

2

The Holy Theatre

I AM calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible – Made – Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes. We observe that the behaviour of people, of crowds, of history, obeys such recurrent patterns. We hear that trumpets destroyed the walls of Jericho, we recognize that a magical thing called music can come from men in white ties and tails, blowing, waving, thumping and scraping away. Despite the absurd means that produce it, through the concrete in music we recognize the abstract, we understand that ordinary men and their clumsy instruments are transformed by an art of possession. We may make a personality cult of the conductor, but we are aware that he is not really making the music, it is making him – if he is relaxed, open and attuned, then the invisible will take possession of him; through him, it will reach us.

This is the notion, the true dream behind the debased ideals of the Deadly Theatre. This is what is meant and remembered by those who with feeling and seriousness use big hazy words like nobility, beauty, poetry, which I would like to re-examine for the particular quality they suggest. The theatre is the last forum where idealism is still an open question: many audiences all over the world will answer positively from their own experience that they have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life. They will maintain that

Oedipus or *Berenice* or *Hamlet* or *The Three Sisters* performed with beauty and with love fires the spirit and gives them a reminder that daily drabness is not necessarily all. When they reproach the contemporary theatre for its kitchen sinks and cruelties, this, honourably, is what they are trying to say. They remember how during the war the romantic theatre, the theatre of colours and sounds, of music and movement, came like water to the thirst of dry lives. At that time, it was called escape and yet the word was only partially accurate. It was an escape, but also a reminder: a sparrow in a prison cell. When the war was over, the theatre again strove even more vigorously to find the same values.

The theatre of the late '40s had many glories: it was the theatre of Jouvett and Bérard, and of Jean-Louis Barrault, of Clavé at the ballet, *Don Juan*, *Amphitryon*, *La Folle de Chaillot*, *Carmen*, John Gielgud's revival of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *Peer Gynt* at the Old Vic, Olivier's *Oedipus*, Olivier's *Richard III*, *The Lady's not for Burning*, *Venus Observed*; of Massine at Covent Garden under the birdcage in the *The Three-Cornered Hat* just as he had been fifteen years before – this was a theatre of colour and movement, of fine fabrics, of shadows, of eccentric, cascading words, of leaps of thought and of cunning machines, of lightness and of all forms of mystery and surprise – it was the theatre of a battered Europe that seemed to share one aim – a reaching back towards a memory of lost grace.

Walking along the Reeperbahn in Hamburg on an afternoon in 1946, whilst a damp dispiriting grey mist whirled round the desperate mutilated tarts, some on crutches, noses mauve, cheeks hollow, I saw a crowd of children pushing excitedly into a night club door. I followed them. On the stage was a bright blue sky. Two seedy, spangled clowns sat on a painted cloud on their way to visit the Queen of Heaven. 'What shall we ask her for?' said one. 'Dinner,' said the other and the children screamed approval. 'What shall we have for dinner?' 'Schinken, leberwurst . . .' the clown began to list all the unobtainable foods and the squeals of excitement were gradually replaced by a hush – a hush that settled into a deep

and true theatrical silence. An image was being made real, in answer to the need for something that was not there.

In the burnt-out shell of the Hamburg Opera only the stage itself remained – but an audience assembled on it whilst against the back wall on a wafer-thin set singers clambered up and down to perform *The Barber of Seville*, because nothing would stop them doing so. In a tiny attic fifty people crammed together while in the inches of remaining space a handful of the best actors resolutely continued to practise their art. In a ruined Düsseldorf, a minor Offenbach about smugglers and bandits filled the theatre with delight. There was nothing to discuss, nothing to analyse – in Germany that winter, as in London a few years before, the theatre was responding to a hunger. What, however, was this hunger? Was it a hunger for the invisible, a hunger for a reality deeper than the fullest form of everyday life – or was it a hunger for the missing things of life, a hunger, in fact, for buffers against reality? The question is an important one, because many people believe that in the very recent past there still was a theatre with certain values, certain skills, certain arts that we perhaps wantonly have destroyed or cast aside.

We mustn't allow ourselves to become the dupes of nostalgia. The best of the romantic theatre, the civilized pleasures of the opera and the ballet were in any event gross reductions of an art sacred in its origins. Over the centuries the Orphic Rites turned into the Gala Performance – slowly and imperceptibly the wine was adulterated drop by drop.

