shown that the medium is the message.

The theatre reasserts that essentially primitive response to space and movement, colour and sound, the elements which literate man finds so alarming and perilous. For the spectator in the theatre scarcely reasons the relationship between king and beggar before he senses it in voice, posture, costume and the physical bond between them. He scans the picture as if he were many cameras with many lenses. Both in the conception and in the communication of drama, the picture must always anticipate the words, and by generalized impressions the spectator is powerfully prepared for the specific and incisive focus of the words. The study of the drama is the study of how the stage compels its audience to be involved in its actual processes. The spectator interprets and so contributes to and finally becomes the play, whose image is all and only in his mind.

It is this high degree of involvement which makes theatre at its best so appealing: yet not by encouraging such a kind of licence that the result is riot. The stage, with its mesh of strong sensory details, can exercise a superb control over the spectator, and flex it as the occasion demands. There are times when some of the dullest things in the world – husband talking to wife, Hjalmar Ekdal to Gina, or mother to child, Ranevskaya to Anya – can rivet attention, simply by allowing the audience to feed into a commonplace human relationship its own elementary knowledge of life. There are other times when word and deed can overwhelm by sheer inflammatory theatre, and leave the audience room only for passive assimilation. We are back with McLuhan's hot and cold: except that within the infinite elasticity of the theatre medium we must admit the fundamental and serviceable interdependence of these contrary elements. *Romeo and Juliet* opens with an impersonal and indeed metaphysical statement in formal sonnet form, which is then sharply brushed aside as the streets of Verona graphically illustrate the prologue's message.

Even at the level of clothes and paint and noise, the theatre bombards its audience with a hundred simultaneous capsules of information, anything capable of reaching the mind and imagination through the eye or the ear. The critic, equipped with literary apparatus, the linear logic of cause and effect, cannot cope with such an assault. Yet dramatic simultaneity, the synaesthesia of the senses and perceptions,

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is the object of study: for from it come the concepts by which the experience is to be judged, and by no other way.

McLuhan's guidelines and warnings (in *Understanding Media*, pp. 32–3), loaded as they seem to be with his freewheeling generalities, are nevertheless pertinent here. The effect of the form is not necessarily related to its content, nor does the effect occur at the level of 'opinion'; but the form *will* alter patterns of perception. Radio drama can immediately transport the listener into its special world of fantasy; music in drama can enlarge the perceptions by its extraordinary power of generalizing; the stylizing of high theatre can implant a unique degree of aesthetic detachment between actor and spectator to lead the audience to the apprehension of reality. 'Each form of transport not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message. The use of any kind of medium or extension of man alters the patterns of interdependence among people, as it alters the ratios among our senses' (p. 91). McLuhan's central assertion here is our springboard to an understanding of the particular things that happen in a play.

Aristotelian and linear thinking about drama, which seems to dis-entangle elements like plot, character and spectacle, theme and style, invites a degree of failure: this kind of information not only belongs to a world outside the theatre, but must remain at such a level of abstraction and fragmentation that it cannot account for what happens to an audience. Bernard Beckerman has described this as studying a play by 'striation': 'The habit of mind that chooses to treat a play as a collection of strands inhibits an appreciation of it as a sequence of total experiences. . . As a scene unfolds, it is impossible to know what is "plot" and what is "character"' (*Dynamics of Drama*, p. 36). A play's affective elements escape, the actualities which determine the moment-by-moment response. All theories of tragedy evaporate when Macbeth trips over the carpet or when Hamlet wears pink.

The critic must continually remind himself how complex an event is the play, how subtle the weaving that makes up the happening. Drama has its own discipline, one which is not an extension of that of literature. While it borrows from a dozen other arts, it owes allegiance to none. At its centre is the theatre experience, which is capable of analysis, recreation and judgment of its methods and purposes like those of any other art. The task is complicated, however, by the need to give attention to four distinct focal points in its

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composition: the writer's background and conditions of work as they affect the *conception* of the play, the book of the play – the arrangement of *words* he must substitute for his conception, the *performance* of the play with particular actors in a particular playhouse, and – most fickle of all – the *audience* to whom it is addressed.

Each of these constituents calls for close examination, leading the student perhaps into verbal, linguistic and gestic studies, an appreciation of allied crafts and arts like music and design, and into history and social philosophy, but always with reference to the central notion of a creative, living theatre. The discipline of identifying himself with author, director, actor or spectator, as preliminary to the critical evaluation of intentions and results, is the complete drama student's first and essential acquisition.

