

What is theatre about?

Battle of Ideas - Eventos Satélite 2011

DEBATE SEG 3 OUTUBRO

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What is theatre about?

I'm the outsider to this debate as I'm neither Portuguese nor a theatre professional. I have been concerned for some time though about an increasing degree of instrumentalism in the arts in general and demands for the arts to be socially and economically useful as well as their subordination to political ends. I think theatre is very much a case in point so am glad to be given a chance to discuss it.

The question, what is theatre 'about', is a very difficult one. What I'm going to say in trying to answer it can only be very provisional, broad-brush stroke and I know that there are a lot of exceptions - in terms of theatre that doesn't conform to the sketch I'm going to give.

It is such a difficult question that it is very tempting to refuse to answer it. The Irish poet and playwright, Brendan Behan, when asked once what his play *The Hostage* was about, what was its message, is said to have replied: "Message? What the hell do you think I am, a bloody postman?"

Now, this answer does not mean that theatre, or that play, is not about anything. Just that there is no direct and guaranteed communication between the vision of the playwright and the audience.

Yet, I think we can say that theatre is about two things:

1. a vision of the playwright, his subjective judgment, about a bit of the world, a story if you like; a vision made real on the night by
2. its critical reception by the audience, through the active exercise of judgment by the audience

Theatre should, it seems to me, present itself to the audience to judge it and also ask that they, in the light of what they have seen, judge themselves, reflect on who and how they should be in this world.

So, I don't think theatre works politically in an obvious, direct, or programmatic way. Certainly not in terms of delivering a political message (e.g. racism is bad) easily or in being sure of making any difference.

'About' Today

Yet people keep trying to use theatre in this way. Last year in Britain, admittedly it was a general election year, but still there were a lot of political plays. D C Moore's *The Empire* (about the British war in Afghanistan), Anders Lustgarten's *A Day at the Racists*, David Hare's *The Power of Yes*, Lucy Prebble's *Enron...*

I could go on.

This year we have had Moira Buffini and others doing climate change with *Greenland* and Philip Ralph's *Deep Cut* about bullying.

These 'about' plays cover war, racism, corporate greed, bankers, big oil and other assorted evils.

Not only are they plays about something they think is wrong but they run in seasons organised like academic conferences. I quote: "The Bush presents The Schools Season: *The Knowledge* by John Donnelly and *Little Platoons* by Steve Walters." The season examined education in Britain today and featured a series of talks, debates and events...

Joining the fashion for pre- and post-performance talks just in case the message of what the play was about didn't get rammed home in the actual performance.

Much like what has happened to documentary films which are nothing these days without a message and an associated online campaign you can sign up to support.

All very worth and do-gooding, often very boring, but, but, are they any good?

As well as theatre 'about, we have a lot in Britain of what is called verbatim theatre which affords us the 'privilege' of hearing the voices of war-torn civilians or rape victims, in their own words, with no intervention by the playwright apart from selecting those voices that seem most true to him.

Undemanding in terms of story-telling for the playwright but demanding that we empathise with these voices and feel their pain.

In fact the proponents of verbatim theatre, like David Hare, argue explicitly that its "function is to keep society healthy." Theatre, in this conception, is to act like a purgative, a drug, or like therapy.

Demanding, not that we judge, because this is the raw truth we are hearing after all remember, verbatim, word for word, but rather that we feel the right degree of shame and guilt, that we feel for the victims, that our comfortable bourgeois liberal identities are shaken and undermined.

This mission, this desire to shock our complacency or even complicity, has actually been the *form* of what theatre is about for a long time, at least in British theatre. There has been a steady and increasing trend post-war to shock, break every taboo and offend every sensibility.

While there was censorship of theatre, until 1968, this made more sense maybe. But if we take the broad view, consider Brenton's *Romans in Britain*, Berkoff's *East*, Mamet's *Oleanna*, Brook's *Marat/Sade*, the work of Joe Orton, the adoption of Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', or more recently, the In-Yer-Face theatre of Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping & Fucking*), Sarah Kane (*Blasted*), or Anthony Neilson (*Penetrator*), we can see that there are no depths that have not been dredged. The extremities of human experience have been exposed and everything dragged through the gutter leaving nothing noble, no heroes on stage. We have seen rape, torture, anal sex, naked actors humiliated, drug addiction, cannibalism: nothing has been off limits in this relentless drive to shock.

The often puerile, infantile even, drive to always be different and offensive, never recognisable and enjoyable, is above all a desire to shock and, I think, to shake and undermine adult authority. It can be defended by its proponents as a radical form of shock therapy but I think it is better understood as deeply hostile to judgement and authority. Not a radical consciousness raising exercise but an assault on our senses and reason.

As in war, shock, the emotional, psychological, punch in the gut, is designed to render one incapable of critical judgement, to make one react without thought. To surrender and accept that what the play is saying about something is true.