The curtain used to be the great symbol of a whole school of theatre – the red curtain, the footlights, the idea that we are all children again, the nostalgia and the magic were all of a piece. Gordon Craig spent his life railing against the theatre of illusion, but his most treasured memories were of painted trees and forests and his eyes would light up as he described effects of *trompe d'œil*. But the day came when the same red curtain no longer hid surprises, when we no longer wanted – or needed – to be children again, when the rough magic

yielded to a harsher common-sense; then the curtain was pulled down and the footlights removed.

Certainly, we still wish to capture in our arts the invisible currents that rule our lives, but our vision is now locked to the dark end of the spectrum. Today the theatre of doubting, of unease, of trouble, of alarm, seems truer than the theatre with a noble aim. Even if the theatre had in its origins rituals that made the invisible incarnate, we must not forget that apart from certain Oriental theatres these rituals have been either lost or remain in seedy decay. Bach's vision has been scrupulously preserved by the accuracy of his notations: in Fra Angelico we witness true incarnation: but for us to attempt such processes today, where do we find the source? In Coventry, for instance, a new cathedral has been built, according to the best recipe for achieving a noble result. Honest, sincere artists, the 'best', have been grouped together to make a civilized stab at celebrating God and Man and Culture and Life through a collective act. So there is a new building, fine ideas, beautiful glass-work – only the ritual is threadbare. Those Ancient and Modern hymns, charming perhaps in a little country church, those numbers on the wall, those dog-collars and the lessons – they are sadly inadequate here. The new place cries out for a new ceremony, but of course it is the new ceremony that should have come first – it is the ceremony in all its meanings that should have dictated the shape of the place, as it did when all the great mosques and cathedrals and temples were built. Goodwill, sincerity, reverence, belief in culture are not quite enough: the outer form can only take on real authority if the ceremony has equal authority – and who today can possibly call the tune? Of course, today as at all times, we need to stage true rituals, but for rituals that could make theatre-going an experience that feeds our lives, true forms are needed. These are not at our disposal, and conferences and resolutions will not bring them our way.

The actor searches vainly for the sound of a vanished tradition, and critic and audience follow suit. We have lost all sense of ritual and ceremony – whether it be connected

with Christmas, birthdays or funerals – but the words remain with us and old impulses stir in the marrow. We feel we should have rituals, we should do ‘something’ about getting them and we blame the artists for not ‘finding’ them for us. So the artist sometimes attempts to find new rituals with only his imagination as his source: he imitates the outer form of ceremonies, pagan or baroque, unfortunately adding his own trappings – the result is rarely convincing. And after the years and years of weaker and waterier imitations we now find ourselves rejecting the very notion of a holy stage. It is not the fault of the holy that it has become a middle-class weapon to keep children good.

When I first went to Stratford in 1945 every conceivable value was buried in deadly sentimentality and complacent worthiness – a traditionalism approved largely by town, scholar and press. It needed the boldness of a very extraordinary old gentleman, Sir Barry Jackson, to throw all this out of the window and so make a true search for true values possible once more. And it was at Stratford years later, at the official luncheon to celebrate Shakespeare’s 400th birthday, that I saw a clear example of the difference between what a ritual is and what it could be. It was felt that Shakespeare’s birthday called for a ritual celebration. The only celebration anyone could vaguely remember was related to a feast: and a feast today means a list of people from *Who’s Who*, assembled round Prince Philip, eating smoked salmon and steak. Ambassadors nodded to one another and passed the ritual red wine. I chatted with the local M.P. Then someone made a formal speech, we listened politely – and rose to our feet to toast William Shakespeare. At the moment the glasses clinked – for not more than a fraction of a second, through the common consciousness of everyone present and all for once concentrating on the same thing – passed the notion that four hundred years ago such a man had been, and that this was what we were assembled for. For a breath of time the silence deepened, a touch of meaning was there – an instant later it was brushed away and forgotten. If we understood more about rituals, the ritual celebration of an individual to whom

we owe so much might have been intentional, not accidental. It might have been as powerful as all his plays, and as unforgettable. However, we do not know how to celebrate, because we do not know what to celebrate. All we know is the end result: we know and we like the feel and sound of celebrating through applause, and this is where we get stuck. We forget that there are two possible climaxes to a theatre experience. There is the climax of celebration in which our participation explodes in stamping and cheering, shouts of hurrah and the roar of hands, or else, at the other end of the stick, the climax of silence – another form of recognition and appreciation for an experience shared. We have largely forgotten silence. It even embarrasses us; we clap our hands mechanically because we do not know what else to do, and we are unaware that silence is also permitted, that silence also is good.

