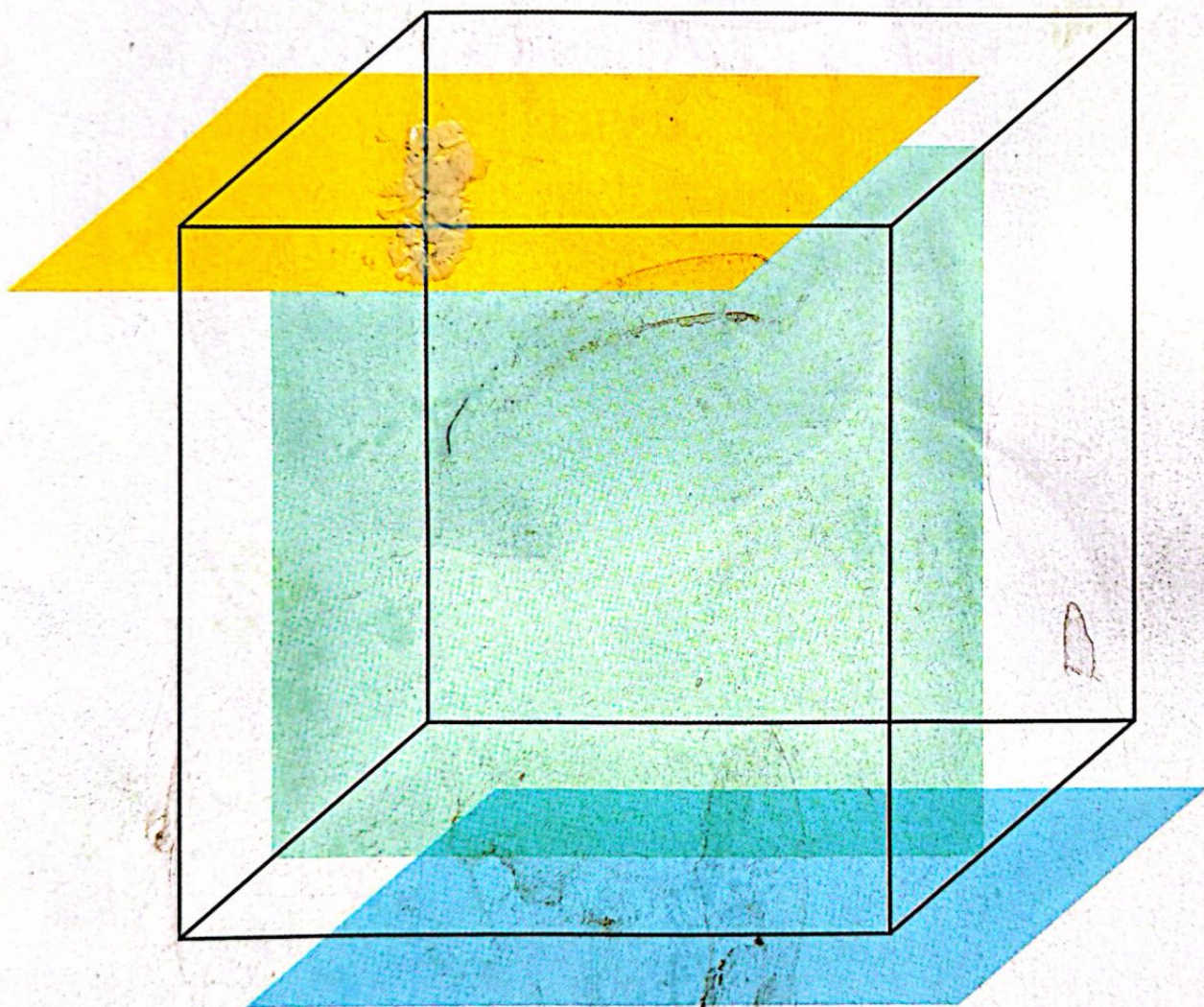


THE EMPTY SPACE

A Book About the Theatre:
Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate



PETER BROOK

Winner of multiple Tony and Emmy Awards

The Deadly Theatre

I CAN take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. Yet when we talk about theatre this is not quite what we mean. Red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness, these are all confusedly superimposed in a messy image covered by one all-purpose word. We talk of the cinema killing the theatre, and in that phrase we refer to the theatre as it was when the cinema was born, a theatre of box office, foyer, tip-up seats, footlights, scene changes, intervals, music, as though the theatre was by very definition these and little more.

I will try to split the word four ways and distinguish four different meanings – and so will talk about a Deadly Theatre, a Holy Theatre, a Rough Theatre and an Immediate Theatre. Sometimes these four theatres really exist, standing side by side, in the West End of London, or in New York off Times Square. Sometimes they are hundreds of miles apart, the Holy in Warsaw and the Rough in Prague, and sometimes they are metaphoric: two of them mixing together within one evening, within one act. Sometimes within one single moment, the four of them, Holy, Rough, Immediate and Deadly intertwine.

The Deadly Theatre can at first sight be taken for granted, because it means bad theatre. As this is the form of theatre we see most often, and as it is most closely linked to the despised, much-attacked commercial theatre it might seem a waste of time to criticize it further. But it is only if we see that deadliness is deceptive and can appear anywhere, that we will become aware of the size of the problem.

The condition of the Deadly Theatre at least is fairly obvious. All through the world theatre audiences are dwindling. There are occasional new movements, good new writers and so on, but as a whole, the theatre not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains. The theatre has often been called a whore, meaning its art is impure, but today this is true in another sense – whores take the money and then go short on the pleasure. The Broadway crisis, the Paris crisis, the West End crisis are the same: we do not need the ticket agents to tell us that the theatre has become a deadly business and the public is smelling it out. In fact, were the public ever really to demand the true entertainment it talks about so often, we would almost all be hard put to know where to begin. A true theatre of joy is non-existent and it is not just the trivial comedy and the bad musical that fail to give us our money's worth – the Deadly Theatre finds its deadly way into grand opera and tragedy, into the plays of Molière and the plays of Brecht. Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. The Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare. We see his plays done by good actors in what seems like the proper way – they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring – and in our hearts we either blame Shakespeare, or theatre as such, or even ourselves. To make matters worse there is always a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, whilst reciting his favourite lines under his breath. In his heart he sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves. Unfortunately, he lends the weight of his authority to dullness and so the Deadly Theatre goes on its way.

Anyone who watches the real successes as they appear each year, will see a very curious phenomenon. We expect the so-called hit to be livelier, faster, brighter than the flop – but this is not always the case. Almost every season in most theatre-loving towns, there is one great success that defies these rules; one play that succeeds not despite but because of dullness. After all, one associates culture with a certain sense of duty, historical costumes and long speeches with the sensation of being bored: so, conversely, just the right degree of boringness is a reassuring guarantee of a worthwhile event. Of course, the dosage is so subtle that it is impossible to establish the exact formula – too much and the audience is driven out of their seats, too little and it may find the theme too disagreeably intense. However, mediocre authors seem to feel their way unerringly to the perfect mixture – and they perpetuate the Deadly Theatre with dull successes, universally praised. Audiences crave for something in the theatre that they can term ‘better’ than life and for this reason are open to confuse culture, or the trappings of culture, with something they do not know, but sense obscurely could exist – so, tragically, in elevating something bad into a success they are only cheating themselves.

