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Morris Freedman

## Violence in the Modern Theater

### NOTES ON THE NEW SENECAISM

A FEW YEARS AGO, an off-Broadway group in New York called The Living Theater crystallized, or perhaps anticipated, a trend by producing two works that attained national notoriety, *The Connection* and *The Brig*. The first depicted a group of dope addicts awaiting the arrival of their necessary provision. The second was a literal, moment-by-moment record of life in a service prison camp; that is, the prisoners were themselves Marines who had broken some military law, and their guards were fellow Marines.

For *The Connection*, the theater was made virtually part of the stage: the action started in the audience and moved across the footlights, the curtain was never lowered, and members of the audience on occasion expected the characters to come down among them and panhandle to pay for the delivery of the awaited heroin. (In his review, Lionel Abel suggested that it might have been especially effective "to announce that anyone seated in the theatre had a right to a shot of 'horse.' Actors could have been stationed in the audience who would respond, and we would have been fascinated by the possibility of being in the fix too.")

*The Brig* was impressive in the amount of sheer noise and energy it generated: the humiliating shouting of the prisoners when making the simplest requests, the banging of garbage cans, the hitting of men and objects; the play was, among other things, a violent assault against our usual level of decibel tolerance.

For all of their documentary appearance, perhaps precisely because of it, the two plays' forms, tightly observed the simple classical unities of time, place, and action. The time was equal to chronological time; the setting remained the same; there was a single action and tone. Yet there were no other qualities of the classical drama: no hero flawed

by hubris or hamartia, no peripeteia, no deus ex machina (unless Cowboy, the Negro dressed in white who delivers the heroin, can be considered as such). The plays could have started earlier and ended later and might have included any other group of men. The Living Theater might as readily have been called Theatrical Life. Not so irrelevantly as might first seem, the group had its actual demise in a spectacular public event when police closed down the box office for nonpayment of taxes.

What was the point of these plays? Both were marked by frequent outbursts of savagery and by a coolness toward excesses that by itself, to use Kenneth Tynan's word, was "shattering." In both works, toilets were prominent in the setting. The language was bluntly direct and obscene. The candor was total. Lionel Abel suggested that the audience at *The Connection* was itself looking for a fix, to make connection with a meaningful experience, to find some stimulation in the theater that carried over into their lives. Robert Brustein suggested that, to the extent the audience got caught up in the action, it was itself "motivated by a voyeuristic interest in freak shows," that to the extent it believed in the reality of the characters, it was violating "their privacy." Tynan, Brustein, and Abel each emphasized the honesty of the work and its close connections to what we think of as "normal" life.

The acknowledged pretense of Broadway theater, which is to say of conventional American drama, was no longer capable, however skillfully it broke down for the moment any suspension of disbelief, of provoking the necessary visceral response preliminary to genuine sympathy and catharsis. (Not that it didn't try. Miller's *After the Fall* is an exhausting, pleading harangue to the audience for understanding and exculpation by the main character.) But the new Senecans are trying to bring the bull pit into the theater; unlike Shakespeare, they are not merely going to compete with bearbaiting and other forms of actual bloodletting. The eye-gouging and limb-amputating in Shakespeare were to be only a small part of the make-believe to satisfy audiences expecting genuine gore.

In our time, the Broadway theater has become too sharply separated from other forms of American mass entertainment. There is a total abyss between it and wrestling matches, rodeos, prizefights, and those multitudinous other events that attract crowds throughout the country to covered tents or large open fields. Because drama is so specifically literary, made up of words arranged in an order, we separate theatrical

drama from the drama of life. But there is a continuum between Ugo Betti's *Corruption in the Palace of Justice* and the transcripts of the Congressional hearings involving Frank Costello, the late Senator Joe McCarthy, the present Senator Dodd; between the Philadelphia, Mississippi, lynching of a Negro boy and his two white companions and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie*; between LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* and the Newark riot.

The recent phenomenon of "happenings," a little old-fashioned by now if not altogether played out, indicates the need to look in reality itself for theater. It is fashionable to speak of "making the scene" as though we are indeed walking into a theatrical setting.

