CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHridge

A DIRECTING THESIS PRODUCTION OF
THIS BUSY MONSTER MANUNKIND

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in
THEATRE
by
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January, 1975
The abstract of Michael L. Newell is approved:

California State University, Northridge
December, 1974
INTRODUCTION

Twentieth century theatre has experienced an ongoing argument between those who would use the stage to replicate the externals of living, and those who would make the stage into a world where the irrational substrata of life are peeled back and examined. The former group is vulnerable to charges of photographic and phonographic realism. The second group seems inclined towards marvelous pagentry without content, or towards content spilled out without form or discipline. Its movement and staging are often obscure, and intelligible speech frequently seems to be taboo.

If contemporary theatre is to be healed into a complete organism, certain steps seem vital. Theatre must value the irrational, but not self-indulgently. It must bring the irrational before the stark eye of human reason and vice-versa. The entire organisms of human beings, both theatre artists and audiences, must be affected. The most useful tool for doing this is one which would combine discursive and non-discursive features in a mind-engaging, imagination-liberating experience, i.e., a poetry of movement linked to a poetry of sound and word. A poetry of movement has been found, or at least techniques for approaching poetry of movement have been articulated.
in the avant-garde (theatre of the irrational). Outside of Shakespeare, however, little English language drama would qualify as both interesting theatre and genuine poetry; and the problem with Shakespeare is finding a way to make him come alive in contemporary terms. This does not seem an impossible task, but, with certain notable exceptions, contemporary theatre artists have not revealed skills adequate to this ambition.

How, then, is the impasse to be broken and verbal poetry made into a vital feature of contemporary theatre? A way is suggested in the work of the Open Theatre, the Polish Lab Theatre, and by such productions as Peter Brook's US, and Orphast. Several useful features are to be found in this type of work. Its forms are non-linear, non-narrative, cinematic, and alogical in nature. Form becomes abstract in the manner of modern painting. Content is evolved by groups of actors working under the supervision of directors, with or without the alliance of sympathetic playwrights. When playwrights are involved, their function is to articulate concerns explored by the actors and to give those concerns a theatrical shape. In these groups and productions, movement becomes "visual poetry", resembling such highly expressive physical disciplines as dance, mime, gymnastics, and the work of clowns. Poetry of movement, or visual poetry, does not lend itself to a neat definition. Perhaps a useful way to approach this concept is to use an example given by Artaud in *The Theatre And Its Double*, where he refers to the, "... Oriental language which represents night by a tree on which a bird that had already closed one eye is beginning to close the other." In other words, what is being sought in the avant-garde theatre seems to be a kind of kinetic hieroglyphics.

One reason speech is treated with contempt in the avant-garde theatre is suggested by Peter Brook in *The Empty Space*, when he makes reference to the currency of language being debased by politicians, Madison Avenue, and such popular entertainment forms as television and radio. Throughout our society language is used as an instrument of suppression, hucksterism, and self-aggrandizement; and our all-pervasive mass media are geared to the lowest common denominator of thought, feeling, and aspiration.
At all levels of society language takes on features that are expressive, neither of thought, nor of individual personalities. Street language takes on a kind of inarticulate mass mouthing of the latest catch-all phrases. The mass media all sound but one step removed from the hucksterisms of Madison Avenue with a semantic blandness that is designed to ensure that the general population continues to sleep-buy all the latest products of government, business, and academia. What has been ignored by avant-garde theatre artists, however, is that many of our best twentieth century poets share their concerns and have exhibited great power and deftness in their use of language.

A possible healing agent for the crippled speech of contemporary theatre might be suggested at this point: the welding of poetry selected from contemporary sources to the rehearsal and production techniques of the avant-garde that were discussed earlier in this paper.

A way of working is being suggested here, wherein actors and a director collaborate on exploring a theme, and where carefully selected poetry is fed into the working process by the director as a means of giving powerful verbal expression to concerns dealt with in hieroglyphic physical terms. A wedding of verbal poetry to a poetry of movement is what is being sought. Poetry of movement suggests kinetic metaphor, paradox, irony, imagery, and texture of a fresh order, and the verbal poetry must be of a like nature. If fresh possibilities for language are to be found, poetry seems the most likely source; because it is among our best poets that compression and originality of language are most in evidence. If vital theatrical expression is to be found, it must be at a point where movement and the word can meet as equals in their quest to liberate the imagination.

