

Jump Up, Shake Around

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But no honey-tongued persuasion,
No smooth words of artful charming,
No stout threats shall loose my tongue,
Till he loose these bonds of insult,
And himself make just atonement
For injustice done to me.

-Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound (450 B.C.)

The best work of three major American playwrights--Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Arthur Miller--was first produced while I was in high school. It was, therefore, too recent to be included in those midcentury English classes.

Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter, Albee were produced after I had completed college. If I were not an English teacher I would probably never choose to read their plays nor would I see them performed on stage.

Most adults do not buy plays to read nor do they frequent the community theaters, if there are any. They do not read plays because they were never convinced that a drama script deals directly with the condition of their lives. They do not attend plays, in part for the same reason, but also because they never had adequate opportunity to appreciate the dramatic appeal of the live performance.

The high school generation we are now teaching will likewise be culturally deprived in relation to such playwrights of their time as Sam Shepard, John Guare, Terrence McNally, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Arthur Kopit, Robert Montgomery, Paul Zindel, C.J. Burton, Charles Gordone, Lonnie Elder III. Our students will escape exposure to the works of these men, and any knowledge of their plays will be via the filmed version or the television special in the next decade (i.e., The Price, The Andersonville Trial).

One can test the validity of this assumption by asking any friend, young or old, what he has seen or read by any of the first five playwrights in the preceding paragraph. All wrote plays which received critical acclaim and have either been performed in Minnesota or are available in paperback. To continue the experiment, one can ask his older friends the same questions about Albee or Pinter. The rule of thumb seems to be: If not in high school, then probably never.

We need to remind ourselves of the purpose and power of drama as a performing art of special relevancy to the here and now.

No portion of literature is connected by closer or more numerous ties with the present condition of society than the drama. (Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America [New York: Vintage Books, 1954], p. 84.)

The human condition, Heidegger says, is to be there. Probably it is the theatre, more than any other mode of representing reality, which reproduces this situation most naturally. The dramatic character is on stage, that is his primary quality: he is there (Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel [New York: Grove Press, 1966], p. 111.)

The theater has much in common with other media. What is peculiar to it is the flesh and blood encounter of flesh and blood human beings. (Eric Bentley, The New York Times, August 30, 1970.)

. . .the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions-- and to laugh at it. That is the cause to which, in their various individual, modest, and quixotic ways, the dramatists of the Absurd are dedicated. (Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd [New York: Anchor Books, 1961], p. 316.)

We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all. (Antonin Artaud, quoted by Robert Brustein, The New York Times, March 28, 1971.)

We need to make some judgements and take some risks to bring more contemporary drama into our courses. And we need to reexamine our method of studying drama. We want students to read novels and short stories and poetry on their own initiative outside of class, and to continue to read all their lives. We want to involve them in drama in the same way, and it is obvious we seldom succeed in this objective. If one asks young people where they went on the weekend, the answer may be a rock concert or a movie, but rarely is it to the theater. True, there is tremendous competition from the electronic media. But if the human experience revealed through the dramatic moment on stage is as vital as we believe it to be, then surely this moment has an attraction for our young in an age of public passion and instant react.

Part of the dramatic power lies in words, But the total impact depends on several other factors. the artistic unity provided by the director, the skill of the players, the set and lighting --each contributes to an appreciation of the whole.

"The theater is an exciting place to be," says Paul Hecht, 29-year-old actor who left a starring role on Broadway to play Cyrano at the Guthrie theater. "The theater shouldn't be intim-

idating. You shouldn't go thinking it is your cultural evening out." (Barbara Flanagan in the Minneapolis Star, June 3, 1971.)

There are obvious alternatives to beginning a study of drama by reading from a text. The NCTE research report completed by James Hoetker on classroom study versus theater attendance is a timely one. (Language Arts Newsletter, Minneapolis Public Schools, March-April, 1971, pp. 6-7.) Granted, one study may not be conclusive, and limitations exist in any given school situation, but the results certainly indicate the need for a wider exploration by other teachers.