If we talk of deadly, let us note that the difference between life and death, so crystal clear in man, is somewhat veiled in other fields. A doctor can tell at once between the trace of life and the useless bag of bones that life has left; but we are less practised in observing how an idea, an attitude or a form can pass from the lively to the moribund. It is difficult to define but a child can smell it out. Let me give an example. In France there are two deadly ways of playing classical tragedy. One is traditional, and this involves using a special voice, a special manner, a noble look and an elevated musical delivery. The other way is no more than a half-hearted version of the same thing. Imperial gestures and royal values are fast disappearing from everyday life, so each new generation finds the grand manner more and more hollow, more and more meaningless. This leads the young actor to an angry and impatient search for what he calls truth. He wants to play his

verse more realistically, to get it to sound like honest-to-God real speech, but he finds that the formality of the writing is so rigid that it resists this treatment. He is forced to an uneasy compromise that is neither refreshing, like ordinary talk, nor defiantly histrionic, like what we call ham. So his acting is weak and because ham is strong, it is remembered with a certain nostalgia. Inevitably, someone calls for tragedy to be played once again 'the way it is written'. This is fair enough, but unfortunately all the printed word can tell us is what was written on paper, not how it was once brought to life. There are no records, no tapes – only experts, but not one of them, of course, has firsthand knowledge. The real antiques have all gone – only some imitations have survived, in the shape of traditional actors, who continue to play in a traditional way, drawing their inspiration not from real sources, but from imaginary ones, such as the memory of the sound an older actor once made – a sound that in turn was a memory of a predecessor's way.

I once saw a rehearsal at the Comedie Française – a very young actor stood in front of a very old one and spoke and mimed the role with him like a reflection in a glass. This must not be confused with the great tradition, say, of the Noh actors passing knowledge orally from father to son. There it is meaning that is communicated – and meaning never belongs to the past. It can be checked in each man's own present experience. But to imitate the externals of acting only perpetuates manner – a manner hard to relate to anything at all.

Again with Shakespeare we hear or read the same advice – 'Play what is written'. But what is written? Certain ciphers on paper. Shakespeare's words are records of the words that he wanted to be spoken, words issuing as sounds from people's mouths, with pitch, pause, rhythm and gesture as part of their meaning. A word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour which dictate the need for expression. This process occurs inside the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor. Both may only be conscious of the words, but both

for the author and then for the actor the word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation. Some writers attempt to nail down their meaning and intentions in stage directions and explanations, yet we cannot help being struck by the fact that the best dramatists explain themselves the least. They recognize that further indications will most probably be useless. They recognize that the only way to find the true path to the speaking of a word is through a process that parallels the original creative one. This can neither be by-passed nor simplified. Unfortunately, the moment a lover speaks, or a king utters, we rush to give them a label: the lover is 'romantic', the king is 'noble' – and before we know it we are speaking of romantic love and kingly nobility or princeliness as though they are things we can hold in our hand and expect the actors to observe. But these are not substances and they do not exist. If we search for them, the best we can do is to make guesswork reconstructions from books and paintings. If you ask an actor to play in a 'romantic style' he will valiantly have a go, thinking he knows what you mean. What actually can he draw on? Hunch, imagination and a scrapbook of theatrical memories, all of which will give him a vague 'romanticness' that he will mix up with a disguised imitation of whatever older actor he happens to admire. If he digs into his own experiences the result may not marry with the text; if he just plays what he thinks is the text, it will be imitative and conventional. Either way the result is a compromise: at most times unconvincing.

It is vain to pretend that the words we apply to classical plays like 'musical', 'poetic', 'larger than life', 'noble', 'heroic', 'romantic', have any absolute meaning. They are the reflections of a critical attitude of a particular period, and to attempt to build a performance today to conform to these canons is the most certain road to deadly theatre – deadly theatre of a respectability that makes it pass as living truth.

Once, when giving a lecture on this theme, I was able to put it to a practical test. By luck, there was a woman in the audience who had neither read nor seen *King Lear*. I gave her Goneril's first speech and asked her to recite it as

best she could for whatever values she found in it. She read it very simply – and the speech itself emerged full of eloquence and charm. I then explained that it was supposed to be the speech of a wicked woman and suggested her reading every word for hypocrisy. She tried to do so, and the audience saw what a hard unnatural wrestling with the simple music of the words was involved when she sought to act to a definition:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
Beyond that can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

Anyone can try this for himself. Taste it on the tongue. The words are those of a lady of style and breeding accustomed to expressing herself in public, someone with ease and social aplomb. As for clues to her character, only the façade is presented and this, we see, is elegant and attractive. Yet if one thinks of the performances where Goneril speaks these first lines as a macabre villainess, and looks at the speech again, one is at a loss to know what suggests this – other than preconceptions of Shakespeare's moral attitudes. In fact, if Goneril in her first appearance does not play a 'monster', but merely what her given words suggest, then all the balance of the play changes – and in the subsequent scenes her villainy and Lear's martyrdom are neither as crude nor as simplified as they might appear. Of course, by the end of the play we learn that Goneril's actions make her what we call a monster – but a real monster, both complex and compelling.

In a living theatre, we would each day approach the rehearsal putting yesterday's discoveries to the test, ready to believe that the true play has once again escaped us. But the Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done.

This is the running problem of what we loosely call style.

Every work has its own style: it could not be otherwise: every period has its style. The moment we try to pinpoint this style we are lost. I remember vividly when shortly after the Pekin Opera had come to London a rival Chinese Opera Company followed, from Formosa. The Pekin Company was still in touch with its sources and creating its ancient patterns afresh each night: the Formosan company, doing the same items, was imitating its memories of them, skimping some details, exaggerating the showy passages, forgetting the meaning – nothing was reborn. Even in a strange exotic style the difference between life and death was unmistakable.

The real Pekin Opera was an example of a theatrical art where the outer forms do not change from generation to generation and only a few years ago it seemed as though it were so perfectly frozen that it could carry on for ever. Today, even this superb relic has gone. Its force and its quality enabled it to survive way beyond its time, like a monument – but the day came when the gap between it and the life of the society around it became too great. The Red Guards reflect a different China. Few of the attitudes and meanings of the traditional Pekin Opera relate to the new structure of thought in which this people now lives. Today in Pekin the emperors and princesses have been replaced by landlords and soldiers, and the same incredible acrobatic skills are used to speak of very different themes. To the Westerner this seems a wicked shame and it is easy for us to shed cultivated tears. Of course, it is tragic that this miraculous heritage has been destroyed – and yet I feel that the ruthless Chinese attitude to one of their proudest possessions goes to the heart of the meaning of living theatre – theatre is always a self-destructive art, and it is always written on the wind. A professional theatre assembles different people every night and speaks to them through the language of behaviour. A performance gets set and usually has to be repeated – and repeated as well and accurately as possible – but from the day it is set something invisible is beginning to die.