I. THE PROJECT

An M.A. Thesis Production was performed in the Studio Theatre at California State University, Northridge on May 17, 18, and 19, 1974 at 8:00 p.m. Performances also were given at 1:00 p.m. on May 18 and 19. Production funds were supplied through the Student Laboratory Theatre Board. The production was cast in February of 1974, and the rehearsal period ran from mid-March to the date of opening. The production was an experiment along the lines suggested above.
A. The Concept

The concept underlying the experimental production can be stated thus: poetry can be used as an alternative to the conventional playscript in the creation of a theatrical production. This entails clustering poems around a group theme, and rehearsing and staging those poems with techniques akin to, and derived from, those pioneered and articulated by such persons as Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin, and Peter Brook in the area of non-verbal theatrical expression.

This implies the need for a special approach to working with actors, an approach that is geared to allowing the actor considerable latitude in the creation of the theatre expression, i.e., the production. This latitude includes actor input in theme selection, as well as actor input in the areas of selecting literary works or company-created material to be used in the production.

What is also implied is a style of presentation that requires more than ordinary actor control of body and voice.

B. Implementation

The production was cast with students of the California State University, Northridge, Department of Drama. Actors were sought who showed certain discrete qualities: 1) the ability to move with control and imagination; 2) vocal instruments adequate to the demands of poetry; 3) some sensitivity to poetry as interpreters; 4) an ability to work with other actors without excessive ego-assertion.

Ten actors were cast, seven females and three males. The male-female ratio is not indicative of directorial prejudice or theatrical need, but merely reflects the sexual demographics of the Drama Department.

The production was created over an eight to nine week period. Initial work consisted of sensitivity exercises, physical self-awareness exercises, and ensemble exercises in improvisation. The composer, scenic and costume designers, and technical directors were encouraged to participate in these exercises and frequently did. This led to an unusual rapport between actors and other members of the production unit.

Another feature of the early work was exploratory discussions focusing on theme. The basic theme of man's search for a humane way
to survive, was articulated by the director and reflected his own philo-
sophic concerns. The cast helped define which dimensions of the theme
were to be explored.

Because of time limitations, the theme was articulated by the
director, as opposed to a theme being conceptualized by the group.
This same lack of time led to the director's increasing assertion
of personal vision as opposed to the evolution of a genuinely collective
vision. Group input into the creation of an original theatre piece
never ceased, but it took the form of helping find theatrical expression
for the director's vision, rather than creating a collective vision
as such. The attempt to find visual analogues to poetry woven around
a theme was carried out, but not as a realization of group concerns.
Instead, the conceptual framework was directorially provided. However,
the creation of stage-images adequate to the conception was frequently
a collective achievement.

C. The Final Product

The end product was a rather interesting failure. The interest
lay in some innovative orderings of theatre space, striking ensemble
stage images, and in an unusually ambitious attempt by composer and
director to merge music with the rest of the theatre spectacle on
a rather large scale.

The failure lay in an inability to find an adequate structure
to unify the thematic elements, and in actor shortcomings in areas
of physical, vocal and interpretative control.

The failures were a direct result of the limited rehearsal
time, and of certain directorial limitations. Although poems were
being shuffled around and deleted, and new stagings and interpretations
were being developed right up to opening night, there simply was not
adequate rehearsal time to restructure the show after its weaknesses
became evident. Further, there was not sufficient time to train the
actors vocally or physically, even with the help of a talented
associate director who had considerable expertise in solving movement
problems. Beyond the time limitations, the director and his associate
had certain limitations of knowledge, particularly in vocal areas.
This created distinct difficulties in solving certain acting problems.
II. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. The idea of merging poetry with visual analogues in a collective effort of actor, director, designers and musicians, is worth further exploration.

2. Time should not be permitted to be a factor. The state of the group work should determine projected performance dates, rather than letting the work be warped by fixed temporal boundaries.

3. There is need for occasional contact with audiences over a period of months to provide a testing ground for the work while in progress.

4. To succeed in this form of theatre, actors need considerable training in dance, gymnastics, and ensemble non-verbal improvisation.

5. Actors need considerable training in voice production, voice placement, and diction.

6. The function of a director in this kind of work should be primarily to focus the group's explorations. He should, however, be competent in all areas of actor training.

7. Theme selection and development should reflect collective needs and visions rather than the needs and visions of a single autocratic visionary.

8. An academic environment tends to vitiate the theatre energies of those involved in work like this, by making too many demands on actors' time. This kind of work needs a group who can be together over extended periods with theatre as their sole interest.