It is only when a ritual comes to our own level that we become qualified to deal in it: the whole of pop music is a series of rituals on a level to which we have access. Peter Hall's vast and rich achievement in his cycle of Shakespeare's 'Wars of the Roses' drew on assassination, politics, intrigue, war: David Rudkin's disturbing play *Afore Night Come* was a ritual of death: *West Side Story* a ritual of urban violence, Genet creates rituals of sterility and degradation. When I took a tour of *Titus Andronicus* through Europe this obscure work of Shakespeare touched audiences directly because we had tapped in it a ritual of bloodshed which was recognized as true. And this leads to the heart of the controversy that exploded in London about what were labelled 'dirty plays': the complaint was that the theatre today is wallowing in misery; that in Shakespeare, in great classical art, one eye is always on the stars, that the rite of winter includes a sense of the rite of spring. I think this is true. In a sense I agree wholeheartedly with our opponents – but not when I see what they propose. They are not searching for a holy theatre, they are not talking about a theatre of miracles; they are talking of the tame play where 'higher' only means 'nicer' – being noble only means being decent – alas, happy endings

and optimism can't be ordered like wine from cellars. They spring whether we wish it or not from a source and if we pretend there is such a source readily at hand we will go on cheating ourselves with rotten imitations. If we recognize how desperately far we have drifted from anything to do with a holy theatre we can begin to discard once and for all the dream that a fine theatre could return in a trice if only a few nice people tried harder.

More than ever, we crave for an experience that is beyond the humdrum. Some look for it in jazz, classical music, in marijuana and in LSD. In the theatre we shy away from the holy because we don't know what this could be – we only know that what is called the holy has let us down, we shrink from what is called poetic because the poetic has let us down. Attempts to revive poetic drama too often have led to something wishy-washy or obscure. Poetry has become a meaningless term, and its association with word-music, with sweet sounds, is a hangover of a Tennysonian tradition that has somehow wrapped itself round Shakespeare, so that we are conditioned by the idea that a verse play is half-way between prose and the opera, neither spoken nor sung, yet with a higher charge than prose – higher in content, higher somehow in moral value.

All the forms of sacred art have certainly been destroyed by bourgeois values but this sort of observation does not help our problem. It is foolish to allow a revulsion from bourgeois forms to turn into a revulsion from needs that are common to all men: if the need for a true contact with a sacred invisibility through the theatre still exists, then all possible vehicles must be re-examined.

I have sometimes been accused of wanting to destroy the spoken word, and indeed in this absurdity there's a grain of sense. In its fusion with the American idiom our ever-changing language has rarely been richer, and yet it does not seem that the word is the same tool for dramatists that it once was. Is it that we are living in an age of images? Is it even that we must go through a period of image-saturation, for the need for language to re-emerge? This is very possible, for today

writers seem unable to make ideas and images collide through words with Elizabethan force. The most influential of modern writers, Brecht, wrote full and rich texts, but the real conviction of his plays is inseparable from the imagery of his own productions. Yet in the desert one prophet raised his voice. Railing against the sterility of the theatre before the war in France an illuminated genius, Antoine Artaud, wrote tracts describing from his imagination and intuition another theatre – a Holy Theatre in which the blazing centre speaks through those forms closest to it. A theatre working like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic; a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text.

Is there another language, just as exacting for the author, as a language of words? Is there a language of actions, a language of sounds – a language of word-as-part-of movement, of word-as-lie, word-as-parody, of word-as-rubbish, of word-as-contradiction, of word-shock or word-cry? If we talk of the more-than-literal, if poetry means that which crams more and penetrates deeper – is this where it lies? Charles Marowitz and I instituted a group with the Royal Shakespeare Theatre called the Theatre of Cruelty to investigate these questions and to try to learn for ourselves what a holy theatre might be.

The title was by way of homage to Artaud, but it did not mean that we were trying to reconstruct Artaud's own theatre. Anyone who wishes to know what 'Theatre of Cruelty' means should refer directly to Artaud's own writings. We used his striking title to cover our own experiments, many of which were directly stimulated by Artaud's thought – although many exercises were very far from what he had proposed. We did not start at the blazing centre, we began very simply on the fringes.