In the Moscow Art Theatre, in Tel Aviv in the Habimah, productions have been kept going for forty years or more:

I have seen a faithful revival of Vakhtangov's twenties' staging of *Princess Turandot*; I have seen Stanislavsky's own work, perfectly preserved: but none of these had more than antiquarian interest, none had the vitality of new invention. At Stratford where we worry that we don't play our repertoire long enough to milk its full box office value, we now discuss this quite empirically: about five years, we agree, is the most a particular staging can live. It is not only the hair-styles, costumes and make-ups that look dated. All the different elements of staging – the shorthands of behaviour that stand for certain emotions; gestures, gesticulations and tones of voice – are all fluctuating on an invisible stock exchange all the time. Life is moving, influences are playing on actor and audience and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, current events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of the daily truth. In fashion houses someone will thump a table and say 'boots are definitely in': this is an existential fact. A living theatre that thinks it can stand aloof from anything so trivial as fashion will wilt. In the theatre, every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it. In this sense, the theatre is relativity. Yet a great theatre is not a fashion house; perpetual elements do recur and certain fundamental issues underlie all dramatic activity. The deadly trap is to divide the eternal truths from the superficial variations; this is a subtle form of snobbery and it is fatal. For instance, it is accepted that scenery, costumes, music are fair game for directors and designers, and must in fact be renewed. When it comes to attitudes and behaviour we are much more confused, and tend to believe that these elements if true in the writing can continue to express themselves in similar ways.

Closely related to this is the conflict between theatre directors and musicians in opera productions where two totally different forms, drama and music, are treated as though they were one. A musician is dealing with a fabric that is as near as man can get to an expression of the invisible. His score notes this invisibility and his sound is made by

instruments which hardly ever change. The player's personality is unimportant; a thin clarinettist can easily make a fatter sound than a fat one. The vehicle of music is separate from music itself. So the stuff of music comes and goes, always in the same way, free of the need to be revised and reassessed. But the vehicle of drama is flesh and blood and here completely different laws are at work. The vehicle and the message cannot be separated. Only a naked actor can begin to resemble a pure instrument like a violin and only if he has a completely classical physique, with neither paunch nor bandy legs. A ballet dancer is sometimes close to this condition and he can reproduce formal gestures unmodified by his own personality or by the outer movement of life. But the moment the actor dresses up and speaks with his own tongue he is entering the fluctuating territory of manifestation and existence that he shares with the spectator. Because the musician's experience is so different, he finds it hard to follow why the traditional bits of business that made Verdi laugh and Puccini slap his thighs seem neither funny nor illuminating today. Grand opera, of course, is the Deadly Theatre carried to absurdity. Opera is a nightmare of vast feuds over tiny details; of surrealist anecdotes that all turn round the same assertion: nothing needs to change. Everything in opera must change, but in opera change is blocked.

Again we must beware of indignation, for if we try to simplify the problem by making tradition the main barrier between ourselves and a living theatre we will again miss the real issue. There is a deadly element everywhere; in the cultural set-up, in our inherited artistic values, in the economic framework, in the actor's life, in the critic's function. As we examine these we will see that deceptively the opposite seems also true, for within the Deadly Theatre there are often tantalizing, abortive or even momentarily satisfying flickers of a real life.

In New York for instance, the most deadly element is certainly economic. This does not mean that all work done there is bad, but a theatre where a play for economic reasons rehearses for no more than three weeks is crippled at the outset.

Time is not the be-all and end-all: it is not impossible to get an astonishing result in three weeks. Occasionally in the theatre what one loosely calls chemistry, or luck, brings about an astonishing rush of energy, and then invention follows invention in lightning chain reaction. But this is rare: common sense shows that if the system rigidly excludes more than three weeks' rehearsal most of the time, most things suffer. No experimenting can take place, and no real artistic risks are possible. The director must deliver the goods or be fired and so must the actor. Of course time can also be used very badly; it is possible to sit around for months discussing and worrying and improvising without this showing in any way whatsoever. I have seen Shakespearian productions in Russia so conventional in approach that two full years of discussion and study of archives give no better a result than scratch companies get in three weeks. I met an actor who rehearsed Hamlet for seven years and never played it because the director died before it was finished. On the other hand, productions of Russian plays rehearsed in the Stanislavsky manner over years still reach a level of performance of which we can only dream. The Berliner Ensemble uses time well, they use it freely, spending about twelve months on a new production, and over a number of years they have built up a repertoire of shows, every one of which is remarkable – and every one of which fills the theatre to capacity. In simple capitalist terms, this is better business than the commercial theatre where the scrambled and patched shows so seldom succeed. Each season on Broadway or in London a large number of expensive shows fold within a week or two against the rare freak that scrapes through. None the less, the percentage of disasters hasn't jolted the system or the belief that somehow it will all work out in the end. On Broadway ticket prices are continually rising and, ironically, as each season grows more disastrous, each season's hit makes more money. As fewer and fewer people go through the doors, larger and larger sums cross the ticket office counter, until eventually one last millionaire will be paying a fortune for one private performance for himself alone. So it comes about

that what is bad business for some is good business for others. Everyone moans and yet many want the system to go on.

The artistic consequences are severe. Broadway is not a jungle, it is a machine into which a great many parts snugly interlock. Yet each of these parts is brutalized; it has been deformed to fit and function smoothly. This is the only theatre in the world where every artist – by this, I mean designers, composers, lighting electricians, as well as actors – needs an agent for his personal protection. This sounds melodramatic, but in a sense everyone is continually in danger; his job, his reputation, his way of life is in daily balance. In theory, this tension should lead to an atmosphere of fear, and, were this the case, its destructiveness would be clearly seen. In practice, however, the underlying tension leads just as directly to the famous Broadway atmosphere, which is very emotional, throbbing with apparent warmth and good cheer. On the first day of rehearsal of *House of Flowers*, its composer Harold Arlen arrived wearing a blue cornflower, with champagne and presents for us all. As he hugged and kissed his way round the cast, Truman Capote who had written the libretto whispered darkly to me, 'It's love today. The lawyers'll be in tomorrow'. It was true. Pearl Bailey had served me with a 50,000-dollar writ before the show reached town. For a foreigner it was (in retrospect) all fun and exciting – everything is covered and excused by the term 'show business' – but in precise terms the brutal warmth directly relates to the lack of emotional finesse. In such conditions there is rarely the quiet and security in which anyone may dare expose himself. I mean the true unspectacular intimacy that long work and true confidence in other people brings about – on Broadway, a crude gesture of self-exposure is easy to come by, but this has nothing to do with the subtle, sensitive interrelation between people confidently working together. When the Americans envy the British, it is this odd sensibility, this uneven give and take that they mean. They call it style, and regard it as a mystery. When you cast a play in New York and you are told that a certain actor 'has style', this usually means an imitation of an imitation of a European. In the

American theatre, people talk seriously of style, as though this was a manner that could be acquired – and the actors who have played the classics and have been flattered by critics into believing that they have 'it', do everything to perpetuate the notion that style is a rare something that a few gentleman actors possess. Yet America could easily have a great theatre of its own. It possesses every one of the elements; there is a strength, courage, humour, cash and a capacity for facing hard facts.

