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The New Theatre of Europe, Volume 4

An Anatomy of Drama

Martin Esslin

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HILL AND WANG • NEW YORK
A division of Farrar, Straus, Giroux

Foreword

me. And as a working director I am equally compelled to think of the plays I am confronted with in terms of practice rather than theory: how to make them *work*. Most practical and pragmatic decisions of this kind are based on experience which has become second nature and which operates on an almost subconscious level. What I have here tried to do is to raise the essential content of that instinctive, experiential knowledge to the level of consciousness, capable—I hope—of being communicated.

I make no claim that the insights this effort has produced differ, essentially, from much that is accepted academic doctrine. But perhaps the process of reasoning and recall of past experience through which they have been reached may make the old, established insights appear in a new light; and a few new angles may even be added to their understanding. Where my conclusions differ from established academic thinking, they might perhaps lead to a new look being taken at some aspects of it; after all, theories must from time to time be tested through practical experience.

At the same time, because I have tried to keep to simple and basic considerations, I hope the book may serve as a useful introduction to the study as well as practice of drama.

The first impulse to write such an introduction came when I was asked by the Open University to contribute some talks to their drama course. I am grateful to Dr Helen Rapp of the BBC's Open University unit who acted as producer for these radio talks and greatly helped me with advice and criticism.

London, April 1976

Martin Esslin

1 Definitions, delimitations

Many thousands of volumes have been written about drama and yet there does not seem to exist one generally acceptable definition of the term. 'A composition in prose or verse', says my edition of the Oxford Dictionary, 'adapted to be acted on the stage, in which a story is related by means of dialogue and action, and is represented, with accompanying gesture, costume and scenery, as in real life; a play.' Not only is this long-winded and clumsily put; it is also downright incorrect. 'A *composition* in prose or verse' seems to imply a text previously composed, so this definition cannot apply to an improvised dramatic performance; '...in which a story is related *by means of dialogue*...': what, then, about those exquisite mime dramas with which the crowds of Paris were being entertained in the nineteenth century or which artists like Marcel Marceau give us today? '...adapted to be *acted on the stage*...': and what about drama in television, radio or the cinema? '...represented with accompanying gesture, *costume and scenery*...': gestures, yes; but I have seen very good drama without costume or indeed scenery! '...as in *real life*...': now, that is going a little far. It seems to assume that all drama must be realistic drama. Is *Waiting for Godot*, or for that

matter *The Merry Widow*, like real life? And yet both, undoubtedly, are drama.

Other dictionary definitions I have looked up have proved equally misleading and incorrect. For the fact is that the art, activity, human craving or instinct which embodies itself in drama is so deeply enmeshed in human nature itself, and in a multitude of human pursuits, that it is wellnigh impossible to draw the exact dividing line between where one kind of more general activity stops and drama proper starts.

One can, for example, look at drama as a manifestation of the *play instinct*: children playing Mother and Father or Cowboys and Indians are, in some sense, improvising drama. Or one can see drama as a manifestation of one of humanity's prime social needs, that of *ritual*: tribal dances, religious services, great state occasions all contain strong dramatic elements. Or one can look at drama as something one goes to *see*, which is being presented and organised as something to be seen, a *spectacle*: in Greek *theatre* (...*theatron*) means a place where one goes to *see* something: the triumphal entry of a victorious emperor into Rome contained dramatic elements, so did gladiatorial contests between Christians and lions, so did public executions, so do all spectator sports. None of these activities can be regarded as drama in its proper sense, but the dividing lines between them and drama are very fluid indeed: is a circus, for example, where acrobats display their prowess a sporting activity? What then of the clowns who perform acrobatic feats together with little farcical scenes? What of the riders who display their skill in a simulated attack on a stage-coach? Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the prince of German poets, resigned his post as artistic director of the Court Theatre at Weimar in protest against a play involving the feats of a performing

dog. He may have been quite right in doing so, but was not his definition of drama a little narrow, nevertheless? Is drama no longer drama when not all the actors are human beings? What, then, of puppet theatre and shadow plays (like those of Java), what of cartoon films in which the actors are mere drawings?

Perhaps one should approach the definition of drama from that angle: there is no drama without *actors*, whether they are present in flesh and blood, or projected shadows upon a screen, or puppets. 'Enacted fiction' might be a short and pithy definition of drama, except that it would exclude documentary drama, which is enacted reality. Perhaps 'an art form based on mimetic action' would fit the bill? But then there are abstract ballets or, indeed, cartoon films, which while still action are not, strictly speaking, mimetic. Are they still drama? Yes, in one sense; no, in another.

Definitions—and thinking about definitions—are valuable and essential, but they must never be made into absolutes; if they are, they become obstacles to the organic development of new forms, experiment and invention. It is precisely because an activity like drama has fluid delimitations that it can continuously renew itself from sources that had hitherto been regarded as lying beyond its limits. It does not really matter whether the circus or the music hall, the political procession or the pop concert might still be strictly defined as forms of drama. What is certain is that the art of drama has received important, sometimes overwhelmingly significant inspirations and impulses from them. And similarly out of more strictly defined forms of drama may come new developments like the Happening or the multimedia show; there will be much debate about whether these should then still be called drama; such debate will be

valuable in the process of clarification of ideas and methods, but its actual outcome—is it drama, is it not?—will be relatively unimportant.

There is, however, one basic point of fundamental importance which has to be stressed because, although obvious, it continues to be persistently overlooked, particularly by those who as critics and academic teachers of drama are the guardians of its tradition and lore: and that is that theatre—stage drama—is, in the second half of the twentieth century, only one—and a relatively minor—form of dramatic expression and that the mechanically reproduced drama of the mass media, the cinema, television and radio, different though it may be in some of its techniques, is also fundamentally drama and obeys the same basic principles of the psychology of perception and understanding from which all the techniques of dramatic communication derive.

Drama as a technique of communication between human beings has entered upon a completely new phase of development of truly secular importance in an age which the great German critic Walter Benjamin characterised as that of 'the technical reproducibility of works of art'. Those who still regard live theatre as the only true form of drama are comparable to those contemporaries of Gutenberg who would acknowledge only a handwritten book as a true book. Through the mass media drama has become one of the most powerful means of communication between human beings, far more powerful than the merely printed word which was the basis of the Gutenberg revolution.