Much recent modern drama has returned to the Senecan practice of showing on stage offstage acts of violence. Today the audience is invited to share in the bloodletting. Gorki's *The Lower Depths* or O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* aimed at involving the audience atmospherically rather than literally. Today we become accessories, witnesses. In Albee's *The Zoo Story*, we see a character stabbed to death; similarly in Jones's *Dutchman*. Instances may readily be multiplied.

Curiously, one might argue that these particular violent acts are not significant in and of themselves; they give special meaning to the central action. When Grandma slowly buries herself alive while lying in a beach sandbox, the process of the self-immolation seems to be the point rather than simply the final asphyxiation. In *The American Dream*, the epitome of young American manhood occupying the center of the stage in a golden glow, all muscles flexing away simultaneously, talks at length about his physical dismemberment by his parents because of his infantile interest in his sexual parts. Whitney Balliett, writing in *The New Yorker*, remarked on the "forbidding" presence in *The American Dream* of "the butchery and perversion of the Greek theatre." The anatomizing of the peculiar yet powerful marital relationship in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a prolonged and excessively clinical study of the tortures and horrors of a domesticity built on suppressed but necessary brutalities in the given circumstances. The play gives us the raw material traditionally antecedent to familiar tragedy. We never see Captain and Mrs. Alving confront (or affront) one another in Ibsen's *Ghosts*; what we see are the ultimate consequences of what we surmise must have been as mutually abrasive and destructive a daily encounter as that between George and Martha. Harold Pinter, too, specializes, as in *The Caretaker* or in *A*

*Slight Ache*, in the immediately mysterious and frightening emanations of the directly clinical.

We should not respond to the new Senecan plays as a group. The horror, the shock, the sadism in many is frequently and in good measure gratuitous; the lunatic excesses in *Marat/Sade* (*The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*) are those of the carnival sideshow, isolated, ends in themselves, animated figures out of the wax museum. One of the most immediately offensive of recent works, on the other hand, is LeRoi Jones's *The Toilet*, whose very title has the quality of Senecan shock. With a title like that who needs to read the play to get the point? But it also happens to be, in its final effect, one of the genuinely touching plays of the modern Senecan repertory. The details of the play are loathesome, but in totality it breaks through our instinctive revulsion and engages our sympathy. (As Hoyt Trowbridge once argued, may not Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," about a rape by an animal of a human, be "sublime" in the original Longinian sense? Neither content nor form can predetermine aesthetic achievement.)

*The Toilet* is especially effective in outraging expectation, in disarming our resistance. How are we to have the arms we throw up to shield our vision twisted so painfully behind our backs that we acknowledge and then regard the toilets of our civilization? The new Senecanism may have other intentions and other effects, but the insistence on holding an unsparing dialogue with the audience seems paramount. Pirandello, of course, also put a burden of responsibility on the audience for the action on the stage. He anticipated the current Senecan fashion of forcing the onlooker—in *It Is So! (If You Think It is So)*, for example—to share in the thoughtless lustfulness and then the frustration of the privacy-invaders on the stage. Brecht's alienation effect, Artaud's theatre of brutality, the absurdists, also recognized that audiences had to be first invited, then forcibly compelled to participate in the ceremony of experience in the modern theater.

The theater of violence makes the stage a part of life and finds in life its own stage. In Genet's *The Blacks*, Archibald, the master of ceremonies, directly confronts a member of the audience, invites him into the action and viciously rejects him, offers him a stick used in a stage ritual, then violently takes it back and cracks it in half. We are not different from the actors on the stage, nor they from us; what hap-

pens there happens here; as we surround the action in an arena stage, it surrounds us. (Negroes at performances of *The Blacks* muttered revival-like calls of approval at the nightly ritual murder of a white woman.) In Albee's *Tiny Alice*, the sickness on stage is communicated in waves outward, enveloping us, for as the tiny replica of the house on stage reproduces in miniature the action taking place around it, so the microcosm of the actual stage, we sense with nausea, may be reproducing the action of the total house we are in, balcony, lobby, street, city, nation, and all.