One morning I stood in the Museum of Modern Art looking at the people swarming in for one dollar admission. Almost every one of them had the lively head and the individual look of a good audience – using the simple personal standard of an audience for whom one would like to do plays. In New York, potentially, there is one of the best audiences in the world. Unfortunately, it seldom goes to the theatre.

It seldom goes to the theatre because the prices are too high. Certainly it can afford these prices, but it has been let down too often. It is not for nothing that New York is the place where the critics are the most powerful and the toughest in the world. It is the audience, year after year, that has been forced to elevate simple fallible men into highly priced experts because, as when a collector buys an expensive work, he cannot afford to take the risk alone: the tradition of the expert valuers of works of art, like Duveen, has reached the box office line. So the circle is closed; not only the artists, but also the audience, have to have their protection men – and most of the curious, intelligent, nonconforming individuals stay away. This situation is not unique to New York. I had a closely related experience when we put on John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* in Paris at the Athenée. It was a true flop – almost all the Press was bad – and we were playing to virtually empty houses. Convinced that the play had an audience somewhere in the town, we announced that we would give three free performances. Such was the lure of complimentary tickets that they became like wild premières. Crowds fought to get in, the police had to

draw iron grilles across the foyer, and the play itself went magnificently, as the actors, cheered by the warmth of the house, gave their best performance, which in turn earned them an ovation. The theatre which the night before had been a draughty morgue now hummed with the chatter and buzz of success. At the end, we put up the house lights and looked at the audience. Mostly young, they were all well dressed, rather formal, in suits and ties. Françoise Spira, directress of the theatre, came on the stage.

'Is there anyone here who could not afford the price of a ticket?'

One man put up his hand.

'And the rest of you, why did you have to wait to be let in for free?'

'It had a bad Press.'

'Do you believe the Press?'

Loud chorus of 'No!'

'Then, why. . . ?'

And from all sides the same answer – the risk is too great, too many disappointments. Here we see how the vicious circle is drawn. Steadily the Deadly Theatre digs its own grave.

Or else we can attack the problem the other way round. If good theatre depends on a good audience, then every audience has the theatre it deserves. Yet it must be very hard for spectators to be told of an audience's responsibility. How can this be faced in practice? It would be a sad day if people went to the theatre out of duty. Once within a theatre an audience cannot whip itself into being 'better' than it is. In a sense there is nothing a spectator can actually do. And yet there is a contradiction here that cannot be ignored, for everything depends on him.

When the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *King Lear* toured through Europe the production was steadily improving and the best performances lay between Budapest and Moscow. It was fascinating to see how an audience composed largely of people with little knowledge of English could so influence a cast. These audiences brought

with them three things; a love for the play itself, real hunger for a contact with foreigners and, above all, an experience of life in Europe in the last years that enabled them to come directly to the play's painful themes. The quality of the attention that this audience brought expressed itself in silence and concentration; a feeling in the house that affected the actors as though a brilliant light were turned on their work. As a result, the most obscure passages were illuminated; they were played with a complexity of meaning and a fine use of the English language that few of the audience could literally follow, but which all could sense. The actors were moved and excited and they proceeded to the United States, prepared to give to an English-speaking audience all that this focus had taught them. I was forced to go back to England and only caught up with the company a few weeks later in Philadelphia. To my surprise and dismay, much of the quality had gone from their acting. I wanted to blame the actors, but it was clear that they were trying as hard as they could. It was the relation with the audience that had changed. In Philadelphia, the audience understood English all right, but this audience was composed largely of people who were not interested in the play; people who came for all the conventional reasons – because it was a social event, because their wives insisted, and so on. Undoubtedly, a way existed to involve this particular audience in *King Lear*, but it was not our way. The austerity of this production which had seemed so right in Europe no longer made sense. Seeing people yawn, I felt guilty, realizing that something else was demanded from us all. I knew that were I doing a production of *King Lear* for the people of Philadelphia I would without condescension stress everything differently – and, in immediate terms, I would get it to work better. But with an established production on tour I could do nothing. The actors, however, were instinctively responding to the new situation. They were underlining everything in the play that could arrest the spectator – that is to say, when there was a bit of exciting action or a burst of melodrama, they exploited it, they played louder and cruder and of course whipped past

those intricate passages that the non-English audience had so enjoyed – which, ironically, only an English-speaking audience could have appreciated to the full. Eventually our impressario took the play to the Lincoln Centre in New York – a giant auditorium where the acoustics were bad and the audience resented its poor contact with the stage. We were put in this vast theatre for economic reasons: a simple illustration of how a closed circle of cause and effect is produced, so that the wrong audience or the wrong place or both conjures from the actors their coarsest work. Again, the actors, responding to the given conditions, had no choice, they faced the front, spoke loudly and quite rightly threw away all that had become precious in their work. This danger is built into every tour, because in a sense few of the conditions of the original performance apply – and contact with each new audience is often a matter of luck. In the old days, the strolling players naturally adapted their work to each new place: elaborate modern productions have no such flexibility. In fact, when we played 'US', the Royal Shakespeare Theatre's group-happening-collaborative spectacle on the Vietnam war, we decided to refuse all invitations to tour. Every element in it had come into being just for the particular cross-section of London that sat in the Aldwych Theatre in 1966. The fact that we had no text wrought and set by a dramatist was the condition of this particular experiment. Contact with the audience, through shared references, became the substance of the evening. Had we a shaped text, we could have played in other places, without one we were like a happening – and in the event, we all felt that something was lost in playing it even through a London season of five months. One performance would have been the true culmination. We made the mistake of feeling obligated to enter our own repertoire. A repertoire repeats, and to repeat something must be fixed. The rules of British censorship prevent actors adapting and improvising in performance. So in this case, the fixing was the beginning of a slide towards the deadly – the liveliness of the actors waned as the immediacy of the relation with their public and their theme lessened.

During a talk to a group at a university I once tried to illustrate how an audience affects actors by the quality of its attention. I asked for a volunteer. A man came forward, and I gave him a sheet of paper on which was typed a speech from Peter Weiss's play about Auschwitz, *The Investigation*. The section was a description of bodies inside a gas chamber. As the volunteer took the paper and read it over to himself the audience tittered in the way an audience always does when it sees one of its kind on the way to making a fool of himself. But the volunteer was too struck and too appalled by what he was reading to react with the sheepish grins that are also customary. Something of his seriousness and concentration reached the audience and it fell silent. Then at my request he began to read out loud. The very first words were loaded with their own ghastly sense and the reader's response to them. Immediately the audience understood. It became one with him, with the speech – the lecture room and the volunteer who had come on to the platform vanished from sight – the naked evidence from Auschwitz was so powerful that it took over completely. Not only did the reader continue to speak in a shocked attentive silence, but his reading, technically speaking, was perfect – it had neither grace nor lack of grace, skill nor lack of skill – it was perfect because he had no attention to spare for self-consciousness, for wondering whether he was using the right intonation. He knew the audience wanted to hear, and he wanted to let them hear: the images found their own level and guided his voice unconsciously to the appropriate volume and pitch.