That is why a knowledge of the nature of drama, an understanding of its fundamental principles and techniques and an ability to think and talk about it critically has become very necessary indeed in our world. And that

does not only apply to such great works of the human spirit as the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare, but also to the television situation comedy or, indeed, to that briefest of dramatic forms, the television or radio commercial. We are surrounded by dramatic communication in all the industrialised countries of the world today; we ought to be able to understand and analyse its impact on ourselves—and our children. The explosion of dramatic forms of expression presents us all with considerable risks of being enslaved to insidious forms of subliminal manipulation of our consciousness; but also with immense creative opportunities.

2 *The nature of drama*

In Greek the word *drama* simply means *action*. Drama is mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behaviour (with the exception of the few extreme cases of abstract action which I have mentioned). What is crucial is the emphasis on action. So drama is not simply a form of literature (although the words used in a play, when they are written down, can be treated as literature). What makes drama drama is precisely the element which lies outside and beyond the words and which has to be seen as action—or *acted*—to give the author's concept its full value.

In talking about an art form—and in trying to get the fullest enjoyment and enrichment from it—it is of fundamental importance to understand what this particular art form is specifically able to contribute to the sum total of man's tools of expression and, indeed, to conceptualisation, thought. If in music we are dealing with the ability of sounds to make us recreate the ebb and flow of human emotion; if in architecture and sculpture we are able to explore the expressive possibilities of the arrangement of materials and of masses in space; if literature is concerned with the ways in which we can handle—and respond to—language and concepts; if painting is ulti-

The nature of drama

mately concerned with the relationship and impact of colours, shapes and textures on a flat surface, what, then, is the specific province of drama? Why, for instance, should we act out an incident rather than merely tell a story about it?

Let me start on a purely personal note. In the '40s and '50s I worked as a script writer in the European Service of the BBC. The programmes we were supposed to write were intended to give an audience who did not speak English an idea of what life in Britain was like. They were supposed to be *documentary* programmes, as near to reality as possible. But if, for example, we wanted to describe how an employment exchange worked, because of the language barrier between our listeners and life in England we could not just go out with a tape recorder and produce a recording of the various things that went on there. I remember being sent to write such a programme. I visited one of the employment exchanges and I was impressed by the mixture of bureaucratic formality with courtesy and real kindness on the part of the civil servants there.

How could I convey my impressions in the best possible manner? I could have written a purely literary, discursive description, something on these lines:

The official asks the applicant for a job to give him the relevant details. He is not unfriendly although he maintains a certain reserve and distance, yet at the same time it is quite apparent from the tone of voice he uses that he is genuinely trying to help the person in front of him...

And so on and so on. Such a description would not have carried much conviction because it would have sounded

like very special pleading with a purely propagandist intention. It would also have been extremely longwinded—an endless psychological analysis. So instead I decided to dramatise the little scene:

OFFICIAL: Do sit down.

APPLICANT: Thank you.

OFFICIAL: Now let's see. Your name is —?

APPLICANT: John Smith.

OFFICIAL: And your last job was —

APPLICANT: Machinist.

OFFICIAL: I see.

And so on. When this short dialogue is acted in the right spirit, the tone of voice—the acting, the action—conveys infinitely more than the actual words that are spoken. Indeed, the words (the literary component of the dramatic fragment) are secondary. The real information conveyed in the little scene when acted lies in the *relationship*, the *interaction* of two characters, the way they react to each other. This came across even in radio merely through the tone of voice. On the stage, the way their eyes meet or fail to meet, the way the official might gesture towards a chair when he invites the applicant to sit down, would be equally significant and important. On the page of the script this little dialogue conveys only a very small fraction of what the acted scene will express. This illustrates the importance of actors and directors in the art of drama. It also points to the fact that a really good playwright needs immense skill to convey the mood of the gestures, the tone of voice he wants from his actors through the dialogue he writes. But this leads us into very much more technical and complex areas. Let us, for the moment, stay with the basic concepts.

In the arts, as in philosophy, the principle of Occam's Razor remains of permanent validity—the most economical, the least time-consuming, the most elegant expression of thought will be nearest to the truth. For the expression of the imponderable mood, the hidden tensions and sympathies, the subtleties of human relationships and interaction, drama is by far the most economical means of expression.

Think of it in these terms: a novelist has to describe what a character looks like. In a play the appearance of the character is instantly conveyed by the actor's body and costume and make-up. The other visual elements in drama, the setting, the environment in which the action takes place, can be equally instantly communicated by the sets, the lighting, the grouping of the characters on the stage. (This also applies to the cinema and plays on television.)

These are the most primitive considerations. Far more profound, far more subtle, is the way in which drama can operate on several levels at once. Discursive literature, the novel, the short story, the epic poem, operates at any given instant only along a single dimension. Their storytelling is linear. Complexities, such as ironies or double-takes, are of course within the range of discursive writing, but they have to be built up through accumulation of the total picture by adding elements from moment to moment. And there is already a high degree of abstraction in any story told in such a manner: the author is constantly seen at work in selecting his material, in deciding which element to introduce next. Drama, by being a concrete representation of action as it actually takes place, is able to show us several aspects of that action simultaneously and also to convey several levels of action and emotion at the same time. For example, a line

of dialogue like 'Good morning, my dear friend!' might be spoken in a wide variety of tones of voice and expression. Accordingly, an audience might wonder whether the person who spoke these words meant them sincerely, used them sarcastically, or even had a note of hidden hostility in them. In a novel the author would have to say something along these lines:

"'Good morning my dear friend,'" he said, but Jack had the impression that he did not really mean it. Was he sarcastic, he asked himself, or was he suppressing some deeply felt hostility....'

The dramatic form of expression leaves the spectator free to make up his own mind about the sub-text concealed behind the overt text—in other words, it puts him into the same situation as the character to whom the words are addressed. Therefore it makes it possible for him to experience the emotion of the character directly rather than having to accept a mere description of it. Moreover, this need to decide for themselves how to interpret the action also adds to the suspense with which the audience will follow the story. Instead of being told about a situation, as the reader of a novel or story inevitably is, the spectators of drama are actually put into, directly confronted with, the situation concerned.