One of the most shocking, classically Senecan plays of recent times does not involve persons at all. *Motel*, one of the three works in *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude Van Itallie, portrays a male and a female manikin who enter a motel room to the accompaniment of the recorded monologue of the lady motel manager, proceed to copulate, draw dirty pictures on the mirror, then tear the place apart, including the figure of the droning motel manager, dismembering her totally, even her head covered with hair rollers. (Here, too, incidentally, the toilet is important. It "flushes of its own accord," the recording assures the manikins. "All you've got to do is get off. Pardon my mentioning it, but you'll have to go far before you see a thing like that on this route." And indeed the sound of the flushing can be heard at appropriate intervals. The toilet seat itself is ripped off in the course of the vandalism.)

Robert Brustein, in his review of the play, later published as the introduction to the trilogy, speaks of *Motel* as "based on a metaphor so powerful that it may well become the objective correlative of the Johnson age. . . . Vladimir Nabokov effectively used motel culture, in *Lolita*, as an image of the sordidness and tastelessness in the depths of our land; Mr. Van Itallie uses it as an image of our violence, our insanity, our need to defile. He has, in short, discovered the deepest poetic function of the theatre which is . . . to invent metaphors which can poignantly suggest a nation's nightmares and afflictions. These metaphors solve nothing, change nothing, transform nothing, but they do manage to relax frustration and assuage loneliness by showing that it is still possible for men to share a common humanity—even if this only means sharing a common revulsion against what is mean and detestable."

That the new Senecanism reflects some deep-seated and even popular need of our time may possibly be demonstrated more vividly through Michael McClure's *The Beard*, an extended theatrical meta-

phor (to use Brustein's expression) about two American culture heroes from widely separated periods and entirely different contexts—Billy the Kid, the young New Mexican killer of the nineteenth century, and Jean Harlow, the quintessential and reputedly sexually insatiable movie star of our own century. *The Beard* may be described, before anything else, as self-destructive by its own nature, like those pieces of mechanized sculpture by Jean Tinguely which operate slowly toward their own extinction.

The play is of such a character, in vocabulary and climax (the only significant action comes at the end; all else is a nearly static dialogue, although there is some movement by the two principals and at one point Billy the Kid tears some of Jean Harlow's clothes) as to demand almost immediate closing down by the authorities of whatever establishment in which it is performed. It provokes an immediate cathartic reaction to itself, overflowing with the sorts of obscenities and exchanges, blunt, monosyllabically Anglo-Saxon, simple and simple-minded, the vocabulary of toilet-wall graffiti, which are normal idiom only in the depths or on the outskirts of our familiar, polite society.

It is repetitious in a compulsive, palimpsestic manner; the underlayers are images of the top surface of shallowness and constricted mindlessness, the result of the public and long sustained nurturing of that selfishness which can so readily reduce our popular culture heroes to puppets who destroy themselves by believing in themselves. The final scene is explicitly sexual, including an act declared by statute to be illegal in most parts of the United States.

Yet the work is obviously metaphorical and can hardly be described by any usual theater-goer as erotic—any more than those fornicating manikins in *Motel* are erotic. The monotonous, near-moronic, childishly chantlike exchanges between Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow in their tinsel heaven have nothing to do with any recognizable, documentary reality. The intensity of their sustained mutual insulting of and swearing at each other is reminiscent only of other metaphorical situations, those in *Waiting for Godot* or in *No Exit*. It seems to me extravagantly over-responsive to surface to allow anger or outrage to blur the horror, the abominable extremity of their fate, of what consciousness must be like in eternity for the doll-like creatures who have greatness thrust upon them by what, in context, is clearly a rotten, increasingly rotting culture.

The police, the uniformed and thus immediately identifiable representatives of the establishment, will have nothing to do with Cole-

ridge's injunctions about responding to poetry. They believe, they believe. They act on what they see and hear, on the evidence, on what can be recorded on tape or on film. They do not look for symbol. They purge society of what is clearly antisocial or extrasocial; this is their role, and their playing of it may be a guide to what is literal, to what precedes any larger vision. In its immediate purgative effectiveness, in its insistence that it be taken in the first place literally, works like *The Beard* may be measured by almost objective, quantitative standards: how fast before the fuzz moves in to arrest actors and audience? Lenny Bruce's performances met the same criteria.