We set an actor in front of us, asked him to imagine a dramatic situation that did not involve any physical movement, then we all tried to understand what state he was in. Of course, this was impossible, which was the point of the exercise. The next stage was to discover what was the very

least he needed before understanding could be reached: was it a sound, a movement, a rhythm – and were these interchangeable – or had each its special strengths and limitations? So we worked by imposing drastic conditions. An actor must communicate an idea – the start must always be a thought or a wish that he has to project – but he has only, say, one finger, one tone of voice, a cry, or the capacity to whistle at his disposal.

An actor sits at one end of the room, facing the wall. At the other end another actor, looking at the first one's back, not allowed to move. The second actor must make the first one obey him. As the first one has his back turned, the second has no way of communicating his wishes except through sounds, for he is allowed no words. This seems impossible, but it can be done. It is like crossing an abyss on a tightrope: necessity suddenly produces strange powers. I have heard of a woman lifting a huge car off her injured child – a feat technically impossible for her muscles in any predictable conditions. Ludmilla Pitoeff used to go on stage with her heart pounding in a way that in theory should have killed her every night. With this exercise, many times we also observed an equally phenomenal result: a long silence, great concentration, one actor running experimentally through a range of hisses or gurgles until suddenly the other actor stood and quite confidently executed the movement the first one had in mind.

Similarly these actors experimented in communication through tapping with a finger-nail: starting from a powerful need to express something and again using only one tool. Here it was rhythm – on another occasion, it was the eyes or the back of the head. A valuable exercise was to fight in partners, taking and giving back every blow, but never being allowed to touch, never moving the head, nor the arms, nor feet. In other words a movement of the torso is all that is allowed: no realistic contact can take place, yet a fight must be engaged physically, emotionally and carried through. Such exercises should not be thought of as gymnastics – freeing muscular resistance is only a by-product – the purpose all

the time is to increase resistance – by limiting the alternatives – and then using this resistance in the struggle for a true expression. The principle is the one of rubbing two sticks together. This friction of unyielding opposites makes fire – and other forms of combustion can be obtained in the same way. The actor then found that to communicate his invisible meanings he needed concentration, he needed will; he needed to summon all his emotional reserves; he needed courage; he needed clear thought. But the most important result was that he was led inexorably to the conclusion that he needed form. It was not enough to feel passionately – a creative leap was required to mint a new form which could be a container and a reflector for his impulses. That is what is truly called an 'action'. One of the most interesting moments was during an exercise in which each member of the group had to act a child. Naturally, one after the other did an 'imitation' of a child by stooping, wiggling, or squawking – and the result was painfully embarrassing. Then the tallest of the group came forward and without any physical change at all, with no attempt to imitate baby talk, he presented fully to everyone's complete satisfaction the idea that he had been called upon to carry. How? I can't describe it; it happened as direct communication, only for those present. This is what some theatres call magic, others science, but it's the same thing. An invisible idea was rightly shown.

I say 'shown' because an actor making a gesture is both creating for himself out of his deepest need and yet for the other person. It is hard to understand the true notion of spectator, there and not there, ignored and yet needed. The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind: a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness – it is always what Artaud calls a signal through the flames – yet this implies a sharing of experience, once contact is made.

Slowly we worked towards different wordless languages: we took an event, a fragment of experience and made exercises that turned them into forms that could be shared. We

encouraged the actors to see themselves not only as improvisers, lending themselves blindly to their inner impulses, but as artists responsible for searching and selecting amongst form, so that a gesture or a cry becomes like an object that he discovers and even remoulds. We experimented with and came to reject the traditional language of masks and make-ups as no longer appropriate. We experimented with silence. We set out to discover the relations between silence and duration: we needed an audience so that we could set a silent actor in front of them to see the varying lengths of attention he could command. Then we experimented with ritual in the sense of repetitive patterns, seeing how it is possible to present more meaning, more swiftly than by a logical unfolding of events. Our aim for each experiment, good or bad, successful or disastrous, was the same: can the invisible be made visible through the performer's presence?