So we can say that drama is the most concrete form in which art can recreate human situations, human relationships. And this concreteness is derived from the fact that, whereas any narrative form of communication will tend to relate events that have happened in the past and are now finished, the concreteness of drama is happening in an eternal present tense, not there and then, but here and now.

There is a seeming exception to this—the modern narrative technique of the internal monologue in which the novelist puts us inside the mind of his character and follows his thoughts as they occur. But the very term monologue, which comes from drama, shows that the internal monologue is, in fact, a dramatic form as much as a narrative one. Internal monologues are essentially drama; hence they can be acted—and often are, particularly on radio. A writer like Beckett, most of whose narrative works are internal monologues, must really be regarded as, above all, an outstanding dramatic writer, a fact which is borne out by his great success as a writer both for the stage and for radio.

The immediacy and concreteness of drama and the fact that it forces the spectator to interpret what is happening in front of him on a multitude of levels, compelling *him* to decide whether the tone of voice of the character was friendly or menacing or sarcastic, means that drama has all the qualities of the real world, the real situations we meet in life—but with one very decisive difference: in life the situations we are confronted with are real; in the theatre—or in the other forms of drama (radio, TV, the cinema)—they are merely acted, they are make-believe, *play*.

Now the difference between reality and play is that what happens in reality is irreversible, while in play it is possible to start again from scratch. Play is a simulation of reality. That, far from making play a frivolous pastime, in fact emphasises the immense importance of all play activity for the well-being and development of man.

Children play in order to familiarise themselves with the behaviour patterns which they will have to use and experience in their life, in reality. Young animals play to learn to hunt, to flee, to orientate themselves. All play

activity of this kind is essentially dramatic, because it consists of a mimesis, an imitation of real-life situations and behaviour patterns. The play instinct is one of the basic human drives, essential for the survival of the individual as well as of the species. So drama can be regarded as more than a mere pastime. It is profoundly linked to the basic make-up of our species.

Yes, you may object, that may be true of the play of children and animals. But is it also true of a comedy by Noel Coward or a Broadway farce?

I would argue that, strange as it may sound, that is indeed the case, however indirectly, at however many removes.

Look at it this way: in their play children try out and learn the roles (note the terminology, which comes from the theatre) they will play in their adult life. Much of the current debate about the equality of women, for example, is concerned with showing that little girls are often brainwashed into an inferior position by learning a certain type of female role in their childhood, largely through being made to play differently from boys. If this is so, it is equally evident that society continues to instruct (or, if you prefer the term, to brainwash) its members in the different social roles they have to play throughout their lives. Drama is one of the most potent instruments of this process of instruction or brainwashing—sociologists would call it the process by which individuals internalize their social roles.

Dramatic forms of presentation—and in our society every individual is exposed to them daily through the mass media—are one of the prime instruments by which society communicates its codes of behaviour to its members. This communication works both by encouraging imitation and by presenting examples of behaviour

which has to be avoided or shunned. Here wires may sometimes become crossed: the gangster movie designed to show that crime does not pay may in fact demonstrate to a potential gangster how to go about being a gangster. One way or another it is through the vicarious play activity (which drama is for adults) that many of these patterns are transmitted, in a positive or a negative sense.

The drawing-room comedy *à la* Noel Coward also clearly transmits patterns of behaviour in the form of the manners, the social forms, the sexual codes that are being shown; and equally the bedroom farce, by making people laugh about the outrageous lapses of parsons caught in brothels, also reinforces codes of behaviour. Laughter is a form of release for subconscious anxieties. Farce, as I hope to show later, is about the anxieties which people have about possible lapses of behaviour to which they may be exposed through temptations of various kinds.

But, beyond that, drama can be more than merely an instrument by which society transmits its behaviour patterns to its members. It can also be an instrument of thought, a cognitive process.

For drama is not only the most concrete—that is, the least abstract—artistic imitation of real human behaviour, it is also the most concrete form in which we can think about human situations. The higher the level of abstraction, the more remote thought becomes from human reality. It is one thing to argue that, for example, capital punishment is effective or ineffective, quite another to translate that abstract concept, which may be buttressed by statistics, into human reality. That we can only do by imagining the case of one human being involved in capital punishment—and the best way to do so is to write and act out a play about it. It is no coincidence that the think-tanks trying to work out plans

of action for various future contingencies such as epidemics or nuclear wars do this in terms of working out scenarios for the possible sequence of events. In other words they are translating their statistics, their computer data, into dramatic form, into concrete situations which have to be acted out with all the imponderables such as the individual psychological reaction of the decision-makers involved.

Most serious drama from the Greek tragedies to Samuel Beckett is of this nature. It is a form of philosophising, not in abstract but in concrete terms—in today's philosophical jargon one would say in existential terms. It is significant that an important existential philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, felt compelled to write plays as well as novels. The dramatic form was the only method by which he could work out some of the concrete implications of his abstract philosophical thought.

Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist, also regarded drama as a scientific method, the theatre as an experimental laboratory for the testing of human behaviour in given situations. 'What would happen if...?' is the premise of most plays of this nature. Most of the social problems of the last hundred years were not only aired but worked out in the plays of writers like Ibsen, Bernard Shaw or Brecht; many profound philosophical problems in the plays of Strindberg, Pirandello, Camus, Sartre and Beckett.

But—you may object—in a play these problems are worked out arbitrarily according to the whim of a playwright. In a laboratory they are tested objectively.

I am convinced that this possibility also exists in the theatre. For, in the theatre too, there are objective ways of testing experiments in human behaviour.

3 *Drama as collective experience: ritual*

Drama, therefore, can be seen as a form of thought, a cognitive process, a method by which we can translate abstract concepts into concrete human terms or by which we can set up a situation and work out its consequences (for example: what would happen if, say, all extramarital love were to become a capital offence, as in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*).

Yet are not the playwright, the director, the actors so completely in control of a dramatic experiment of this kind that they can arbitrarily dictate its result, make it come out just as they like? And how, if that is so, can drama be regarded as a way of testing the consequences and implications of a given situation?