A play, in sum, is an historical event, and the focus of attention is the experience of that play in a particular time. The true student of drama will find a bad play to be as exciting as a good one, that in its time the failure of Goldsmith's *The Good-Natur'd Man* is as engrossing as the success of *She Stoops to Conquer*. For such a student, the doldrums of dramatic history are as worthy of his interest as the great periods of so-called flowering, and Victorian domestic melodrama clamors for attention as much as Shaw's attack on it. The implication is that, in a social and historical context, the audience – any audience – is as important as the playwright, however great.

If a play is a set of living, shifting relationships in a human, social situation, these relationships are painfully difficult to represent without some kind of inadequately diagrammatic suggestion laid out in three dimensions. The patterns which follow are an attempt to build up such a diagram in leaps of two dimensions at a time.

The irreducible theatre event is contained in these three elements:

SCRIPT ————— ACTOR ————— AUDIENCE

The playwright is setting down his play on paper works perforce by a code of words. The text is a coded pattern of signals to the actor, and the resulting performance is a further coded pattern of signals to the spectator. Any study of a play is impossible without an initial decoding of all signals, and the skill of decoding constitutes the introductory training of the student. It may seem that the primary evidence of the play resides in the most stable element in the line of

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transmission, in the script itself. But the script is not the play. The meaning of this evidence is deceptive since it is only to be found by constant reference to the interstices in the diagram, which represent the truly mercurial relationships:

- (a) the script's anticipation of the behaviour of the actor
- (b) the interpretation of the signals in the script by the actor
- (c) the quality and accuracy of the signals transmitted in performance
- (d) their reception or rejection in whatever degree by an audience
- (e) the actor's response to the reception of his signals
- (f) the flexibility or otherwise of the script under the pressure of performance

In fine analysis, it is clearly as important to know what is being returned by the spectator to the actor, and by the actor to the script, as to know the intentions of the script in the first place. Arguably, intentions are of no consequence whatsoever.

These elements are irreducible because they constitute the three living links in the chain. If they are examined individually, certain organs of vital function are found in each. Peter Brook has observed that words in a play are 'an end product which begins as an impulse. This process occurs inside the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor' (*The Empty Space*, p. 12). For some actors a script will be alive insofar as it offers particular opportunities for recreation: a viable characterization, in whatever mode, may be of first importance; or a particular kind of speech, perhaps helpful in tonal or gestic qualities; or clear signals for a dominant style or spirit in the playing. The student also, like the actor, will look into the lines and ask, Is this speech or is it song? He will wish to determine the mood and atmosphere of the whole. What order of life, natural or supernatural, is to be represented? What order of experience, comic or tragic or of any sort between, do the words try to establish? A script will answer most of such questions, and if it is alive it can be seized and invigorated by actor and spectator. If it is only partly alive, this also is important.

It is equally valid to determine the equipment of the actor in order to know the quality of visual and aural signals he could or should convey to an audience in performance. What result if Hamlet were old or Coriolanus a weakling? Even in the absence of histrionic possibility, sensory judgment can remain: as when one hears a child read Shakespeare's vividly textured lines or when a scene is presented

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in a classroom without a true stage/auditorium relationship, or even when a reader sits in his chair to read the text in silence. It is a poor play-reader who cannot gain some sense of what is required of the actor in mime, gesture, facial expression, kind of movement and characteristic style between dance and stillness, the decorum of the part. We can strain to recognize in the darkness of the text the signals of costume, its cut and colour, period and idiosyncrasy, with or without mask or make-up. We can to a degree imagine the appropriate human voice as an instrument for tone and attitude, even the manner of its delivery, realistic and introverted or explicit and projected.

It is not so easy outside the theatre, as Granville-Barker long ago pointed out, to see and hear in imagination two or more players working together. The life in a single character is determined by the better script to a good degree, although those early readers who thought of Lady Macbeth as in the spirit of a fourth witch must have been surprised by Mrs Siddons's tenderness: the spectrum of a great part can be proved only in performance. It is for the actor, finally, to crystallize the nature of the intended impersonation by revealing the measure of individuality or impersonality most apt for the representation. But in a busy scene only the stage can point and particularize the relationship of one character to another, or one to two or more, in their infinite permutations of age and sex, status social and moral, mood sad and joyful.