We know that the world of appearance is a crust – under the crust is the boiling matter we see if we peer into a volcano. How can we tap this energy? We studied Meyerhold's bio-mechanical experiments, where he played love scenes on swings and in one of our performances a Hamlet threw Ophelia on to the knees of the audience, while he swung above their heads on a rope. We were denying psychology, we were trying to smash the apparently water-tight divisions between the private and the public man: the outer man whose behaviour is bound by the photographic rules of everyday life, who must sit to sit, stand to stand – and the inner man whose anarchy and poetry is usually expressed only in his words. For centuries, unrealistic speech has been universally accepted, all sorts of audiences have swallowed the convention that words can do the strangest things – in a monologue, for instance, a man stays still but his ideas can dance where they will. Vaulting speech is a good convention, but is there another? When a man flies over the audience's head on a rope, every aspect of the immediate is put in jeopardy – the circle of spectators that is at ease when the man speaks is thrown into chaos: in this instant of hazard can a different meaning appear?

In naturalistic plays the playwright contrives the dialogue in such a way that while seeming natural it shows what he wants to be seen. By using language illogically, by introducing the ridiculous in speech and the fantastic in behaviour, an author of the Theatre of the Absurd opens up for himself another vocabulary. For instance, a tiger comes into the room, but the couple take no notice: the wife speaks, the husband answers by taking off his pants and a new pair floats in through the window. The theatre of the Absurd did not seek the unreal for its own sake. It used the unreal to make certain explorations, because it sensed the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges, and the presence of the truth in the seeming far-fetched. Although there have been some remarkable individual works stemming from this approach to the world, as a recognizable school the Absurd has reached an impasse. Like so much that is novel in texture, like much concrete music, for instance, the surprise element wears thin, and we are left to face the fact that the field it covers is sometimes very small. Fantasy invented by the mind is apt to be lightweight, the whimsicality and the surrealism of much of the Absurd would no more have satisfied Artaud than the narrowness of the psychological play. What he wanted in his search for a holiness was absolute: he wanted a theatre that would be a hallowed place: he wanted that theatre served by a band of dedicated actors and directors who would create out of their own natures an unending succession of violent stage images, bringing about such powerful immediate explosions of human matter that no one would ever again revert to a theatre of anecdote and talk. He wanted the theatre to contain all that normally is reserved for crime and war. He wanted an audience that would drop all its defences, that would allow itself to be perforated, shocked, startled, and raped, so that at the same time it could be filled with a powerful new charge.

This sounds tremendous, yet it raises a nagging doubt. How passive does this make the spectator? Artaud maintained that only in the theatre could we liberate ourselves from the recognizable forms in which we live our daily lives.

This made the theatre a holy place in which a greater reality could be found. Those who view his work with suspicion ask how all-embracing is this truth, and secondly, how valuable is the experience? A totem, a cry from the womb: these can crack through walls of prejudice in any man: a howl can certainly reach through to the guts. But is this revealing, is this contact with our own repressions creative, therapeutic? Is it really holy – or is Artaud in his passion dragging us back to a nether world, away from striving, away from the light – to D. H. Lawrence, Wagner; is there even a fascist smell in the cult of unreason? Is a cult of the invisible, anti-intelligent? Is it a denial of the mind?

As with all prophets, we must separate the man from his followers. Artaud never attained his own theatre, maybe the power of his vision is that it is the carrot in front of our nose, never to be reached. Certainly, he himself was always speaking of a complete way of life, of a theatre in which the activity of the actor and the activity of the spectator are driven by the same desperate need.

Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed: betrayed because it is always just a portion of his thought that is exploited, betrayed because it is easier to apply rules to the work of a handful of dedicated actors than to the lives of the unknown spectators who happened by chance to come through the theatre door.

None the less, from the arresting words 'Theatre of Cruelty' comes a groping towards a theatre, more violent, less rational, more extreme, less verbal, more dangerous. There is a joy in violent shocks: the only trouble with violent shocks is that they wear off. What follows a shock? Here's the snag. I fire a pistol at the spectator – I did so once – and for a second I have a possibility to reach him in a different way. I must relate this possibility to a purpose, otherwise a moment later he is back where he was: inertia is the greatest force we know. I show a sheet of blue – nothing but the colour blue – blueness is a direct statement that arouses an emotion, the next second that impression fades: I hold up a brilliant flash of scarlet – a different impression is made, but unless someone can grab this moment, knowing why and how and what

for – it too begins to wane. The trouble is that one can easily find oneself firing the first shots without any sense of where the battle could lead. One look at the average audience gives us an irresistible urge to assault it – to shoot first and ask questions later. This is the road to the Happening.