The author and the performers are only one half of the total process: the other half is the audience and its reaction. Without an audience there is no drama. A play which is not performed is merely literature. In performance a play either works or it doesn't work, which is to say that the audience either finds it acceptable or not. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, drama compels the spectator to decode what he sees on the stage in exactly the same way as he has to make sense of, or interpret, any

Henry V no longer arouses the emotion it intends to arouse, it will be evident that the mood, the ideals, the identity image of the nation have decisively changed. This makes drama a very potent indicator and instrument of political change. In Czechoslovakia, for example, in the years that preceded the Prague Spring of 1968 the theatre played a very important part in showing to the nation that the mood had changed. Each individual, however sceptical he might have become of the party's actions, had no means of knowing what others felt in a society where everyone is careful not to expose himself to political persecution by open criticism of the government. In the theatre, however, the very way in which the audience did or did not respond to political exhortation made the situation clear to everyone. I remember when I was in Prague at the time the feeling of relief and exaltation which swept through the audience at a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* when Mercutio died cursing, A plague on both your houses! Every member of the audience felt the political implication of this condemnation of the useless violence of inter-party conflict and as each individual realised that his neighbour had reacted in the same way the spark of mutual recognition fired.

The French Revolution is sometimes said to have really started at the first performance of Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, simply because the way the audience reacted to a highly critical view of the life-style of the aristocracy showed how general anti-aristocratic sentiments had become. This may be a legend or an oversimplification. But it contains a grain of important truth.

4 *Style and character*

Drama is the most social of the art forms: it is, by its very nature, a collective creation: the playwright, the actors, the designer, the costume-maker, the provider of props, the lighting engineer all contribute, and so does the audience by its very presence. The literary part of drama, the script, is fixed, a permanent entity, but each performance of each production of that text is different, because the actors react differently to different audiences, and of course to their own moods.

This fusion of a fixed and a fluid component is one of the prime advantages of live theatre over the mechanically recorded types of drama—the cinema, the radio play, the television play. By permanently fixing the performance as well as the text these media condemn their products to an inevitable process of obsolescence, simply because styles of acting, dress and make-up, as well as the techniques of recording, change, so that recordings of ancient radio plays or old films bear the hallmarks of the quaint and slightly ridiculous products of another epoch. Only the greatest classics, like Marcel Carné's *Les enfants du paradis*, or Charlie Chaplin's or Buster Keaton's comedies, can perhaps survive such an air of outdatedness.

The most important component of any dramatic performance is the actor. He is the word transformed into living flesh. And flesh in the most tangible meaning of the term. People go to the theatre, above all, to see beautiful people; among other things, actors are also people who exhibit themselves for money.

To deny a powerful erotic component in any dramatic experience would be foolish hypocrisy. Indeed, one of the theatre's—and all other drama's—greatest claims is that it operates at the same time on all levels, from the most basic to the most sublime, and that in the best drama the two achieve perfect fusion. We enjoy Shakespeare's poetry in a play like *Romeo and Juliet* not only because it is supreme poetry but also because that poetry is embodied by a beautiful young woman or man who arouses our desire; the desire enhances the poetry and the poetry ennobles the desire and thus the division between body and mind, the earthy and spiritual—which, in any case, is a false dichotomy—is abolished and the unified nature of man, animal *and* spiritual, reaffirmed.

The actors embody and interpret the text provided by the author. And it would seem that they are entirely free to do this in any manner they like. But that is true only up to a point. For the author has at his disposal a very powerful instrument for imposing on the actors the manner of interpretation he desires. That instrument is style.

Let us assume an actor has to speak the following lines in a play:

Tell me, dear friend, what news you have to bring!
I am all ears, though tossed twixt hope and fear
And yet resolved to bear it be what may...

Or that he has to express the identical idea and situation like this:

Come on, Peter, let's have it. I'm dying to hear the news...Do sit down...will you have a drink?...you know how much depends on it for me...I want to be optimistic about the outcome...yet I've always had my doubts too. Do you take water or soda?...Look, tell me what you have to say...I can take it...

Clearly, the first passage, being in verse, in a slightly elevated language, cannot be acted with the fussiness, the naturalism of the second passage which expresses the identical thought and circumstances. By couching the passage in verse the author has made it impossible, for example, for the actor to accompany the action by offering his visitor a drink: one simply doesn't ask whether the visitor takes water or soda in solemn blank verse (or if one did it would have a distinctly comic effect which in this case is obviously not intended). The passage in elevated poetic language will thus clearly have to be spoken while the actor maintains a far more dignified, rigid stance; his gestures will have to be infinitely more stylised, his features far more still. For an actor speaking language like this it is, for example, quite unthinkable that he would scratch his head or pick his nose while uttering the words. For an actor speaking the second passage all this would be quite possible; the rhythms are less formalised, more broken, the words used are more ordinary. Brecht, a playwright who was also a superb director in the theatre, demanded that the dramatist should use gestural language, which means that he should write in a way which imposes the right style of movement and action on the actor, compelling him to conform to the playwright's idea of how the words should be acted.

But the style of writing fulfils another function as well: an informational function towards the audience.

By the style in which a play is written the audience is instantly, and largely subconsciously, being made aware of how they are to take the play, what to expect from it, on what level they ought to react to it. For the audience's reaction is greatly dependent on their expectations. If they are under the impression that the play is *meant* to be funny they will be more readily inclined to laugh than if they know from the beginning that it is to be taken with deep seriousness. Some of this is communicated to the audience by the title, the author, the actors in the play, or whether on the programme it is described as a tragedy or a farce. Nevertheless there may be many in the audience who do not have this advance information, nor is it always clear, even from the programme, what the dramatist or director intends. At the first performance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play in a style highly unusual at the time, the audience did not know how to react, whether to laugh or to cry. But in most cases—in established conventions—the style of speech, of acting, the style of the setting and costumes, instantly conveys the required information to the audience and enables them to pitch their expectation at the desired level: it then tells them, to remain with our example, at what level of abstraction the play will take place. In a tragedy by Racine, for example, the very nature of the highly formalised alexandrines instantly makes it clear that the play will concentrate on the most sublime passions of its characters. In such plays nothing is said about the more petty pre-occupations of the people involved. Phèdre or Andromache are never seen eating, or exchanging small-talk. The verse and the level of the language very soon make us aware of this.