After this, I asked for another volunteer, and gave him the speech from *Henry V* which lists the names and numbers of the French and English dead. When he read this aloud, all the faults of the amateur actor appeared. One look at the volume of Shakespeare had already set off a series of conditioned reflexes to do with speaking verse. He put on a false voice that strived to be noble and historical, mouthed his words roundly, made awkward stresses, got tongue-tied, stiff, and confused, and the audience listened inattentive and restless. When he had done, I asked the audience why they

could not take the list of dead at Agincourt as seriously as the description of death at Auschwitz. This provoked a lively exchange.

'Agincourt's in the past.'

'But Auschwitz is in the past.'

'Only fifteen years.'

'So how long's it got to take?'

'When's a corpse a historical corpse?'

'How many years make killing romantic?'

After this had gone on for some time, I proposed an experiment. The amateur actor was to read the speech again, stopping for a moment after each name: the audience was to endeavour silently in the pause to recall and put together its impressions of Auschwitz and Agincourt, to try to find a way of believing that these names were once individuals, as vividly as if the butchery had occurred in living memory. The amateur began to read again and the audience worked hard, playing its part. As he spoke the first name, the half silence became a dense one. Its tension caught the reader, there was an emotion in it, shared between him and them and it turned all his attention away from himself on to the subject matter he was speaking. Now the audience's concentration began to guide him: his inflexions were simple, his rhythms true: this in turn increased the audience's interest and so the two-way current began to flow. When this was ended, no explanations were needed, the audience had seen itself in action, it had seen how many layers silence can contain.

Of course, like all experiments, this was an artificial one: here, the audience was given an unusually active role and as a result it directed an inexperienced actor. Usually, an experienced actor reading a passage like this will impose a silence on an audience that is in proportion to the degree of truth he brings to it. Occasionally, an actor can completely dominate any house, and so, like a master matador, he can work the audience the way he pleases. Usually, however, this cannot come from the stage alone. For instance, both the actors and myself found *The Visit* and *Marat/Sade* more rewarding to play in America than in England. The English

refused to take *The Visit* on its own terms; the story told of the ruthlessness latent in any small community, and when we played in the English provinces, to virtually empty houses, the reaction of those who came was 'it's not real', 'it couldn't happen', and they enjoyed it or disliked it on the level of fantasy. The *Marat/Sade* was liked in London not so much as a play about revolution, war and madness as a display of theatricality. The opposing words 'literary' and 'theatrical' have many meanings, but in the English theatre, when used as praise, they all too often describe ways of warding off contact with disturbing themes. The American audience reacted to both plays much more directly, they accepted and believed the propositions that man is greedy and murderous, a potential lunatic. They were caught and held by the material of the drama, and in the case of *The Visit* they often did not even comment on the fact that the story was being told to them in a somewhat unfamiliar, expressionistic way. They simply discussed what the play had said. The great Kazan-Williams-Miller hits, Albee's *Virginia Woolf*, summoned audiences that met the cast in the true shared territory of theme and concern – and they were powerful events, the circle of performance was riveting and complete.

In America, in powerful waves, comes a recognition of the deadly, and a strong reaction against it. Years ago, the Actors' Studio came into being to give a faith and continuity to those unhappy artists who were being so rapidly thrown in and out of work. Basing a very serious and systematic study on a portion of Stanislavsky's teaching, the Actors' Studio developed a very remarkable school of acting that corresponded perfectly to the needs of the playwrights and public of the time. Actors still had to give results in three weeks, but they were sustained by the school's tradition and they did not come empty-handed to the first rehearsal. This background of teaching gave a strength and integrity to their work. The Method Actor was trained to reject cliché imitations of reality and to search for something more real in himself. He then had to present this through the living of it, and so acting

became a deeply naturalistic study. 'Reality' is a word with many meanings, but here it was understood to be that slice of the real that reflected the people and the problems around the actor, and it coincided with the slices of existence that the writers of the day, Miller, Tennessee Williams, Inge, were trying to define. In much the same way Stanislavsky's theatre drew its strength from the fact that it corresponded to the needs of the best Russian classics, all of which were cast in a naturalistic form. For a number of years in Russia, the school, the public and the play had made a coherent whole. Then Meyerhold challenged Stanislavsky, proposing a different style of playing, in order to capture other elements of 'reality'. But Meyerhold disappeared. In America today, the time is ripe for a Meyerhold to appear, since naturalistic representations of life no longer seems to Americans adequate to express the forces that drive them. Now Genet is discussed, Shakespeare re-evaluated, Artaud quoted: there is a lot of talk about ritual: and all this for very realistic reasons, as many concrete aspects of American living can only be captured along these lines. Just a short time ago, the English were full of envy for the vitality of the American theatre. Now the pendulum swings towards London, as though the English hold all the keys. Years ago I saw a girl at the Actors' Studio approaching a speech of Lady Macbeth's by pretending to be a tree: when I described this in England it sounded comic, and even today many English actors have yet to discover why odd-sounding exercises are so necessary. In New York, however, the girl did not need to learn about group work and improvisations, she had accepted these, and she needed to understand about the meaning and demands of form; standing with her arms in the air trying to 'feel', she was pouring her ardour and energy uselessly in the wrong direction.

All this brings us back to the same problem. The word theatre has many sloppy meanings. In most of the world, the theatre has no exact place in society, no clear purpose, it only exists in fragments: one theatre chases money, another chases glory, another chases emotion, another chases politics,

another chases fun. The actor is bundled from pillar to post – confused and consumed by conditions outside his control. Actors may sometimes seem jealous or trivial, yet I have never known an actor who did not want to work. This wish to work is his strength. It is what enables professionals everywhere to understand each other. But he cannot reform his profession alone. In a theatre with few schools and no aims, he is usually the tool, not the instrument. Yet when the theatre does come back to the actor, the problem is still not solved. On the contrary, deadly acting becomes the heart of the crisis.

