

THE CLASSROOM IS A THEATRE

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The theatre is a classroom. The notion has an ancient and honorable lineage, going back at least as far as Horace, who advises:

"You want to instruct or else to delight;

Or, better still, to delight and instruct at the same time."

The notion goes even further back through Aristotle to Aeschylus, the first great playwright. I'll be coming back to Aeschylus at the end of this talk.

A great many theatre artists and theatre teachers have given expression to the idea that the theatre is a classroom; my favorite is Shaw, who had this to say about his immensely successful play whose main male character was a professor of phonetics.

"I wish to boast that Pygmalion has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that great art can never be anything else."

I contend that theatre can't teach unless it delights, and I contend with equal vigor that theatre won't truly delight unless it also teaches.

So I teach audiences with my theatrical productions; I teach students who direct, choreograph, and perform in, design, and build my theatrical productions. and I also teach students in my classrooms to think about plays, and, more important, to think about what the plays are about.

Thus, in my teaching, I have three overlapping constituencies: my audiences; the

students who participate in my productions; the students who enroll in my classes. . . The first of these are the audiences who attend the plays I direct. For obvious reasons, I can't bring to this group and this venue a fully mounted play (though I do urge you to go to as many of our productions as you can).

but I can give you my director's notes for my two most recent plays.

The following two notes will give an imperfect but perhaps useful glance at how I use the theatre to teach, as well as delight.

I didn't direct Oedipus at Colonus; I acted in it. Yet it fell to me to write the following note:

Oedipus is a refugee. This fact alone makes Sophocles's ancient play urgently timely.

The terrified citizens of Colonus must decide whether they will welcome into their country this unclean man whom they believe to have committed notorious and shameful acts. Colonus is ably ruled by the King of Athens, a wise and compassionate leader, who decrees that Oedipus is indeed to be made welcome. In welcoming him, the Athenians secure a blessing to themselves and their posterity. It is virtually certain that the Athens of 401 B.C.E., the Athens in which this play was first performed, would not have made the refugee welcome. I leave readers of this note to ponder whether the United States in 2017 would welcome this tired, poor creature, this unlucky wanderer.

Oedipus at Colonus is not primarily a political play. Like all seven of Sophocles' surviving plays, it is a tragedy of rage. It is also a tragedy of redemption: redemption partly earned but mostly given by the awful grace of the gods.

We know little about Sophocles, but our little knowledge can lead to informed speculation. In what follows, I will speculate; if nothing else, my speculations will provoke arguments in the post-show talk-backs and beyond.

Sophocles was nearly ninety when he was at work on this, his final play. He must have known himself to be near death. He must have known as well that Athens would suffer humiliating defeat in the war in which it had been engaged for the last quarter century--and with that defeat the experiment in limited Athenian democracy would come to an end. Perhaps Sophocles knew that he would not live to see the defeat, nor would he live to see this final play performed--perhaps he did not know whether this play would ever be performed. In the event, defeat and tyranny came in 404 B.C.E. about two years after the playwright's death. By 401 B.C.E., the year in which this play was posthumously performed, a sort of tentative and limited democracy had been restored to Athens, but the great age of Athenian democracy, together with the great age of Athenian tragedy, was over.

Sophocles had been born, ninety years earlier, in Colonus. Perhaps the obscure legend that Oedipus had a hidden tomb in Colonus, and that this secret tomb provided generations of protection to Athens, first drew the playwright's attention to that terrible

story that he would tell in three of the greatest dramatic masterpieces we have.

Returning at his life's end to that story, the playwright bids an elegiac farewell to Athens and to Colonus. He gives us, in Theseus, the archetypal depiction of the capable leader--so unlike those execrable Athenian leaders the play's first audience would have known. He also gives us, in Creon and Polyneices, depictions of the lying, blustering leaders who would lead Athens to defeat and tyranny. Oedipus warns that "even the best-governed cities are turbulent," and the Athens of 401 B.C.E. was among the worst-governed cities. The blessing and protection that Oedipus' bones had afforded for so long had finally run out.