Conversely: what makes a dramatist decide in which style he will write his play? When should he use verse,

when prose?

Verse removes the action from the everyday, familiar sphere and makes it clear that no attempt is being made to portray life in all its humdrum pettiness. T.S. Eliot felt that at their climaxes, his plays should reach an intensity of emotion which could only be expressed by the richer language and the rhythmic flow of poetry. In order to enable himself to reach these climaxes by a gentle transition and without a break in style he started a play like *The Cocktail Party* in verse, but verse pitched at so low a level that it almost sounded like prose—

ALEX: You've missed the point completely, Julia:
There were no tigers. That was the point.

JULIA: Then what were you doing, up in a tree?
You and the Maharaja?

ALEX: My dear Julia!
It's perfectly hopeless. You haven't been
listening...

The audience may at this point barely notice that this rather trivial conversation is in verse, but gradually they become aware of its rhythm. At the climax of the play, when one of the characters has suffered martyrdom for her religion, the author can raise the level of emotion and poetry to a much higher level:

REILLY: I'd say that she suffered all that we should
suffer
In fear and pain and loathing—all these
together
And reluctance of the body to become a *thing*.
I'd say she suffered more, because more
conscious
Than the rest of us. She paid the highest price

In suffering. That is part of the design.

Another reason why a playwright may choose to put his play in verse is that he is unable to reproduce the actual way people would have spoken in his play, because it takes place in a distant past or in a country or civilisation too remote from us in space to be easily reproduceable in everyday English. Verse removes the necessity of having to try and achieve a completely convincing realistic effect. That is why modern plays dealing with history or exotic locations often tend to be in verse. On the other hand, an author like Bernard Shaw, wanting to emphasise how wrong it was to think of historical characters as different from ourselves, made Joan of Arc or Caesar talk contemporary English, with all the anachronisms this implied; he demythologised these historical characters.

This shows that the level of language, the style in which a play is written—and consequently acted—has something to do with the level at which the audience looks at the characters. The distinguished Canadian critic Northrop Frye has pointed to four levels of discourse—and these apply to the novel as well as to drama: if the audience is to look at the characters as infinitely above them, as gods, we are in the realm of myth; if the audience is to look up to them as men high above them, we are in the realm of the heroic; if the audience is to look at the characters as being on the same level as themselves, we are in a realistic style; and if the audience looks down on the characters as contemptible, this is the ironic mode.

Myths—like Greek tragedy—will require the highest flights of poetic language. Heroic plays about kings and queens and almost superhuman men and women will still need an elevated language.

On the realistic level, when the author confronts us

with people inhabiting the same social level as ourselves, prose is indicated. And if we look down on the characters, if we are meant to feel superior to them in intelligence—for example in farce or satire—the language can again be stylised, because we are again looking at people removed from ourselves, even though that distance is a distance beneath us: the language there can be mechanically repetitive or exaggeratedly silly or indeed mock-verse, as in satires and parodies.

What applies to the general style of the play as a whole is also true of each character: in a good play by an accomplished playwright each character will have his own style of speaking—which will, however, have to be a variable within the overall level of language of the play as a whole.

In other words: having set himself a lower and an upper limit within which the language of the play will move, the author can vary the level inside that range, according to the way he wants us to look at the character or indeed the scene. In moments when he is reflecting on his own deep emotion Hamlet speaks in verse; when instructing the players or relaxed in Ophelia's lap he speaks in prose. And the gravediggers—clowns to whom we, the audience, are to feel superior—speak an even lower, more grotesque prose. When prose is used for lofty sentiments it will be a poetic prose.

Yet language is far from being the only instrument of characterisation at the playwright's disposal. It sets the general mood. The characterisation of the individual people in a play is largely a matter of their action and reaction. One of the most frequent mistakes made by aspiring and inexperienced playwrights is the idea that one can characterise someone in a play by having others talk about him—

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- JONES: And what do you think of Smith?
MAC: Oh he's mean. Never lends you money even if he's loaded with it.

And so on. One might think that this does characterise Smith. The curious fact—and only long experience convinces one of it—is that in drama this kind of reported characterisation simply does not work. Shakespeare uses descriptions of one character by another one, but the real impact of the characterisation always comes from what the characters themselves do. If you bring Smith on and make him act out his meanness it will have a much greater impact:

- JONES: Hey, Smith. You look happy today.
SMITH: I am happy. I've just won fifty pounds at the races. Backed the outsider at 50 to 1.
JONES: Congratulations. By the way—I'm in a jam. Could you lend me five pounds till next Thursday?
SMITH: Sorry, old man. Quite impossible. You know how poor I am....

This has the added advantage that it also characterises the second character as an opportunist who instantly takes a chance. Admittedly this is an oversimplified example, but it does, I think, make the point. Analyse any skilfully written play and you will find that invariably the characterisation is in the action. In drama, of course, language very often *is* action. One could go further and claim that all language in drama of necessity *becomes* action. In drama we are concerned not only with *what* a character says—the purely semantic meaning of their words but with what the character *does* with his words.

Style and character

- JIM: Liz, will you come to the pictures with me tomorrow night? There's a Judy Garland movie at the local.
LIZ: Sorry, Jim, I have to wash my hair tomorrow night. Sorry.

What matters is not what the girl says—that she has to wash her hair—but what this line of dialogue *does* to the other character. By using that statement she is rejecting the advances of the young man. That is why actors and critics speak of a text and of a subtext.