A Happening is a powerful invention, it destroys at one blow many deadly forms, like the dreariness of theatre buildings, and the charmless trappings of curtain, usherette, cloakroom, programme, bar. A Happening can be anywhere, any time, of any duration: nothing is required, nothing is taboo. A Happening may be spontaneous, it may be formal, it may be anarchistic, it can generate intoxicating energy. Behind the Happening is the shout 'Wake up!' Van Gogh made generations of travellers see Provence with new eyes, and the theory of Happenings is that a spectator can be jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him. This sounds like sense, and in Happenings, the influence of Zen and Pop Art combine to make a perfectly logical twentieth-century American combination. But the sadness of a bad Happening must be seen to be believed. Give a child a paintbox, and if he mixes all the colours together the result is always the same muddy brownish grey. A Happening is always the brainchild of someone and unavoidably it reflects the level of its inventor: if it is the work of a group, it reflects the inner resources of the group. This free form is all too often imprisoned in the same obsessional symbols; flour, custard pies, rolls of paper, dressing, undressing, dressing-up, undressing again, changing clothes, making water, throwing water, blowing water, hugging, rolling, writhing – you feel that if a Happening became a way of life then by contrast the most humdrum life would seem a fantastic happening. Very easily a Happening can be no more than a series of mild shocks followed by let-downs which progressively combine to neutralize the further shocks before they arrive. Or else the frenzy of the shocker bludgeons the shockee into becoming still another form of the Deadly Audience – he starts willing and is assaulted into apathy.

The simple fact is that Happenings have brought into being

not the easiest but the most exacting forms of all. As shocks and surprises make a dent in a spectator's reflexes, so that he is suddenly more open, more alert, more awake, the possibility and the responsibility arise for onlooker and performer alike. The instant must be used, but how, what for? Here, we are back to the root question – what are we searching for anyway? Do-it-yourself Zen hardly fits the bill. The Happening is a new broom of great efficacy: it is certainly sweeping away the rubbish, but as it clears the way the old dialogue is heard again, the debate of form against formless, freedom against discipline; a dialectic as old as Pythagoras, who first set in opposition the terms Limit and Unlimited. It is all very well to use crumbs of Zen to assert the principle that existence is existence, that every manifestation contains within it all of everything, and that a slap on the face, a tweak of the nose or a custard pie are all equally Buddha. All religions assert that the invisible is visible all the time. But here's the crunch. Religious teaching – including Zen – asserts that this visible-invisible cannot be seen automatically – it can only be seen given certain conditions. The conditions can relate to certain states or to a certain understanding. In any event, to comprehend the visibility of the invisible is a life's work. Holy art is an aid to this, and so we arrive at a definition of a holy theatre. A holy theatre not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make its perception possible. The Happening could be related to all of this, but the present inadequacy of the Happening is that it refuses to examine deeply the problem of perception. Naïvely it believes that the cry 'Wake up!' is enough: that the call 'Live!' brings life. Of course, more is needed. But what?

A happening was originally intended to be a painter's creation – which instead of paint and canvas, or glue and sawdust, or solid objects, used people to make certain relationships and forms. Like a painting, a happening is intended as a new object, a new construction brought into the world, to enrich the world, to add to nature, to sit alongside everyday life. To those who find happenings dreary the supporter retorts that any one thing is as good as another. If some seem

THE HOLY THEATRE

'worse' than others, this, they say, is the result of the spectator's conditioning and his jaded eye. Those who take part in a happening and get a kick out of doing so can afford to regard the outsider's boredom with indifference. The very fact that they participate heightens their perception. The man who puts on a dinner jacket for the opera, saying, 'I enjoy a sense of occasion', and the hippy who puts on a flowered suit for an all-night light-show are both reaching incoherently in the same direction. Occasion, Event, Happening – the words are interchangeable. The structures are different – the opera is constructed and repeated according to traditional principles, the light-show unfolds for the first and last time according to accident and environment; but both are deliberately constructed social gatherings that seek for an invisibility to interpenetrate and animate the ordinary. Those of us who work in theatres are implicitly challenged to go ahead to meet this hunger.

There are many people attempting in their own ways to take up the challenge. I will quote three.