I tell my theatre history students that great plays are those plays that speak most strongly to times and places far different from the times and places during which they had been composed. I leave it to listeners to this note to ponder whether we are as near as was that unhappy audience in 401 B.C.E. to the end of our experiment in democracy.

I wrote that note in February, 2017. That October, I directed the world premier of a play called *The Bone Bridge*. Here is my note on that play.

The Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of New Hampshire is honored to be offering the world premiere of Trina Davies' play *The Bone Bridge*, which takes as its subject the heart-wrenching aftermath of the genocide and associated crimes committed by Serbs against Bosnian Muslims during the 1990's. We present this play, winner of the Woodward International Playwriting Prize, through the auspices of Cultural Stages: a program one of whose purposes is to give "UNH theatre and dance students the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of other cultures and societies by seeing the world through the eyes of the characters they portray." Moreover, Cultural Stages offers the entire UNH community the chance to increase their awareness and deepen their understanding of cultures and societies with which they may not previously have been familiar.

I experienced firsthand the absolute necessity of the Cultural Stages program when I taught *The Bone Bridge* in two of my courses last spring. With perhaps one or two exceptions, my students were ignorant of the crimes committed against Bosnian Muslims, and without exception, my students were appalled to learn that such crimes had been committed so recently. My students are emphatically not at fault. Their not knowing this sorry history stems, I think, from the fact that so many Americans at the time turned away from the war and genocide in Bosnia, and the related fact that most Americans kept our eyes and minds averted during the intervening years. Maybe we are fatigued and numbed by the many criminal acts of hatred that have befouled what Bertolt Brecht has called the great and ghastly twentieth century, and that are befouling the perhaps even ghastlier century that is following it. Maybe we Americans are ashamed because Americans and their European allies responded so badly to the war crimes in Bosnia while they were being committed.

Yet it has never been more necessary for us in the United States and here in New

Hampshire to become aware of these events as only theatre, in its fierce urgency, can make us aware. You will hear speeches by the Serbian Leader and his followers that will sound painfully familiar to you, because you have heard so many similar sentiments, expressed in similar language, during the recent political campaign and its aftermath. As I write this, we are learning of crimes against Muslims in Myanmar that eerily repeat the crimes against Muslims that we experience in this play.

The United States is not taking the road to genocide that was taken by those in Bosnia and now in Myanmar, but there are warning signs in Charlottesville, as well as in Claremont, New Hampshire, and right here in Durham. With each passing day, this play seems painfully more timely than it seemed when I first read it in the summer of 2016 as a member of the Woodward Prize Committee.

Though the play deals with war crimes and their consequences, these crimes are not its primary subject. The play takes up the even more difficult subjects of reconciliation, healing, the difficult business of getting on with the fragments of damaged lives, the heroic attempts to fashion those fragments into a new whole. To invoke the words of T.S. Eliot, a great poet whose response to the genocide of his time was, to say the least, equivocal: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

My teaching of audiences who choose to come to my shows is necessarily indirect; either they'll read these notes, or they won't; either they'll be taught, as well as pleased by the shows or they won't.

More direct is my manner of teaching students in my rehearsal rooms and in my classrooms. First, the rehearsal rooms.

I spend a great deal of pedagogic effort teaching students to speak verse both passionately and correctly: augmented, of course, by the superlative voice teaching of Deb Kinghorn and my other colleagues. I won't go into detail about that here. I will note the absolute necessity, when directing Shakespeare productions--or indeed any productions--of leading students to understand as clearly as possible what they are saying, why they are saying it. More than that, I need to persuade students to feel through their own imaginations, through their own bodies, the urgency, often the pain, of what they are saying. Two examples:

In one of the great speeches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a speech often trimmed in production but NEVER in mine, the queen of the fairies addresses the terrors of a changing climate. This may be the first climate change speech in imaginative literature. Shakespeare really is for all time.

Therefore the Moone (the gouernesse of floods)

Pale in her anger, washes all the aire;

That Rheumaticke diseases doe abound.