The dilemma of the actor is not unique to commercial theatres with inadequate rehearsal time. Singers and often dancers keep their teachers by them to the end of their days: actors once launched have nothing whatsoever to help them to develop their talents. If this is seen most alarmingly in the commercial theatre, the same applies to permanent companies. After he reaches a certain position the actor does no more homework. Take a young actor, unformed, undeveloped, but bursting with talent, full of latent possibilities. Quite rapidly he discovers what he can do, and, after mastering his initial difficulties, with a bit of luck he may find himself in the enviable position of having a job which he loves, doing it well while getting paid and admired at the same time. If he is to develop, the next stage must be to go beyond his apparent range, and to begin to explore what really comes hard. But no one has time for this sort of problem. His friends are little use, his parents are unlikely to know much about his art, and his agent, who may be well-meaning and intelligent, is not there to guide him past good offers of good parts towards a vague something else that would be even better. Building a career and artistic development do not necessarily go hand in hand; often the actor, as his career grows, begins to turn in work that gets more and more similar. It is a wretched story, and all the exceptions blur the truth.

How does the average actor spend his days? Of course, it's a wide range: from lying in bed, drinking, going to the hair-

dresser, to the agent, filming, recording, reading, sometimes studying; even, latterly, toying a bit with politics. But whether his use of time is frivolous or earnest is beside the point: little that he does relates to his main preoccupation – not to stand still as an actor – which means not to stand still as a human being, which means work aimed at his artistic growth – and where can such work take place? Time after time I have worked with actors who after the usual preamble that they ‘put themselves in my hands’ are tragically incapable however hard they try of laying down for one brief instant even in rehearsal the image of themselves that has hardened round an inner emptiness. On the occasions that it is possible to penetrate this shell, it is like smashing the picture on a television set.

In England, it seems suddenly that we have a marvellous new breed of young actors – we feel we are witnessing two lines of men in a factory facing opposite directions: one line shuffles out grey, tired, the other strides forward fresh and vital. We get the impression that one line is better than the other, that the lively line is made of better stock. This is partly true, but in the end the new shift will be as tired and grey as the old; it is an inevitable result of certain conditions that have not yet changed. The tragedy is that the professional status of actors over the age of 30 is seldom a true reflection of their talents. There are countless actors who never have the chance to develop their inborn potential to its proper fruition. Naturally, in an individualist profession, false and exaggerated importance is given to exceptional cases. Outstanding actors like all real artists have some mysterious psychic chemistry, half conscious and yet three-quarters hidden, that they themselves may only define as ‘instinct’, ‘hunch’, ‘my voices’, that enables them to develop their vision and their art. Special cases may follow special rules: one of the greatest actresses of our time who seems in rehearsal to be observing no method whatsoever actually has an extraordinary system of her own which she can only articulate in nursery language. ‘Kneading the flour today, darling,’ she has said to me. ‘Putting it back to bake a bit

longer', 'Need some yeast now', 'We're basting this morning'. No matter: this is precise science, just as much as if she gave it the terminology of the Actors' Studio. But her ability to get results stays with her alone: she cannot communicate it in any useful way to the people around her, so while she is 'cooking her pie' and the next actor is just 'doing it the way he feels it,' and the third in drama school language, is 'searching for the Stanislavskian super-objective', no real working-together between them all is possible. It has long been recognized that without a permanent company few actors can thrive indefinitely. However, it must also be faced that even a permanent company is doomed to deadliness in the long run if it is without an aim, and thus without a method, and thus without a school. And by a school, naturally I don't mean a gymnasium where the actor exercises his limbs in limbo. Flexing muscles alone cannot develop an art; scales don't make a pianist nor does fingerwork help a painter's brush: yet a great pianist practises finger exercises for many hours a day, and Japanese painters spend their lives practising to draw a perfect circle. The art of acting is in some ways the most exacting one of all, and without constant schooling, the actor will stop half-way.

So when we find deadliness, who is the culprit? Enough has been said publicly and privately to make the critics' ears burn, to make us believe that it is from them that the worst deadliness really stems. Over the years we moan and grumble about 'the Critics' as though it were always the same six men hurtling by jet, from Paris to New York, from art show to concert to the play, always committing the same monumental errors. Or as though they were all like Thomas à Becket – the jolly, whoring friend of the King who the day he became Cardinal turned as disapproving as all his predecessors: critics come and go, yet those who are criticized generally find 'them' the same. Our system, the newspapers, the reader's demands, the notice dictated by phone, the problems of space, the quantity of rubbish in our play-houses, the soul-destroying effect of doing the same job often and too long, all conspire to prevent a critic from exercising

his vital function. When the man in the street goes to the theatre he can claim just to serve his own pleasure. When a critic goes to a play, he can say he is just serving the man in the street, but it is not accurate. He is not just a tipster. A critic has a far more important role, an essential one, in fact, for an art without critics would be constantly menaced by far greater dangers.

For instance, a critic is always serving the theatre when he is hounding out incompetence. If he spends most of his time grumbling, he is almost always right. The appalling difficulty of making theatre must be accepted: it is, or would be, if truly practised, perhaps the hardest medium of all: it is merciless, there is no room for error, or for waste. A novel can survive the reader who skips pages, or entire chapters; the audience, apt to change from pleasure to boredom in a wink can be lost, irrevocably. Two hours is a short time and an eternity: to use two hours of public time is a fine art. Yet this art with its frightening exigencies is served largely by casual labour. In a deadly vacuum there are few places where we can properly learn the arts of the theatre – so we tend to drop in on the theatre offering love instead of science. This is what the unfortunate critic is nightly called to judge.

Incompetence is the vice, the condition and the tragedy of the world's theatre on any level: for every good light comedy or musical or political revue or verse play or classic that we see there are scores of others that most of the time are betrayed by a lack of elementary skills. The techniques of staging, designing, speaking, walking across a stage, sitting – even listening – just aren't sufficiently known; compare the little it takes – except luck – to get work in many of the theatres of the world with the minimum level of skill demanded say in piano playing: think of how many thousands of music teachers in thousands of small cities can play all the notes of the most difficult passages of Liszt or sight-read Scriabin. Compared with the simple ability of musicians most of our work is at amateur level most of the time. A critic will see far more incompetence than competence in his theatregoing. I was once asked to direct an

opera at a Middle Eastern opera house which wrote frankly in its letter of invitation 'our orchestra has not all the instruments and plays some wrong notes but our audiences so far have not noticed'. Fortunately, the critic does tend to notice and in this sense, his angriest reaction is valuable – it is a call for competence. This is a vital function, but he has still another one. He is a pathmaker.

The critic joins in the deadly game when he does not accept this responsibility, when he belittles his own importance. A critic is usually a sincere and decent man acutely aware of the human aspects of his job; one of the famous 'Butchers of Broadway' was said to have been tormented by the knowledge that on him alone depended people's happiness and future. Still, even if he is aware of his power of destruction, he underrates his power for good. When the *status quo* is rotten – and few critics anywhere would dispute this – the only possibility is to judge events in relation to a possible goal. This goal should be the same for artist and critic – the moving towards a less deadly, but, as yet, largely undefined theatre. This is our eventual purpose, our shared aim, and noting all the sign-posts and footprints on the way is our common task. Our relations with critics may be strained in a superficial sense: but in a deeper one the relationship is absolutely necessary: like the fish in the ocean, we need one another's devouring talents to perpetuate the sea bed's existence. However, this devouring is not nearly enough: we need to share the endeavour to rise to the surface. This is what is hard for all of us. The critic is part of the whole and whether he writes his notices fast or slow, short or long, is not really important. Has he an image of how a theatre could be in his community and is he revising this image around each experience he receives? How many critics see their job this way?