Discrete speculations about the audience are not easy, but are essential. At what time and place did it assemble? What of its size?—a mass audience made up of ones and twos for radio or television, or of tens of thousands for the ancient Greek theatre? What was the occasion of its assembly?—holy or profane, coming together at regular or irregular intervals? Its cultural assumptions, its social and political background: these must be known. Should we reckon with notions of the mass psychology of emotion, or of laughter; or distinguish between the response of women and men; or contrast that of the younger with that of the older generation? What are an audience's communal needs and wishes, and its mood at the given time? Synge's *Playboy* would be a different creature ten years later. Shakespeare required that Gloucester be tied to a chair for his blinding, in order to return the playhouse to the bear-pit, with the old earl pinioned and bound fast, 'tied to th' stake', with Cornwall and Regan yapping their repetitions, 'Wherefore to Dover?', like two dogs before they tear his flesh with 'boarish fangs' and send him off like an animal to 'smell his

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way to Dover'. What if a modern audience instinctively substitutes the image of the third degree for this *Gestalt* of Elizabethan bear-baiting?

Once these lively partners are identified, then some of the work of synthesis may begin. It may be necessary to ask to what extent the actor was aware of the condition of his audience, or whether the script was appropriate to the occasion. Did the characterization confirm the spectator's attitudes, or divide him against himself by some structural dialectic? Did the performance engage his mind or his feelings? Or both by calculated interaction? Did the signals of the script or the actor turn the mood in the auditorium towards a position romantic or realistic, comfortable or disturbing? Was the key-note spiritual or perhaps cynical? Was the final impact emotive and persuasive, or intellectual and reflective? All questions are proper which examine the inescapable ties between one partner and another in playmaking. And they all deal in practices, not systems.

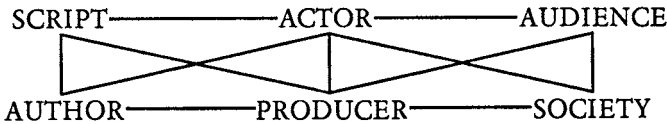
It is natural for the critic to wonder where along the chain is the point of creation. Is it in the conception of the script and its pre-judged effect? Is it in the moment of recreated meaning on a particular stage? Is it in the image of the play relived by the fusing of its elements in the mind of the spectator undergoing the event? Doubtless the writer should take first honours, but it is also true that a great play can provoke the finest performance and the most brilliant response. The apt analogy is that of film-making, where the creative explosion may occur in the scenario, or behind the camera, or in the cutting-room, or when the viewer makes a connection of his own. So, too, a play may cohere creatively by the choice of a verbal stroke in the script, or a compelling inflection of voice on the stage, or a sharp recognition by the audience. We may assume that Shakespeare intended to balance the positive sexuality of Lady Macduff with the negative sexuality of Lady Macbeth, but it is for the two players to strike the contrast and for the spectator to perceive the force of the relationship. The script separates to join them, like Theseus and Oberon, or Falstaff and King Henry IV, but only the interdependence of the parties to the play sparks the vision behind the experience.

The simplest ingredients of the play as an event are, however, complicated by other people and other factors. Behind the script there is an author; behind the actor there may be a promoter, a producer or

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a director; behind the audience lies a whole society. New relationships are involved, and the map of the play expands.



Whatever the 'new criticism' may say, a knowledge of each artist behind the artifact elucidates his creative contribution. The author's conditions of working, his status in society as a professional and as a person, the pressures upon him of implicit or explicit censorship by government or society, or the *Zeitgeist* encouragement of his artistic freedom, may not affect the experience of the theatre event, but it would be frivolous to deny that they penetrate to the core of the event itself. Some of these circumstances are self-imposed by his conformity or non-conformity as an artist; and knowledge of his personal philosophy, or religious or political position, or his stance for the occasion, must be of keen interest. If familiarity with every passing caprice of Bernard Shaw's mind has proved a distraction to the dramatic critic, what would we not give to glimpse a corner of Shakespeare's? Intention itself is to be scrutinized in its minute particulars.

There are few periods in the history of drama when it is unnecessary for the student to recognize the presence of a producer of some kind. A controlling influence upon performance has usually been identifiable – a priest, a master of a guild, a leading player, a theatre manager, an actor-manager, an impresario, a financier. But what degree of control? What was his purpose? What freedom did he assume? Who granted it him – the author, the text, the company, the audience? Was his the choice of play, the casting, the angle of vision, the emphasis of characterization or blocking, the tempo and spirit of the whole? What did the notion of loyalty to the text signify in his time? Not even the most ardent purist denies that the director's duty in the business of communication today is equally to author and to audience; but the balance is delicately subjective. The 'futurist' productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Granville-Barker with his stylized golden fairies (1914) and by Brook with his magic circus (1970) – both shockingly untraditional – were outstandingly true to the original because directed accurately at their contemporary audiences.

With the study of the society that a particular audience represented.