And, thorough this distemperature, wee see
The seasons alter: hoary headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lappe of the Crymson rose,
And on old {Hyems} chinne and lcy crowne,
An odorous Chaplet of sweete Sommer buddes
Is, as in mockery, set. The Spring, the Sommer,
The childing Autumne, angry Winter change
Their wonted Liueries: and the mazed worlde,
By their increase, now knowes not which is which:

My initial appeal was to the actor's imagination. I wanted her to imagine what it might be like to feel in her own body those rheumatic diseases attacking her joints. How would it be if an icy murderous shock attacked her own lap. The fresh lap of the crimson rose would, of course be painfully killed by the frost. The compelling rhythm of that line would underscore the pain and shock.

The word "frosts" occurring at the end of a line, immediately followed by the alliterating "fall" at the beginning of the next line requires the speaker, without taking a breath, to supply a new burst of energy to get from the end of a line to the beginning of the following line. I and many other teachers of verse speaking compare this to the enormous energy required at the crest of a hill.

Add to this the alliteration of frost, fall, and fresh. And add also the strong stress at the end of a line followed immediately by an even stronger stress at the beginning of the next line. "Frosts fall" will hit the ear with a double blow. Made aware of Shakespeare's sonic and imagistic strengths, the student performer, any performer, renders the lines in all their inherent power.

And finally--and this wasn't at all a stretch for any student's imagination, there is the terror caused by an altering of the seasons: anyone who has experienced a spring day, as we all recently did, in February, or an icy wind chill in May, will need no extra help from me to make Titania's mighty lines come to life in the ears and imaginations of audiences.

Last spring, my colleague Deb Kinghorn and I prepared the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice* for an event celebrating the new partnership between the English Department and the law school.

I have argued elsewhere, and I won't repeat those arguments here, that *The Merchant of Venice* is not, as many still think, an antisemitic play. It is a play about mutual hatreds,

and about how those hatreds poison and diminish all those who hold them.

I want to draw attention to a few lines from one of that scene's crucial speeches. It's a speech that generations of school children had been made to memorize. One of those school children was the young Ruth Bader, and Justice Ginsberg, recalling that early exercise in memorization in a superb film on Shakespeare and Memory on which I was also privileged to work, points out that the speech is fundamentally contradicted and finally undone by the sting of Jew hatred at its core. Portia, the speaker of the speech, is herself a hater.

Putatively, the speech is a famous plea for mercy:

It is an attribute to God himselfe;

And earthly power doth then shew likest Gods

When mercie seasons lustice. Therefore lew,

Though lustice be thy plea, consider this,

That in the course of lustice, none of vs

Should see saluation: we do pray for mercie,

The position of "We" in the line of verse indicates that the word requires a strong stress; I would add a slight raise in pitch to the stress; "we do pray for mercy." The rhythm of the line suggests that "we" in this case Portia and her kind, are setting ourselves apart from the others; the Jews, who don't pray for mercy.

The word "Jew", alliterating with the nearby word justice, falls at the end of the line: the strongest position in the line. The tenth syllable of a line of blank verse almost always requires a strong stress.

Thus, the actor must hit the word Jew with considerable force: the verse rhythm requires it. If words could kill, this word would kill. The actor who speaks the speech must utter the word with the needed thrust of contempt and hatred similar to the contempt and hatred inherent in the way some Americans, too many Americans, speak words that begin with N or M. The realization to which Deb and I, working together, sought to persuade the student speaker of the speech is that it isn't a speech about mercy at all; it is a speech of hatred.

(Justice Ginsberg, by the way, notes that no competent jurist would have accepted that notorious contract involving a pound of flesh.)

And now, graceless segue, I turn from the students who choose to partake in my productions to the students who voluntarily or semi-voluntarily choose to enter my classroom which, I contend, is at least part theatre. I aim to instruct, of course, but I also aim to delight or, better yet, to delight and instruct at the same time. I suspect there is

an element of performance, a hope to delight a little, in any classroom whatever the subject. However, I also recognize that my proposition that the theatre is a classroom will generate, has generated, its share of controversy. My classroom at any rate is at least part theatre; if I manage to entertain students, perhaps to delight and even occasionally move students, I have a better shot at leading them out, at educating them.

