

## THiNKiNG about Writing about THiNKiNG about New Plays

Or, how visual arts audiences got comfortable with radical innovation, while theatre audiences didn't.

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It's easy to get discouraged about the theatre. What I find most discouraging (you may disagree) is the prospect of nothing ever changing about the way plays are imagined or written or written about or understood. How offputting it would be if the theatre just kept presenting the same kind of plays based on the same small set of templates-year in, year out, same as it ever was-while I grew older and older and finally...stopped going, I suppose.

But another part of me says that's nonsense. Theatrical experiment is thriving as never before: Why, in the past year alone in one little enclave by the Hudson River, we've had wildly unorthodox new plays (in the sense that everyone understands the term "play") from **Banana Bag & Bodice** [sic]. Sheila Callaghan, Erin Courtney, Will F.no, Madeleine George, Rinne Groff, Rob Handel, Ann Marie Healy, Julia Jarcho, Len Jenkin (a known offender against the cult of orthodoxy), John Jesurun, Karinne Keithley, Kristen Kosmas, Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson, Young Jean Lee, Ethan Lipton, Kirk Lynn, Richard Maxwell, Charlotte Meehan, Sally Oswald, Kate Ryan, Kelly Stuart, Alice Tuan. Anne Washburn, Mac Wellman (another known offender), Gary Winter-and who knows what-all elsewhere (for theatre is always local) across the land. Playwriting, it turns out, is in fine shape. The problem I'm really having is with the state of theatre criticism, which is largely unequipped to deal with this phalanx of new writers.

And no-I'm not going to say terrible things about critics.

But consider the case of Will Eno, who earlier this year received a truly jaw-dropping rave in the paper of record, the clear and stated purpose of which was to make everyone want to rush out and see *Thorn Pain* (based on nothing), which they did. And why would this be a bad thing? Well, the night I went, the audience was pretty much the sort of folks you'd expect to be shelling out 60 bucks for an Off-Broadway show-theatre veterans, happy to have a hot ticket-and no sooner had the play begun than a miasmic pall fell over them, and there they sat glumly for another 70 minutes, resisting the show with a dull ferocity until they were released. And as they trooped out, what they said to each other was some variation of: "I don't know what that thing was supposed to be, but it sure as hell wasn't a play."

An off-night, I am told. But even so, isn't this the Artistic Director's Nightmare? You do a risky play (and Eno's play is, inter alia, weird, unpleasant, irritating, aggressive, manipulative and, like his *Tragedy*: a tragedy, a theatre of absence and withholding rather than presentation and presence); you have a critic who understands and loves the play for what it is; and then your audience comes and hates it for the very thing it is. If this is what necessarily happens-and I believe most theatre practitioners in our country have this expectation, born, alas, of painful experience-then why bother?

Does this mean, then, that the great bold dream of the not-for-profit movement-of revitalizing an art form by expanding the definition of what's possible-stands now revealed, some 40 years on, as a snare and a delusion? Is it in fact the case that theatre is so locked into a set of expectations-about what a play is, about what audiences want-that it is effectively paralyzed?

Of course, at any point in time, any art form consists of expectations with established thresholds beyond which most people cannot readily be led-"The Shock of the New," etc.-and, by the same token, there will always be a handful of people poking around beyond those very thresholds, making unorthodox work, which at the time will appeal to only a few. The problem is not that there are limits. The problem arises when, over time, those limits never change. In other words, the problem of theatre isn't that audiences will only go so far, but that over time, and despite 40 years of effort, they still seem unwilling to go anywhere except where they have gone before. And this, rightly, is recognized by theatres and artists as a paralyzing condition which is bad for all concerned (especially theatres and artists, even if a preponderance of those theatres and artists are-at any given time-quite happy in the mainstream).

If the field as a whole cannot include the new-or can only include it so incrementally as to make it imperceptible and marginal and irrelevant-then the field as a whole is profoundly and inherently conservative. I believe even artists with little personal appetite for radical work find this prospect troubling. Which may be why any discussion of The Problem of New Work so often takes the form of bafflement yielding to truculence: "So, is this how it is? Well, okay, then-get used to it. Unless you've got a better idea...?"

The fact is that as long as the question is "How can anyone ever get an audience to accept and enjoy new and difficult work?", the cycle of frustration will be perpetuated, because the premise is based on the assumption that no one knows the solution. But once the question is reframed, and one inquires whether any other art form has faced a similar problem, the experience of 20th-century American painting surely becomes relevant.