This is to make theatre into an instrument, a weapon in fact, designed to force our acceptance, and not to appeal to us to think.

'About' Yesterday

Actually 'shock theatre' is not that new. Bertolt Brecht, writing in 1935/6: "The stage began to be instructive. Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation."

He allowed that theatre must be entertaining but thought it could also be instructive, scientific, and, of course, famously, alienating.

This may have made sense in the context of pre-war class struggle and later in the German Democratic Republic but today, when a group of players in London, The University of Strategic Optimism, smash into a branch of Lloyds TSB with the slogan “You marketise our education, we educate your markets”, ‘instructive theatre’ is no more than criminal damage and adolescent vandalism: not political.

Brecht, by the end of his life, did realise that a change of direction was needed, maybe through his realisation of the nature of the GDR and experience of Stalinist repression. He called for a theatre of dialectics that would reinstate narrative and speculation, the abstract, in drama, not just experience and calls for practical consequences.

Importantly, he heavily caveated his belief that the theatre could still reproduce the present-day world. It could, he said, but only if the world was understood as being capable of transformation by its audience.

And, today, I would say, we do not – in the context of the philosophy of ‘There Is No Alternative’ – think that the world can be so transformed. In fact the prevailing wisdom is that attempts to change the world are too risky, the unintended consequences too grave, that economic growth does not make us happy and destroys nature. We are told to settle for less, to curb our freedoms, our drinking, smoking, and so on.

So, maybe theatre doesn’t work anymore.

‘About’ Tomorrow

Against this backdrop, I wonder if it is instructive, although I am not an existentialist, to revisit the thinking of Sartre and the existentialist theory of theatre: as still standing in the grand tradition of representational theatre. If only to see if the balance between appealing to the free choice of the audience and a desire to shock them can be reset. If theatre could have a brighter future than continuing down the road of shock and in thrall to the ends of social utility.

For Sartre, Camus, and Gabriel Marcel, theatre tried to show the tragic responsibility of human freedom through dramatizing what real human beings do in the difficulties and contradictions of concrete situations, in the real.

For them it is the role of the playwright to reveal their vision of the world, to tell their story, through its staging as an *appeal* to the audience, an appeal to their responsibility to decide who they want to be: morally, ethically and politically.

What does this mean? The best example for me, and we should bear in mind that Sartre et al stressed the importance of going back to the Greeks, of standing within a tradition of theatre stretching back to Aristotle, is the tragic figure of Orestes.

He murders his mother Clytemnestra – wrong.

Yet avenges the death of his father Agamemnon – right.

He is simultaneously right *and* wrong which seems the definition of a tragic hero. And it is noteworthy that, in the *Oresteia*, there is no human resolution to this conflict represented within the drama. The jury in *The Eumenides* split 50/50 on his guilt, leaving the goddess Athena to acquit him.

In this dramatization of a real conflict we can see a confidence on the part of Aeschylus in the audience of free Athenian citizens to judge for themselves, an appeal to them to decide what the balance should be between the claims of law and of custom.

I wonder if it might actually be radical for theatre today to bring back a degree of storytelling? To have a beginning, a middle, and an end, characters, plot, and to move away a degree from fashionable hostility to such ‘naturalism’?

Fears and hopes

To conclude with what I see as the main dangers for theatre that insists on being so shockingly 'about:

- That it perpetuates a view of people as victims, not as actors in the broadest sense of free human agency
- That its messages are tailored and shaped to fit the (propaganda) objectives of funding bodies, i.e. the state.
- That it does nothing more than pander to the prejudices of a very like minded theatre going audience who get the frisson of seeing 'racism' and 'rape' up close and leave comforted in the knowledge that it is not they that are the rapists or racists.

How might it be different?

- With a commitment to produce theatre that is good – and entertaining – in its own terms, not a means to some other end, be that social or political or whatever
- By stimulating honest and intelligent criticism: for example, dropping the critics star rating system which encourages laziness in both critic and theatre-goer
- By experimenting with new writing in an 'old' way: producing plays that do have a beginning, a middle and an end, that form an artistic unity representing the playwright's vision and, thereby, offer themselves up to criticism and judgment

And, finally, maybe, as a way of resetting the balance in a theatre which has become human, all too human, in its determination to show the horrors of life, we should look for ways to recapture the magic of theatre, the element of the divine.

David Mamet has said the "theatrical interchange is a communion between the audience and God, moderated by a play or litany constructed by the dramatist."

I think there is a metaphorical truth in this in so far as theatre is able to show both something about the world we live in *and* our ability to represent that world at the same time. If the experience of going to the theatre is, as Sartre had it, a 'directed creation', then there is something divine about the stage: man creates a world for men, showing us what is often beyond judgment, like Orestes, yet demanding judgment nonetheless.

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