This brings me back to the all-important element which constitutes the peculiar power and impact of drama: even in the very simplified little dialogue of my example it is up to the audience to decide for themselves what the action behind the humdrum statement about the girl who has to wash her hair every Thursday night actually was. We, the audience, have to decide whether these words amount to a rejection, and we have to try to decide it on the basis of our own experience, our own reaction to a similar situation in our own lives. Because we have to make this decision we are forced to put ourselves into the shoes of the character who rejects, or the one who is rejected, we have to develop a high degree of empathy, of identification—we experience the action on the stage with the characters. And that action is behind the words, unspoken. What is *not* said is as important in drama—both as action and as characterisation—as what *is* said. It is not the words that matter but the situation in which the words are uttered. In Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, in the last act, a situation is contrived in which we all expect that Lopakhin will propose to Varya. Finally the two are brought together in front of us. They exchange the most insignificant small-

talk. The words are trivial, but the emotion is tremendous, simply because we are aware of what is happening rather than of what is being said. And what is happening is that these two people are missing their last chance of happiness. Through timidity. Through cowardice. Through an inability to say the right word. Here the absence of language is both powerful and unforgettable characterisation and equally powerful and unforgettable action.

5 *The structure of drama*

Put in its simplest and most mundane terms, the basic task of anyone concerned with presenting any kind of drama to any audience consists in capturing their attention and holding it as long as required. Only when that fundamental objective has been achieved can the more lofty and ambitious intentions be fulfilled: the imparting of wisdom and insight, poetry and beauty, amusement and relaxation, illumination and purging of emotion. If you lose their attention, if you fail to make them concentrate on what is happening, on what is being said, all is lost.

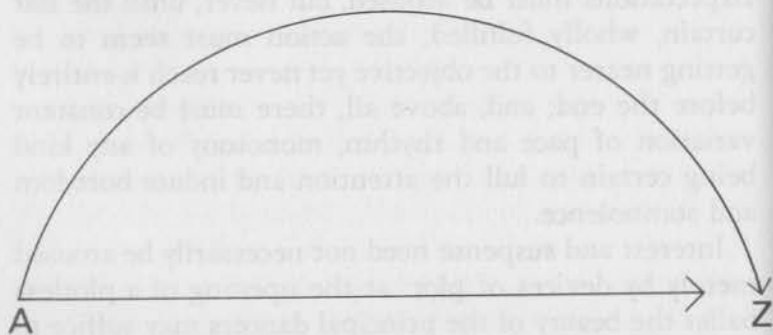
The creation of interest and suspense (in their very widest sense) thus underlies all dramatic construction. Expectations must be aroused, but never, until the last curtain, wholly fulfilled; the action must seem to be getting nearer to the objective yet never reach it entirely before the end; and, above all, there must be constant variation of pace and rhythm, monotony of any kind being certain to lull the attention and induce boredom and somnolence.

Interest and suspense need not necessarily be aroused merely by devices of plot: at the opening of a plotless ballet the beauty of the principal dancers may suffice to

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arouse interest, and the audience's expectation of seeing the full gamut of steps provides sufficient suspense to sustain concentration for a long while. The statement of a theme, its first variation, and the author's ingenuity in continuing to vary it (provided the theme was in itself attractive enough to arouse interest) might provide sufficient expectation and thus suspense. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the very fact that the characters keep reassuring themselves that nothing ever happens and that there is nothing for them to do creates its own kind of suspense: the audience cannot quite believe that this is so and wants to know what *is* going to happen next. And on the way to their final recognition that, ultimately, there has really not been anything happening, enough interesting episodes have occurred, each of which generated its own interest and suspense.

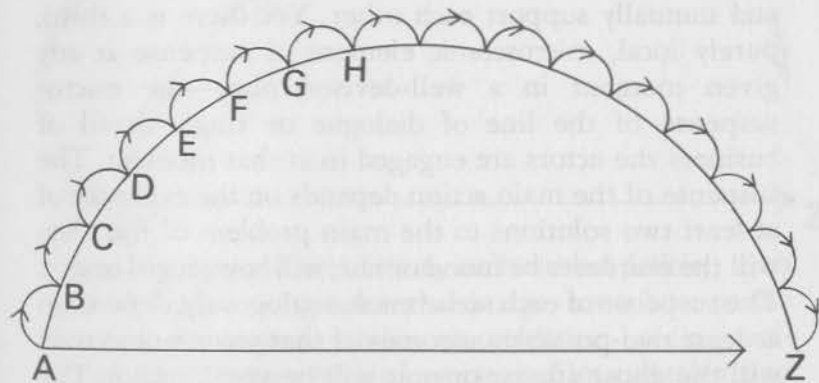
And there are many kinds of suspense: suspense may lie in a question like, 'What is going to happen next?', but equally well in a question like, 'I know what is going to happen, but *how* is it going to happen?' or, indeed, 'I know *what* is going to happen and I know *how* it is going to happen, but how is X going to react to it?'; or it may be of a quite different type, such as, 'What is it that I see happening?' or 'These events seem to have a pattern;



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what kind of pattern will it turn out to be?' One thing, however, is certain: some sort of basic question must emerge fairly early in any dramatic form so that the audience can, as it were, settle down to its main element of suspense. One might say that the major theme of the play must become clear in good time. In most plays or films it is a question, such as who committed the murder, whether the boy will get the girl in the end, or the deceived husband find out about his wife's lover. Once the audience has grasped this main theme, this main objective of the action, their expectation is firmly fixed on the final point and they know where they and the play are going, what its principal *question* is. Their attention is firmly pointed in the right direction. The only question is, by what circuitous route, by which arc will the final answer be reached?

Yet the human attention span is relatively short. One major suspense element is not enough to hold an audience's attention throughout the course of a complete play. On that main arc, subsidiary arcs, arising from the arousal of subsidiary suspense elements must be superimposed. While our main interest is held by the question of who committed the murder, we are, at the