I'm old enough to remember when educated Americans could claim, in print and for attribution, that Modernism (by which they actually meant an undifferentiated grabbag of styles from Picasso to Pollock) was a "fraud," something "a six-year-old child could do better." Today nobody would dare make that claim. Nobody, that is, who isn't prepared to be dismissed as an ignoramus or cultural provocateur (with Tom Wolfe's 1975 *The Painted Word* leading that particular Pickett's Charge). Nor is the reason mysterious. Wander into any blockbuster Modernist exhibit, and you will find little old gray-haired ladies going through the galleries, nattering on about "the flatness of the picture-plane." Once little old gray-haired ladies feel comfortable discussing the flatness of the picture-plane, you can't write off Henri Matisse as no better than a six-year-old.

Now I had to go to college and take an art history class to learn about the flatness of the picture-plane; where on earth do the little old gray-haired ladies come by it? No mystery there, either: They can simply rent a headset and let Philippe de Montebello tell them what it is, and where to look for it, and why it matters so. They have, in other words, been taught to use a few terms and concepts-just as I was, just as Philippe de Montebello was,

via the very process Robert Hughes describes in *The Shock of the New* (1981)-and, having acquired a handful of terms and concepts with which to discuss the work, they are suddenly and magically able to discuss and understand it-and, lo, the scales fall from their eyes and they see....

Starting shortly after the second World War, advocates of the visual arts in this country put an enormous amount of effort and energy into disseminating a core set of terms and concepts by which the "difficult" stuff could be discussed and understood. By the mid-1980s, their battle was essentially won, and the halls of the Guggenheims, Dias and MOMAs still swarm with gray-haired ladies and their descendants. Theatre, unless I have been missing something, has spent almost no effort or energy in defining, let alone disseminating, a core set of terms and concepts by which new plays might be discussed and understood. And I believe even the gray-haired ladies aren't subscribing the way they used to.

No museum of any size, no gallery of any importance, for heaven's sake, would mount a show without a catalog. And while a pricey museum catalog may sell on the basis of the souvenir value of the reproductions or its coffee-table cachet, the actual purpose of the catalog is to provide an essay that places the work-at-hand in the context of that shared set of core terms and concepts. In so doing, the catalog directly rebuts objections of fraud or technical incompetence. One need not read the catalog (I suspect hardly anyone does I; the catalog does its essential work merely by existing. The catalog stands as a sentinel; its mere existence demonstrates that the work-at-hand cannot simply be dismissed. The catalog raises the bar of the discourse; it sets the tone and chooses the weaponry. One cannot impugn (let alone dismiss) the art on the walls without going through the catalog, and the catalog gives no quarter. The catalog does not even pretend to be easy or simple. The catalog merely insists that you must respond, if you dare, on its own terms.

Not that the art world is incapable of hubris or folly: You can't plop Richard Serra's aggressive whorl of CorTen steel down into a corporate plaza without a reaction from the lunchtime crowds. You cannot really (and why was this ever a surprise?) expect the average sensual museumgoer to contemplate Robert Mapplethorpe's hardcore candid of sex on the pier without flinching. But these are tiny setbacks in an otherwise triumphal campaign for mass acceptance-a campaign echoed if not quite matched by similar efforts on behalf of dance, symphonic music, the novel and poetry. Which is why I humbly suggest that if little old gray-haired ladies can be taught to "read" Pollock and de Kooning and Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter and Dan Flavin and Donald Judd and John Currin (because even figurative art dare not venture forth without a bodyguard today), they can surely be taught to "read" Mac Wellman, Melissa James Gibson, Will Eno and stranger, wilder creatures.

A TRUE STORY: SOME YEARS AGO, THE WOOSTER GROUP WAS invited to remount *Rumstick Rojd* at New York City's American Place Theatre after its original run downtown. Artistic director Wynn Handman thought he could serve it up to his subscription audience, and I'd heard nothing but horror stories from my buddies in the Group-how almost as soon as the lights went down the audience started to get up and leave, continuing out in a steady stream until by the end there was hardly anyone left.

Imagine, then, my surprise upon attending a Wednesday matinee (!!) to find a crowd of fashionable middle-aged ladies not only sitting through the thing but paying attention and obviously having a grand time. This was so against expectation that I had to seek an answer, and it turned out they were a theatre group from Westchester whose leader had given them a little orientation on the bus ride down. Nothing, mind you, on the order of the "flatness of the picture-plane." The palpable pleasure these women derived from watching and "getting" the show-a pleasure indeed compounded both of enjoying the show on its own terms and feeling the self-congratulation which comes of "getting" something you've been told is "hard" and "difficult"-sprang entirely from this "explanation": that Rumstick Road a) was a piece about a mother's suicide, which b) was made by a younger generation of artists who c) had a lot of technology and media in their lives (hence all the tape recordings and slide projections and aggressive scoring) and d) watched a lot of television and liked to switch channels all the time (hence the disjunctive and associative structure of the piece).