In the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area we have a theater garden in which few of us stroll with our students. This opportunity is apparently part of a healthy nationwide trend. In U.S. News & World Report (May 4, 1970) it was pointed out that "original plays are premiered in communities where professional performances were rare a decade ago." Certainly the development in the mid-60s of the Guthrie Theater with its classical repertory program and the Firehouse Theater with the avante garde reflect the growing opportunities outside of New York.

During the 1970-71 season in our metropolitan area we had from six to twelve different productions on any weekend. One could have experienced Sophocles, Moliere, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Brecht, O'Neill, Cocteau, Genet, Beckett, Pinter, Albee, Jean-Claude von Itallie, Elder, Kopit--and some of our local playwrights (Ball, Gaines, Lehr, Nasanow, Ne, Priest).

The Guthrie Theater is a familiar place to many teachers and, happily, to a significant number of students. It has a special office to help high schools utilize not only its performances of the classic plays but also its professional staff. The lesser-known offshoot of the Guthrie, The Other Place, has had some operating problems, but does attempt to bring some of the newer plays, including those by local playwrights, to the community.

Minneapolis' Theater in the Round and St. Paul's Chimera Theater both offer a variety of experiences--comedy, musicals, serious drama. The Children's Theater under the direction of John Donahue has earned a national reputation, with productions that appeal to youngsters of all ages. Frequently they work with adaptation of American classics such as Huckleberry Finn or Little Women. Their summer workshop for young people has extended its influence into the schools, and the staff has been especially cooperative.

The University of Minnesota Theater, now in its 40th season, has the staff to produce a continuing program of quality drama. The techniques at the University theaters are likely to appeal to the young people. And the University is likely to come up with something like Charles Nolte's A Night at the Black Pig Inn, an original based on the events surrounding the 44th birthday of August Strindberg. Or David Monasch's staging of The Eagle With

Two Heads, with the audience shifting rooms for the two acts. Or a group of former San Quentin prison inmates, The Barbwire Company, touring with their message. These experiences do much to serve as a springboard for discussion.

Hamline University has two theaters, Edyth Bush and Drew, where last November one could choose between the Williams classic, The Glass Menagerie, or Stoppard's recent experimental work, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Last February Macalester College was host to the American College Theater Festival for the Minnesota-Dakota area, bringing six quality productions to their fine stage. Of particular interest for discussion was the University of South Dakota entry, Arthur Kopit's Indians, which critic John Lahr ranks as one of the finest American plays of the last two decades.

The "new" theater of the 60s, the efforts to form ensemble groups and to create a freer, improvisational form of drama that often brings the actors into the audience or the audience onto the stage, was represented originally in St. Paul's Fire House Theater. The Minneapolis Ensemble Theater now offers this type of avante garde drama. Because of its style and the immediacy of its social commentary it has special appeal to young people, but its candid representation of life will raise questions about its suitability.

George Kaufman, one of Broadway's most famous comic writers, told us, "Satire is what closes Saturday night." (John Lahr, Up Against the Fourth Wall [New York: Grove Press, 1970], p. 78.) Not so for Brave New Workshop. Its lighthearted view of the current scene in a series of dramatic sketches might be contrasted with the heavier approach of Jules Feiffer's The White House Murder Case, presented last year by the Theater of Involvement. One tends to think of Feiffer as primarily a cartoonist, but Lahr states, "Already blessed with a buffoon's resilience and the ability to take risks with his vision, Feiffer has all the assets to become one of American theater's major craftsmen." (Ibid., p. 94.)

Comedy seems to be the forte of the commercial theaters such as the Old Log, and the Chanhassen Frontier, and the Friars Dinner Theater. These theaters usually offer special matinees at reduced prices for student groups.

One can find drama which appeals to young people at the community theaters: the North Suburban Community Theater, the Lakeshore Players at White Bear Lake, the Jewish Community Center, Theater 1900 at the Plymouth Congregational Church. And perhaps the energy and original purpose of the play as communiator to the people is captured in the occasional efforts of such groups as the Shoestring Playhouse, the Potpourri Players, or the People's Playhouse.