I try to teach students to read and think about plays and--more important--to think about what the plays are about. There is no area of human endeavor that the theatre does not touch; so to teach and learn about theatre is to teach and learn about every aspect of human life.

I contend that there are two fundamental reasons why anyone would go to college: to learn as much as we possibly can about ourselves (the unexamined life is not worth living) and to learn as much as we possibly can about the scarily changing and complexifying world in which, Heaven help us, we will have to live.

As my friend Cecilia Rubino, Professor of Theatre at the New School with whom I collaborated on the Tiresias play, is fond of saying: there are no dress rehearsals for life. However, in learning about the crises that characters in plays cause and suffer, we may get a sort of preview glimpse of our own crises--and we may come to know just a bit more about ourselves, and about the world we will have to navigate. .

All this is by way of saying that theatre is a fundamentally important and useful subject, whatever one is studying. Theatre teaches us about ourselves, and it teaches us about our world. I teach a great many theatre majors, and I also teach a great many students from across the university.

I use plays as points of entry into complex and fraught topics.

Examples:

One can't think of the pain and joy of marriage in quite the same way again, after one has read and absorbed Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. One can't think of the pain of exile in quite the same way again after one has read and absorbed Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, whose protagonists live in a nameless town and yearn with diminishing hope to get back to their imagined Moscow. "Give those girls a railway ticket" snarked Chekhov's younger contemporary Gorky--well knowing that a railway ticket wouldn't have solved their problems, answered their prayers.

So when I team-teach Humanities courses on marriage, I persuade my co-teachers to begin with Ibsen; when I team-teach Humanities courses on exile, I persuade the team to begin with Chekhov. I may have gone over the top a couple of years ago when I persuaded the Humanities team to teach a course on kin, country and cosmos, built around all three of Sophocles' plays about that famously kinky Theban family.

At the center of Ibsen's *Doll's House* is an absolutely revolutionary idea--unthinkable and unimaginable until Ibsen thought of it; imagined it. Nora leaves her marriage not

because her husband is cheating on her or abusing her, but because she cannot, confined by her marriage, find and achieve her humanity.

"Helmer. First and foremost, you are a wife and mother.

Nora. I don't believe that any more. I believe that first and foremost, I am a human being, just as you are--or at least that I must try to become one."

Those two lines of dialogue, immensely powerful in their simplicity as is often the best dramatic dialogue, provide the keynote for a course that takes in the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision on same-sex marriage, a couple of chapters from Mary Wolstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and Euripides' Medea, among other works.

As we begin a course contemplating those three women who live in a nameless town whose proper name has to be exile, we know that we can proceed to learn about other persons, both real and imagined, who believe themselves to be on the wrong side of whatever border they happen to be near. (We taught this course a few years ago--given the contemporary hue and cry over borders, it's probably time to trot out this course again.) We included Edward Said's meditation on being Out of Place, the massive book on the great migration called The Warmth of Other Suns, the Book of Ruth, and the final book of Paradise Lost--that describes perhaps the most painful exile of all.

I hope I haven't merely browbeat the wonderful colleagues with whom I have taught in Humanities over the past quarter century, but I hold it as a self-evident truth that a play can and does provide the best point of entry into the examination of just about any human problem.

Because there really is no area of human endeavor that the theatre does not touch, my courses on Theatre History are actually courses on human history. There is perhaps no better point of entry into religious controversy, religious hypocrisy--then and now--than Moliere's Tartuffe; no better examination of the terrible anguish brought about by the universal thirst for revenge and its concomitant costs than plays about Hamlet or Orestes. It is in plays, first by Aphra Behn and later by Shaw that readers and audiences are forced to contemplate the uncomfortable truth that many marriages, then and now, are in fact financial transactions. We may quail at first when Angelica in Aphra Behn's play or Mrs. Warren in Shaw's play develop the argument that marriage is often a form of prostitution, but as the plays proceed, we find ourselves, against our wills, taking those arguments seriously. In teaching these plays, I perforce urge students to think about and think through these most painful of topics.