That's all. Yet that simple and reductive explanation was enough to give the matinee ladies enough confidence to face Rumstick Road with the expectation that they would understand and recognize what the artists were doing. And sure enough-the lights went down and there were all the tape recorders and the slide projections and the loud blaring music and the mention of the mother's suicide and the jump-cuts between the scenes-and the women were so happy they practically cut each other off in mid-sentence trying to tell me that they enjoyed the show so much because it happened just the way they'd been told it would. This fulfillment of an expectation-their recognition of what they had been told to look for-was what made the show enjoyable. Whereas with Thom Pain it was just the reverse. There was an audience that showed up to see a play (in the sense that everyone understands that term) and found something different-something that in fact was clearly not a play (though it stands in a clear and complex relationship to the sense in which everyone understands the term)-and for want of a context-the shared terms and concepts-found themselves baffled and alienated, hating the experience of being there and thus hating the "play."

So, is it realistic to expect art theory in a daily newspaper? I will let you compare the level of art and theatre criticism in your local paper (I'd say the answer is a qualified "yes"), but the dissemination of shared terms and concepts doesn't depend on a newspaper. And am I seriously suggesting that difficult, strange new plays-plays that are not plays in the sense that everyone understands that term-can be presented to a mainstream theatre audience? I am, indeed-presumptuously and in defiance of everything everyone "knows" about theatre-as long as one adopts the tools and techniques of the visual arts:

1. Theatres must accept that the presentation of new plays is Smart Fun, and be prepared to promote it accordingly. Theatre is so afraid of seeming "elitist" that it often pretends to be dumber than it really is. then tries to mend the damage by claiming that somehow, within its precincts, the "challenging" will be made "accessible." Which is nothing but a fiddle, which an audience will recognize as a fiddle, thereby leaving all parties to the transaction feeling sheepish.

Is there really any reason not to appeal to intelligence-or at least, to the level of intelligence which is assumed, say, by the New Yorker or the New York Times Book Review? Is anyone likely to be put off by a presumption of intelligence? Is it possible that major American cities do not host even a few thousand people who would want to see new, strange, unusual plays-people who might find the very invitation bracing-as long as it came with the assurance that they would also be provided with the terms and concepts that would allow them to follow such current explorations at the forefront of theatre?

2. And this follows from the previous.) The enterprise is not the work itself; the enterprise is creating a context for the work. In fact, the context is even more important than the work, and this is true especially at places like the Performing Garage and the OntologicalHysteric Theater. Those venues are the context. Your experience of a production by Richard Foreman or Elizabeth LeCompte stands or falls by what you make of Foreman or LeCompte themselves (which is to say, the context). The piece itself-the actual lines spoken and actions performed on stage, the "content," if you will, or even, God help us, the "meaning" of the actual work-athand-is understood to be secondary if not irrelevant to the ongoing fact of the theatre and the artists whose work is shown there. The piece itself is just another instance of that true and ongoing work. So at any theatre presenting new plays, it must be the context that the audience is asked to attend more than any particular play. It is that context that the theatre, by its existence, proposes to establish-a context of explication-which must prove itself reliable and dependable and constant. Within that abiding context, the plays themselves will come and go.

3. Therefore (and this too follows from the previous), the context specifically must be, and be known to be, about providing ways to read and understand and discuss the work. Before spending money on production-even before spending money on development-a theatre devoted to new work should spend enough to commission serious and substantive critical essays by smart, literate thinkers, and these essays should all be published in a big fat catalog called the Program, and even effort should be made to get this 50-page booklet into the hands of anyone who buys a ticket-if they don't, in fact, get the thing in the mail beforehand. And these essays need to be top-drawer, high-powered, literate criticism-which doesn't mean they can't be fun and snarky and even perhaps a little heavygoing from time to time. Because, like the museum catalog, they are setting the terms of the discourse. I'm not suggesting anything approaching the current excesses of the MLA; plain English, finely wrought, will suffice. But the writing must show evidence of original thought, and it cannot, ever, excuse or plead or truckle.

When the New York City group Clubbed Thumb mounted its Wellman Festival in 1998, its program was a 50page brochure that included essays by the likes of Marjorie Perloff (though not the essay in question, her preface to Cellophane, available at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/articles/wellman.html>, should give you an idea of the level at which her argument was pitched). Is there any reason why major regional theatres can't engage leading critics, essayists, novelists, poets and playwrights for such a project? Can you imagine a season of new plays culminating in a combined catalog, now of booklength form, with essays by the likes of Camille Paglia and Luc Sante and Don DeLillo and Marjorie Garber and Tony Kushner and Joyce Carol Dates and Michael Chabon and Paula V'ogel and Daniel Mendelsohn and...?

Wouldn't that change forever the way new plays are presented?

And wouldn't that be pretty darn cool?

Jeffrey Jones's play *A Man's Best Friend* was produced by Undermam Theater in New York City this past March.