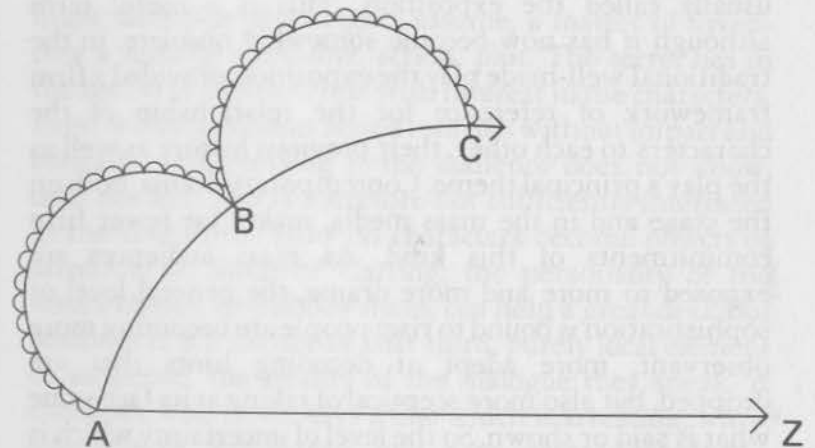
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same time, and in a much shorter time span, eagerly asking ourselves whether the gardener who is being questioned at this moment actually saw the murderer jump over the wall, etc. The main suspense element carries the subsidiary one on its back, as it were. And of course, subsidiary suspense elements may precede the emergence of the main theme or objective of the play. In *Hamlet*, for example, the first suspense element is a relatively minor one: will the ghost appear again? Then: will he appear to Hamlet? Then, when he has appeared: what will he say? And it is only after Hamlet and we have heard what the Ghost has to say that the main revenge theme of the play and the main suspense element emerges: will Hamlet succeed in his revenge. Only then do we realise the nature of the main arc on which the minor suspense elements that kept us concentrating on the action had been supported.

There is thus an element of suspense needed for each scene or section of the action, superimposed on the main objective or suspense momentum of the whole play. At any given moment in a play the director and the actors must be aware of these major—strategical—and minor—i.e. tactical, within the scene—objectives which coexist and mutually support each other. Yet there is a third, purely local, microcosmic element of suspense at any given moment in a well-devised play,—the micro-suspense of the line of dialogue or single detail of business the actors are engaged in at that moment. The suspense of the main action depends on the existence of at least two solutions to the main problem of the play: will the murderer be found or not; will boy get girl or not. The suspense of each scene must, analogously, depend on at least two possible outcomes of that scene's objective: will the ghost appear or not; will he speak or not. The

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suspense in the smallest units of dialogue or business must consist, accordingly, in several possible answers to each question or statement made in the dialogue, or indeed in the stage business and gestures that make up the scene. Predictability is the death of suspense and therefore of drama. Good dialogue is unpredictable. Lines that elicit only predictable answers, gestures that duplicate what has already been conveyed by other means, are dead and should be eliminated. The brilliance of the dialogue of great comedy writers like Noel Coward or Oscar Wilde lies in its paradox and surprise; the greatness of giants among playwrights like Shakespeare lies in the originality of their language and their images (which is another way of saying their unexpectedness and surprise). The dialogue, which serves the immediate tactical objective of the given scene or segment, thus superimposes a third arc, a third element of suspense:



Each surprising formulation, each verbal felicity, each grain of wit or original verbal image, contribute to the interest, the unpredictability, the attention-holding quality of the dialogue. And, of course, in film and television

drama the interest and suspense created by the movement of the camera, visual wit and pictorial felicities fulfil exactly the same function; the same is true of the actors' expressions and movements both on the stage and on the screen—a seemingly dead line may become pregnant with suspense through an unexpected glance from one of the actors to another, a gleam which comes into their eyes.

The pattern outlined here is merely schematic. There is no reason why there should not be a multitude of elements of interest and suspense interacting in far more complex patterns. Yet the three basic strands are essential. A cross-section through any dramatic action should, at any given point, yield at least these three. If one of them is missing, or weak, the audience's attention will flag.

The establishment of the main objective of the play is usually called the exposition. This is a useful term although it has now become somewhat obsolete. In the traditional well-made play the exposition provided a firm framework of reference for the relationship of the characters to each other, their previous history as well as the play's principal theme. Contemporary drama, both on the stage and in the mass media, makes far fewer firm commitments of this kind. As mass audiences are exposed to more and more drama, the general level of sophistication is bound to rise: people are becoming more observant, more adept at decoding hints that are dropped, but also more sceptical of taking at its face value what is said or shown. So the level of uncertainty which is permissible in drama has perceptibly risen; indeed, this uncertainty has itself introduced a new factor of suspense. In a film by Antonioni or Altman, just as in a play by Beckett or Ionesco, we may well no longer ask the ques-

tion which most conventional drama poses for the spectator: what's going to happen next? but the much more general question: what's happening? With this evolution away from the classical exposition, the other traditional terms used in describing the structure of the well-made play have also become somewhat less serviceable. If the exposition is less clear-cut, much of what used to be called the development or complication of the plot tends to merge into a prolonged unravelling of the dramatic strands which might also be called a continued exposition and as a result the traditional turning point (*peripeteia*) and the climax and solution of the play may also be less clear-cut. Nevertheless, these concepts are extremely valuable where they are applicable. One should merely beware of thinking that where they are not applicable there must be something basically wrong with the play. The evocation of interest in the audience is not just, as many would-be playwrights assume, a matter of inventing a suitable story-line, action, plot. The secret lies in the fusion of plot-interest with interest in the characters. Even the most violent action remains without impact and basically uninteresting if the audience does not know, does not like, and is therefore not sufficiently interested in the characters. How do characters become objects of affection or interest? Casting, the personality of the actors chosen to embody them, can help a great deal. But basically it is a matter of that third, purely local element of suspense, the quality of the dialogue they speak. A character who never says a line which is arresting, witty, amusing or interesting, will have great difficulty in catching the audience's sympathy or, conversely, loathing. And then however ingenious the twists of the plot he is involved in, the audience will care little for them.

The awakening and holding of the audience's attention

through expectation, interest and suspense is, as I have stressed, the most primitive and mundane aspect of dramatic structure. The more complex and subtle problems of form rest on this basis. With the exception of radio drama, all other dramatic forms exist both in space (like painting or photography) and in time (like music and poetry). Thus a combination of spatial and temporal elements allows an infinite number of structural permutations between spatial unity in rhythmic diversity on the one hand and unity of pace and tone in a wide variety of visual changes on the other. There can be patterns of intensities rising to a climax and then subsiding, ascending forms of gradual intensification of all elements (speed, pace, rhythm light, colour) and descending ones in which they gradually run down; or again, circular ones in which the end rejoins the shape of the beginning. The repetition of various elements at recurring intervals gives one shape, violent contrasts and abrupt and surprising transitions give another.