It is for this reason that the more the critic becomes an insider, the better. I see nothing but good in a critic plunging into our lives, meeting actors, talking, discussing, watching, intervening. I would welcome his putting his hands on the medium and attempting to work it himself. Certainly, there

is a tiny social problem – how does a critic talk to someone whom he has just damned in print? Momentary awkwardnesses may arise – but it is ludicrous to think that it is largely this that deprives some critics of a vital contact with the work of which they are a part. The embarrassment on his side and ours can easily be lived down and certainly a closer relation with the work will in no way put the critic into the position of connivance with the people he has got to know. The criticism that theatre people make of one another is usually of devastating severity – but absolutely precise. The critic who no longer enjoys the theatre is obviously a deadly critic, the critic who loves the theatre but is not critically clear what this means, is also a deadly critic: the vital critic is the critic who has clearly formulated for himself what the theatre could be – and who is bold enough to throw this formula into jeopardy each time he participates in a theatrical event.

The worst problem for the professional critic is that he is seldom asked to expose himself to scorching events that change his thinking: it is hard for him to retain his enthusiasm, when there are few good plays anywhere in the world. Year after year, there is rich new material pouring into the cinema; yet all the theatres can do is make an unhappy choice between great traditional writing or far less good modern works. We are now in another area of the problem, also considered to be central: the dilemma of the deadly writer.

It is woefully difficult to write a play. A playwright is required by the very nature of drama to enter into the spirit of opposing characters. He is not a judge; he is a creator – and even if his first attempt at drama concerns only two people, whatever the style he is still required to live fully with them both. The job of shifting oneself totally from one character to another – a principle on which all of Shakespeare and all of Chekhov is built – is a super-human task at any time. It takes unique talents and perhaps ones that do not even correspond with our age. If the work of the beginner-playwright often seems thin, it may well be because his range of human sympathy is still unstretched – on the other hand, nothing seems

more suspect than the mature middle-aged man of letters who sits down to invent characters and then tell us all their secrets. The French revulsion against the classic form of the novel was a reaction from the omniscience of the author: if you ask Marguerite Duras what her character is feeling she will often reply, 'How do I know?'; if you ask Robbe Grillet why a character has made a certain action he could answer, 'All I know for sure is that he opened the door with his right hand'. But this way of thinking hasn't reached the French theatre, where it is still the author who at the first rehearsal does a one-man show, reading out and performing all the parts. This is the most exaggerated form of a tradition that dies hard everywhere. The author has been forced to make a virtue of his specialness, and to turn his literariness into a crutch for a self-importance that in his heart he knows is not justified by his work. Maybe a need for privacy is a deep part of an author's make-up. It is possible that it is only with the door closed, communing with himself, that he can wrestle into form inner images and conflicts of which he would never speak in public. We do not know how Aeschylus or Shakespeare worked. All we know is that gradually the relationship between the man who sits at home working it all out on paper and the world of actors and stages is getting more and more tenuous, more and more unsatisfactory. The best English writing is coming out of the theatre itself: Wesker, Arden, Osborne, Pinter, to take obvious examples, are all directors and actors as well as authors – and at times they even have been involved as impresarios.

None the less, whether scholar or actor, too few authors are what we could truly call inspiring or inspired. If the author were a master and not a victim one could say that he had betrayed the theatre. As it is, one can say that he is betraying by omission – the authors are failing to rise to the challenge of their times. Of course, there are exceptions, brilliant, startling ones, here and there. But I am thinking again of the quantity of new creative work poured into films compared with the world's output of new dramatic texts. When new plays set out to imitate reality, we are more conscious of what is imitative

than what is real: if they explore character, it is seldom that they go far beyond stereotypes; if it is argument they offer, it is seldom that argument is taken to arresting extremes; even if it is a quality of life that they wish to evoke, we are usually offered no more than the literary quality of the well-turned phrase; if it is social criticism they are after, it seldom touches the heart of any social target; if they wish for laughter, it is usually by well-worn means.

As a result, we are often forced to choose between reviving old plays or staging new plays which we find inadequate, just as a gesture towards the present day. Or else to attempt to initiate a play – as, for example, when a group of actors and writers in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, wanting a play on Vietnam that did not exist, set out to make one, using techniques of improvisation and authorless invention to fill the vacuum. Group creation can be infinitely richer, if the group is rich, than the product of weak individualism – yet it proves nothing. There is eventually a need for authorship to reach the ultimate compactness and focus that collective work is almost obliged to miss.

In theory few men are as free as a playwright. He can bring the whole world on to his stage. But in fact he is strangely timid. He looks at the whole of life, and like all of us he only sees a tiny fragment; a fragment, one aspect of which catches his fancy. Unfortunately he rarely searches to relate his detail to any larger structure – it is as though he accepts without question his intuition as complete, his reality as all of reality. It is as though his belief in his subjectivity as his instrument and his strength precludes him from any dialectic between what he sees and what he apprehends. So there is either the author who explores his inner experience in depth and darkness, or else the author who shuns these areas, exploring the outside world – each one thinks his world is complete. If Shakespeare had never existed we would quite understandably theorize that the two can never combine. The Elizabethan Theatre did exist, though – and awkwardly enough we have this example constantly hanging over our heads. Four hundred years ago it was possible for a dramatist to wish

to bring the pattern of events in the outside world, the inner events of complex men isolated as individuals, the vast tug of their fears and aspirations into open conflict. Drama was exposure, it was confrontation, it was contradiction and it led to analysis, involvement, recognition and, eventually, to an awakening of understanding. Shakespeare was not a peak without a base, floating magically on a cloud: he was supported by scores of lesser dramatists, naturally with lesser and lesser talents – but sharing the same ambition for wrestling with what Hamlet calls the forms and pressures of the age. Yet a neo-Elizabethan theatre based on verse and pageantry would be a monstrosity. This compels us to look at the problem more closely and try to find out what exactly the special Shakespeare qualities are. One simple fact emerges at once. Shakespeare used the same unit that is available today – a few hours of public time. He used this time span to cram together, second for second, a quantity of lively material of incredible richness. This material exists simultaneously on an infinite variety of levels, it plunges deep and reaches high: the technical devices, the use of verse and prose, the many changing scenes, exciting, funny, disturbing, were the ones the author was compelled to develop to satisfy his needs: and the author had a precise, human and social aim which gave him reason for searching for his themes, reason for searching for his means, reason for making theatre. We see the present-day author still locked in the prisons of anecdote, consistency and style, conditioned by the relics of Victorian values to think ambition and pretension dirty words. How desperately he needs both. If only he were ambitious, if only he were to comb the sky! For as long as he is an ostrich, an isolated ostrich, this can never happen. Before he can raise his head he too must face the same crisis. He too must discover what he believes a theatre to be.