Teachers in schools outside the metropolitan area will need to explore first what theater might be available near their communities. But if one accepts the value of the direct involvement through attendance, it should be no great problem to schedule a long weekend in the Twin Cities for students in advanced classes. By leaving Thursday noon and returning Sunday, they would find it possible to attend three different performances. If one objective of our English courses is a greater awareness and understanding of others, it would seem logical to work out arrangements for visiting classes to be guests of various metropolitan classes. This would eliminate some of the expense, and, hopefully, be an educational experience for both host and guest.

Instead of a text, the guide to current drama becomes the Entertainment and Arts Section of the Sunday Minneapolis Tribune. The reviews of Mike Steele, Peter Altman, and Ed Bolton provide some guidelines. A general reference available in paperback might be The Third Theater by Robert Brustein, Dean of the Yale School of Drama.

Direct involvement with our theaters and their personnel should become a vital part of our study of dramatic literature. At the same time we should consider our classroom approach. To appreciate the dramatic whole, we can suggest that the student attempt the actor's task, without grading or demanding perfection. This would involve the reading of lines, a technique which is being utilized. But the emphasis in contemporary theater is frequently on motion as well as sound. It is on improvisation as well as the prepared script. This is the New York influence of the Living Theater's work, and its offshoot, the Open Theater, and the excellent productions of Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Lab Theater. Such acting crafts lend themselves to simplified classroom participation. Sound-motion exercises and improvisations can be developed at any level if they are properly introduced.

An effective approach to the study of drama, therefore, would begin with the performance aspect. There would be immediate involvement through sound-motion exercises and improvisations; attendance at the professional, university and amateur theaters; and visits at school with theater personnel. Then the group would turn to the literary aspect and read and discuss whatever plays the teacher believes important. Hopefully, the students would be able to see the play come alive as they read.

This would move the secondary schools in the direction that many colleges and universities have taken in the past decade. Recognizing the incongruity of study which separates the performing and literary aspects of drama, they have formed theater departments and achieved educational respectability for this discipline. Edwin Pettet, Chairman of the School of Dramatic Art at Brandeis University, states, "Presently more than four hundred colleges and universities confer the baccalaureate degree upon students with a concentration in the theater arts, and one hundred eighty-five offer the advanced degree of master of arts or doctor of philosophy

in theater." (Alan S. Downer, The American Theater Today [New York: Basic Books, 1967], p. 184.)

The establishment of term or quarterly electives and the flexibility of modular scheduling lend themselves to this approach. There would be additional opportunity for independent study or playwriting after introductory courses. Some excellent dramatic dialog can be developed from articles such as those in the New York Times Magazine, and the step beyond dialog is full script.

Edward Albee, in an interview in the New York Times (April 18, 1971), suggests, "Serious theater is meant to change people, to change their perception of themselves." If we accept that as one legitimate objective of our study of drama with our students, we first need to change our method of experiencing drama so that it becomes a dynamic portrayal of the human condition.

I know how the caged bird feels,
I look out,
from behind the bars,
into the grinning faces of my masters,
feel their cooing whistles,
teaching me their songs, their pretty melodies,
but I don't learn them.

(from The New Chautauqua written by
Fred Baines for use by the Any Place
Theater in the streets of the Twin
Cities, 1968)

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Bentley, Eric	<u>What Is Theatre?</u>
Blau, Herbert	<u>The Impossible Theater</u>
Brustein, Robert	<u>The Third Theatre</u>
Downer, Alan	<u>The American Theater Today</u>
Esslin, Martin	<u>The Theatre of the Absurd</u>
Gilman, Richard	<u>Common and Uncommon Masks</u>
Kernan, Alvin	<u>Modern American Theatre</u>
Kerr, Walter	<u>Thirty Plays Hath November</u>
Lahr, John	<u>Up Against the Fourth Wall</u>
Lewis, Allan	<u>American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre</u>

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