*Saved* by Edward Bond, a British play, was refused "a license for public performance . . . as it stands," an introductory note to the published text tells us. The situation which made the play offensive, causing some members of the private audience to rush out of the theater vomiting, was the brutal pummeling and squashing to death of an infant in its carriage by a group of British hoodlums. Actually, in the context of the work, the murder of the baby is, as in so many other modern plays incorporating forms of violence, on the edge of the central action, the attempt of the central character, Len, to keep himself attached to a family arrangement.

Part of Edward Bond's prefatory comment to *Saved* may suggest some of the intentions of the new Senecanism. "*Saved*," he says, "is almost irresponsibly optimistic. Len, the chief character, is naturally good, in spite of his upbringing and environment, and he remains good in spite of the pressures of the play. But he is not wholly good or easily good because then his goodness would be meaningless, at least for himself. His faults are partly brought home to him by his ambivalence at the death of the baby and his morbid fascination with it afterwards. . . . The play ends in a silent social stalemate, but if the spectator thinks this is pessimistic, that is because he has not learned to clutch at straws. Clutching at straws is the only realistic thing to do. The alternative, apart from the self-indulgence of pessimism, is a fatuous optimism based on superficiality of both feeling and observation. . . . [Len] lives with people at their worst and most hopeless . . . and does not turn away from them. I cannot imagine an optimism more tenacious, disciplined or honest than his . . . the murder of the baby shows the Oedipus, atavistic fury fully unleashed. The scene is typical of what some people do when they act without restraint, and is not true just of these particular people and this particular occasion. Everyone knows of worse happenings. This sort of



fury is what is kept under painful control by other people in the play, and that partly accounts for the corruption of their lives. Clearly the stoning to death of a baby in a London park is a typical English understatement. Compared to the 'strategic' bombing of German towns it is a negligible atrocity, compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant."

ART DOES MORE THAN REFLECT REALITY; it also does more than record it. Art sometimes gives us a way of understanding reality, of assimilating it to some order and informed apprehension that provide a comfort of feeling or of understanding or, ideally, keeping in mind Eliot's objection to the dissociation of sensibility, of both. In an affluent society we can buy not only forms of happiness but also the means to insulate ourselves from feeling altogether. All art must shock *le bourgeois*, the middle-class establishment, one way or another, before it goes on to do other things, including the offering of pleasure. Picasso's *Guernica*, as horrible as it is carefully ordered, if it satisfies in any aesthetic way at all does so because of its truthfulness as well as its excess. Senseless, unmotivated, casual, frivolous, profitable, self-indulgent brutality, murder, torture in the world at large do not penetrate our usual defenses because they are unstructured, inorganic, accidental; organized forms of man's inhumanity to man, like concentration camps, atomic explosions in populated areas, war itself, we exclude altogether as threats to our esteem and psychic well-being, for they are sanctioned by society. It is possible for the serious playwright today to take on Senecan techniques in small, realistic situations (or in large but metaphorical ones) more readily than to take them on in the dimensions called for by concentration camps, apartheid, Latin-American dictatorships, the Vietnam confusions. But always the immensity of the larger world looms over the stage; we focus on the microscopic disordered cell, for we sense that it is organically linked to the larger cancer.

Drama in any age has a social dynamic. It is not critically heretical to remark that some of our leading Senecans today are or have been activists in violent affairs, Jean Genet, LeRoi Jones, Joe Orton, Norman Mailer. The gulf between the ideal and the real, between the best for man and the worst, is visibly getting wider. Simultaneously, we are being forced to become more aware of that gulf. It was in South Africa, the only country in the world today where human beings are by law defined to lack even minimal human capacities or needs, that

the first successful heart transplant was sustained. Progress in the Western world to minimize pain and discomfort of every sort has been enormous, an achievement that makes all the more dismal our failure to ease poverty, illiteracy, human disfranchisement generally. Our affluent Western society, to labor the point, has marvelously learned to anesthetize itself. It has not learned altogether how to kid itself about all the abominations. However reluctantly, someone is paying attention to the new Senecans; we can't imprison every Lenny Bruce or LeRoi Jones, and we cannot always defend ourselves by charging with sickness all the writers who speak to us disturbingly. The Jonathan Swifts will be heard in any age.