Naturally, an author can only work with what he has got and cannot leap out of his sensibility. He cannot talk himself into being better or other than he is. He can only write about what he sees and thinks and feels. But one thing can amend the instrument at his disposal. The more clearly he recog-

nizes the missing links in his relationships – the more accurately he experiences that he is never deep enough in enough aspects of life, nor deep enough in enough aspects of the theatre, that his necessary seclusion is also his prison – the more then can he begin to find ways of connecting strands of observation and experience which at present remain unlinked.

Let me try to define more precisely the issue that confronts the writer. The theatre's needs have changed, yet the difference is not simply one of fashion. It is not as though fifty years ago one type of theatre was in vogue while today the author who feels the 'pulse of the public' can find his way to the new idiom. The difference is that for a long time playwrights have very successfully traded on applying to the theatre values from other fields. If a man could 'write' – and writing meant the ability to put together words and phrases in a stylish and elegant manner – then this was accepted as a start towards good writing in the theatre. If a man could invent a good plot, good twists, or what's described as 'understanding human nature' these were all considered to be at least stepping-stones towards fine playwriting. Now the lukewarm virtues of good craftsmanship, sound construction, effective curtains, crisp dialogue have all been thoroughly debunked. Not least, the influences of television has been to accustom viewers of all classes all over the world to make instant judgment – at the moment they catch sight of a shot on the screen – so that the average adult continually situates scenes and characters unaided, without a 'good craftsman' helping with exposition and explanation. The steady discrediting of non-theatre virtues is now beginning to clear the way for other virtues. These are in fact more closely related to the theatre form and also they are more exacting ones. Because if one starts from the premise that a stage is a stage – not a convenient place for the unfolding of a staged novel or a staged poem or a staged lecture or a staged story – then the word that is spoken on this stage exists, or fails to exist, only in relation to the tensions it creates on that stage within the given stage circumstances. In other words, although the dramatist brings his own life nurtured by the life around

him into his work – the empty stage is no ivory tower – the choices he makes and the values he observes are only powerful in proportion to what they create in the language of theatre. Many examples of this can be seen wherever an author for moral or political reasons attempts to use a play as the bearer of a message. Whatever the value of this message, in the end it only works according to values that belong to the stage itself. An author today can easily cheat himself if he thinks that he can 'use' a conventional form as a vehicle. This was true when conventional forms still had life for their audience. Today when no conventional forms stand up any more, even the author who doesn't care about theatre as such, but only about what he is trying to say, is compelled to begin at the root – by facing the problem of the very nature of dramatic utterance. There is no way out – unless he is prepared to settle for a second-hand vehicle that's no longer in working order and very unlikely to take him to where he wants to go. Here the author's real problem and the director's real problem go hand in glove.

When I hear a director speaking glibly of serving the author, of letting a play speak for itself, my suspicions are aroused, because this is the hardest job of all. If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it. This demands many deliberate actions and the result may have great simplicity. However, setting out to 'be simple' can be quite negative, an easy evasion of the exacting steps to the simple answer.

It is a strange role, that of the director: he does not ask to be God and yet his role implies it. He wants to be fallible, and yet an instinctive conspiracy of the actors is to make him the arbiter, because an arbiter is so desperately wanted all the time. In a sense the director is always an imposter, a guide at night who does not know the territory, and yet he has no choice – he must guide, learning the route as he goes. Deadliness often lies in wait when he does not recognize this situation, and hopes for the best, when it is the worst that he needs to face.

Deadliness always brings us back to repetition: the deadly director uses old formulae, old methods, old jokes, old effects; stock beginnings to scenes, stock ends; and this applies equally to his partners, the designers and composers, if they do not start each time afresh from the void, the desert and the true question – why clothes at all, why music, what for? A deadly director is a director who brings no challenge to the conditioned reflexes that every department must contain.

For half a century at least, it has been accepted that the theatre is a unity and that all elements should try to blend – this has led to the emergence of the director. But it has largely been a matter of external unity, a fairly external blending of styles so that contradictory styles do not jar. When we consider how the inner unity of a complex work can be expressed we may find quite the reverse – that a jarring of externals is quite essential. When we go further and consider the audience – and the society from which the audience comes – the true unity of all these elements may best be served by factors that by other standards seem ugly, discordant and destructive.

A stable and harmonious society might need only to look for ways of reflecting and reaffirming its harmony in its theatres. Such theatres could set out to unite cast and audience in a mutual 'yes'. But a shifting, chaotic world often must choose between a playhouse that offers a spurious 'yes' or a provocation so strong that it splinters its audience into fragments of vivid 'nos'.

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Lecturing on these themes has taught me a great deal. I know that at this point someone always leaps up in the audience to ask whether (a) I think that all theatres that are not up to the loftiest standards should be closed or (b) whether I think it's a bad thing for people to enjoy themselves at a good entertainment or (c) what about the amateurs?

My reply usually is that I would never like to be a censor, ban anything or spoil anyone's fun. I have the greatest regard

for the repertory theatres, and for groups all through the world struggling against great odds to sustain the level of their work. I have the greatest respect for other people's pleasure and particularly for anyone's frivolity. I came to the theatre myself for sensual and often irresponsible reasons. Entertainment is fine. But I still ask my questioners whether they really feel on the whole that theatres give them what they expect or want.

I don't particularly mind waste, but I think it's a pity not to know what one is wasting. Some old ladies use pound notes as bookmarks: this is only silly if it is absent-minded.

The problem of the Deadly Theatre is like the problem of the deadly bore. Every deadly bore has head, heart, arms, legs: usually, he has family and friends: he even has his admirers. Yet we sigh when we come across him – and in this sigh we are regretting that somehow he is at the bottom instead of the top of his possibilities. When we say deadly, we never mean dead: we mean something depressingly active, but for this very reason capable of change. The first step towards this change is facing the simple unattractive fact that most of what is called theatre anywhere in the world is a travesty of a word once full of sense. War or peace, the colossal bandwagon of culture trundles on, carrying each artist's traces to the evermounting garbage heap. Theatres, actors, critics and public are interlocked in a machine that creaks, but never stops. There is always a new season in hand and we are too busy to ask the only vital question which measures the whole structure. Why theatre at all? What for? Is it an anachronism, a superannuated oddity, surviving like an old monument or a quaint custom? Why do we applaud, and what? Has the stage a real place in our lives? What function can it have? What could it serve? What could it explore? What are its special properties?

In Mexico, before the wheel was invented, gangs of slaves had to carry giant stones through the jungle and up the mountains, while their children pulled their toys on tiny rollers. The slaves made the toys, but for centuries failed to make the connection. When good actors play in bad

comedies or second-rate musicals, when audiences applaud indifferent classics because they enjoy just the costumes or just the way the sets change, or just the prettiness of the leading actress, there is nothing wrong. But none the less, have they noticed what is underneath the toy they are dragging on a string? It's a wheel.