The essential truth to remember, however, is that while formlessness is amorphous, without discernible structure, all form, all structure depends on articulation, the joining together of distinct elements. This is important enough in the spatial dimension where the grouping of characters on the stage, the distribution of colour and light, make all the difference between chaos and comprehensibility. In the temporal dimension it is even more vital: just as a piece of music proceeds with its own rhythm and must be subdivided into distinct sections, the verses and chorus of a song, the movements of a sonata or symphony, so the movement of drama in any form must be similarly articulated and shaped. If one sets out on a long walk in a town in which one has just arrived to reach a destination one or two miles down a straight road, the

walk at first will appear endless. The second time, when one remembers landmarks on the way which become subsidiary objectives and articulate the journey, the boredom will lessen and the time will pass much more swiftly. For something which is shapeless and contains no indication of its internal articulation could be endless. Once we realise that the distance is divided into—say—four parts, each of which is within easy reach, the terror of setting out towards an undefined, distant goal disappears. Clarity of structure and a clear 'signposting' of the course of the action are thus very important formal elements in the structuring of drama. And the more the variation between each segment and its neighbour, the less will be the danger of monotony, another dangerous source of boredom.

In an art form in which the structuring of the work in a time dimension is of such importance, it is only natural that timing, a sense of timing, is the essential hallmark of the good playwright, as well as of director and actor. This starts with the length (or brevity) of each distinct scene or section of a dramatic work and ends with the tiniest pause that elapses between the raising of an eyebrow and the delivery of a line.

Economy is the essence of timing. Drama is, among many other things, a method of communication. Watching a play, a film, a television serial, listening to a radio play, we have declared our willingness to have something communicated to us and therefore we are intent on decoding the communication: everything that happens in that frame on the screen, on that stage, in that half-hour of broadcasting, must contribute to that act of communication. Max Frisch describes in his diaries how when he was first asked to come to the Zurich theatre to be commissioned to write his first play, he arrived too early

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and sat waiting in the empty, dark auditorium. Suddenly the lights on the stage went up, a stage-hand appeared and placed some chairs in readiness for the rehearsal that was about to start. Frisch describes how he watched this activity with rapt attention, how suddenly every movement of the man acquired tremendous significance, simply because it was happening on a lit stage, within the picture frame of that stage. For we are conditioned to think of a stage (or a television or cinema screen) as spaces within which significant things are being shown; they therefore concentrate our attention and compel us to try and arrange everything that happens there into a significant pattern, to make sense of it as a pattern. Hence, anything that is unnecessary or does not contribute to that pattern will appear as an intrusion, an irritant. The playwright, the director, the actors, the designer of sets and costumes must therefore constantly be aware of the function of each detail within the whole structure. A line of dialogue may not directly contribute to the movement of the plot, but it may be essential to establish some vital clue to the character; a piece of furniture in the set may never be needed for the action, yet it may be important to establish atmosphere. In *Uncle Vanya* Chekhov specifies that above the desk of that Russian landowner there should hang a large map of Africa. Africa never enters into the play, but the very incongruity of the map's presence illustrates the wayward, ineffectual character of Vanya himself. He must have found that map in an attic, or picked it up cheaply in some antique shop and put it up, perhaps because it reminded him of a world of adventure beyond his reach, or perhaps only to cover a damp patch on that wall. The map of Africa can thus be seen as a brilliant piece of character-drawing on the part of Chekhov—and an

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extremely economical one at that. Its presence does not lengthen the play by one second, yet it communicates a great deal.

This is not to say that all the many elements of action, dialogue, design or music which a performance uses to communicate with the audience must be consciously apprehended by every member of the audience as part of the total communication he is receiving. Much of the impact of drama is subliminal and instinctive. In real life we react to the appearance and the mode of speech of a new acquaintance instinctively and without consciously analysing each element of the overall impression he makes on us. Similarly in a play we may find the hero sympathetic, the heroine attractive, without the process by which we have arrived at this reaction becoming conscious. But the process of choosing someone who will evoke such an instinctive reaction to play that part must be a conscious and deliberate decision on the part of the director, and the actor thus chosen must in turn make a deliberate effort to portray a sympathetic and attractive character.

The total structure of a dramatic work thus depends on a very delicate balance of a multitude of elements, all of which must contribute to the total pattern and all of which are wholly interdependent. A scene which is very quiet may appear boring after another quiet scene: it will come as a welcome relief after a very noisy one. Context is all: in the right context an almost imperceptible gesture may move mountains, the simplest phrase may turn into the most sublime poetic utterance. That is the true miracle of drama, its true poetry.

Yet, while the effects may appear mysterious, the way in which they are achieved can be analysed and understood. Once the spectator's attention and interest have

been caught, once he has been induced to follow the action with the utmost concentration and involvement, his powers of perception are heightened, his emotions are freely flowing and he will, in fact, reach a heightened state of consciousness: more receptive, more observant, better able to discern the underlying unity and pattern of human existence. This is what makes true receptivity to any art akin to religious experience (or the heightened awareness of the world induced by certain drugs). And among all artistic experiences of this kind drama is one of the most powerful.

6 *The critical vocabulary*

In talking about any subject we cannot do without a specialised vocabulary of terms and concepts. This is especially true of drama which is an exceedingly complex art form. In discussing style I pointed out that the form of language employed in the opening scene of a play sets the key, as it were and communicates the spirit in which the whole play is to be taken by the audience. In this context what matters is whether the language is elevated or coarse, in prose or verse, whether the actors' movements are formal or realistic.

Styles of dramatic writing have changed over the centuries, as indeed have the conventions by which audiences have been offered drama (such as the restriction to two and later three actors in Greek tragedy or the rigid confinement of all drama behind the frame of the proscenium arch in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). In periods and civilisations with unified, coherent world-view accepted by the vast majority without question—periods like the classical Greek world or the Middle Ages—the arts, and drama in particular, tend to reflect that attitude to life by a single and unified style of presentation. In other periods, like our own, a wide variety of philosophies and attitudes to life coexist and