I always begin my theatre history courses with Aeschylus--the first great maker of tragedy. I want to end these remarks with two bits of Aeschylus.

Early in the tragedy of Agamemnon, always the play with which I begin in my course on Theatre History, the would-be leader of the Greek forces poised for Troy is given a stark choice. His navy is stalled, becalmed with no wind in the bay of Aulis, his promise to launch his thousand ships to rescue his brother's wife unkept. As his restive men watch (this is vividly described and enacted by the chorus) a pair of eagles swoop down and tear to pieces a pregnant hare--killing her and her unborn young. The prophet Calchas gives Agamemnon to understand that the eagles represent the would-be general and his brother, and that the pregnant hare represents all the women and children who will be slaughtered if the war is launched. If Agamemnon truly wants to bring his armada to beset Troy, he must suffer in his own family something of the pain he and his warriors will inflict on so

many other families. If he murders his own daughter, he will get a wind. This is not a matter of inevitable fate. Agamemnon could choose not to launch the war. As Louis Macneice puts it in his translation, Agamemnon sacrifices his virgin daughter that he may launch a war for a runaway wife.

Theatre always asks hard questions beginning with the phrase "what if?" The great actor and acting teacher Stanislavsky calls it the magic if. What would I do if I were that character in those circumstances? What if everyone who wants to launch a war must, as Agamemnon does, inflict the pain of war on his own family? Would you send your own children to this war? I remember the furious response when Michael Moore asked exactly this same question in his 2003 film about the launching of the Iraq war. That's an object lesson about how dangerous a twenty-five-hundred year-old play can be.

Let me conclude with one more bit of Aeschylus. Later in that same chorus that describes and enacts Agamemnon's choice and his murder of his daughter, the chorus expatiates on how we truly learn. I quote from Robert Fagles' translation, and then, as I do in my course, from the perhaps outdated translation of Edith Hamilton. Here is Fagles:

"Zeus has led us on to know,
the Helmsman lays it down as law
that we must suffer, suffer into truth."

These difficult words I think are suggesting that we can only truly learn from our own suffering.

I tell the students in the honors section of theatre history that on the night of April 4, 1968, coming up on fifty-one years ago now, sitting senator and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy had to tell a largely black audience in Indianapolis that Martin Luther King had been murdered. As we listen to Kennedy's speech today, and I require my students to listen to it, (it's readily available on Youtube) we cannot but respond with that onrushing terror that, as Aristotle teaches, is one of the effects of tragedy; because we know that, within two months of delivering that speech, Kennedy himself will also be murdered. Kennedy quotes that passage of Aeschylus, in the Edith Hamilton version, to his stunned audience:

". . . knowledge won through suffering.

Drop, drop—in our sleep, upon the heart
sorrow falls, memory's pain,
and to us, though against our very will,
even in our own despite,
comes wisdom
by the awful grace of God."

Kennedy slightly misquotes Edith Hamilton; he is quoting from memory, and it doesn't

take a theatrical imagination to apprehend that he is under considerable stress. Here is what he actually said--perhaps, a some argue, improving on Hamilton:

"Aeschylus once wrote,

'And even in our sleep,

pain which cannot forget

falls drop by drop upon the heart,

until in our own despair,

against our will,

comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

We can't know if Kennedy's quotation from Aeschylus provided even a grain of comfort to his audience. But that Kennedy chose to draw on these words from an ancient tragedy at such a terrible moment suggests that, perhaps, he at least hoped there are other ways of learning than through our own suffering. There are no dress rehearsals for life--but maybe theatre can provide the next-best thing. What if, instead of always having to suffer ourselves in order to learn, what if we could try to learn from the sufferings of this great parade of imaginary creatures? Perhaps by taking part in what theatre can teach as it delights, we can learn at least something from the sufferings and joys of Hamlet, of Hedda, of Harper, of Hester, of all those vividly depicted people whose terrible and wonderful stories the theatre continues to tell.