There is Merce Cunningham. Stemming from Martha Graham, he has evolved a ballet company whose daily exercises are a continual preparation for the shock of freedom. A classical dancer is trained to observe and follow every detail of a movement that he is given. He has trained his body to obey, his technique is his servant, so that instead of being wrapped up in the doing of the movement he can let the movement unfold in intimate company with the unfolding of the music. Merce Cunningham's dancers, who are highly trained, use their discipline to be more aware of the fine currents that flow within a movement as it unfolds for the first time – and their technique enables them to follow this fine prompting, freed from the clumsiness of the untrained man. When they improvise – as notions are born and flow between them, never repeating themselves, always in movement – the intervals have shape, so that the rhythms can be sensed as just and the proportions as true: all is spontaneous and yet there is order. In silence there are many potentialities; chaos or order, muddle or pattern, all lie fallow – the invisible

made visible is of a sacred nature, and as he dances Merce Cunningham strives for a holy art.

Perhaps the most intense and personal writing of our time comes from Samuel Beckett. Beckett's plays are symbols in an exact sense of the word. A false symbol is soft and vague: a true symbol is hard and clear. When we say 'symbolic' we often mean something drearily obscure: a true symbol is specific, it is the only form a certain truth can take. The two men waiting by a stunted tree, the man recording himself on tapes, the two men marooned in a tower, the woman buried to her waist in sand, the parents in the dustbins, the three heads in the urns: these are pure inventions, fresh images sharply defined – and they stand on the stage as objects. They are theatre machines. People smile at them, but they hold their ground: they are critic-proof. We get nowhere if we expect to be told what they mean, yet each one has a relation with us we can't deny. If we accept this, the symbol opens in us a great and wondering O.

This is how Beckett's dark plays are plays of light, where the desperate object created is witness of the ferocity of the wish to bear witness to the truth. Beckett does not say 'no' with satisfaction; he forges his merciless 'no' out of a longing for 'yes' and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn.

There are two ways of speaking about the human condition: there is the process of inspiration – by which all the positive elements of life can be revealed, and there is the process of honest vision – by which the artist bears witness to whatever it is that he has seen. The first process depends on revelation; it can't be brought about by holy wishes. The second one depends on honesty, and it mustn't be clouded over by holy wishes.

Beckett expresses just this distinction in *Happy Days*. The optimism of the lady buried in the ground is not a virtue, it is the element that blinds her to the truth of her situation. For a few rare flashes she glimpses her condition, but at once she blots them out with her good cheer. Beckett's action on some of his audience is exactly like the action of this situation on the

leading character. The audience wriggles, squirms and yawns, it walks out or else invents and prints every form of imaginary complaint as a mechanism to ward off the uncomfortable truth. Sadly, it is the wish for optimism that many writers share that prevents them from finding hope. When we attack Beckett for pessimism it is we who are the Beckett characters trapped in a Beckett scene. When we accept Beckett's statement as it is, then suddenly all is transformed. There is after all quite another audience, Beckett's audience; those in every country who do not set up intellectual barriers, who do not try too hard to analyse the message. This audience laughs and cries out – and in the end celebrates with Beckett; this audience leaves his plays, his black plays, nourished and enriched, with a lighter heart, full of a strange irrational joy. Poetry, nobility, beauty, magic – suddenly these suspect words are back in the theatre once more.

In Poland there is a small company led by a visionary, Jerzy Grotowski, that also has a sacred aim. The theatre, he believes, cannot be an end in itself; like dancing or music in certain dervish orders, the theatre is a vehicle, a means for self-study, self-exploration; a possibility of salvation. The actor has himself as his field of work. This field is richer than that of the painter, richer than that of the musician, because to explore he needs to call on every aspect of himself. His hand, his eye, his ear, and his heart are what he is studying and what he is studying with. Seen this way, acting is a life's work – the actor is step by step extending his knowledge of himself through the painful, everchanging circumstances of rehearsal and the tremendous punctuation points of performance. In Grotowski's terminology, the actor allows a role to 'penetrate' him; at first he is all obstacle to it, but by constant work he acquires technical mastery over his physical and psychic means by which he can allow the barriers to drop. 'Auto-penetration' by the role is related to exposure: the actor does not hesitate to show himself exactly as he is, for he realizes that the secret of the role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets. So that the act of performance is an act of sacrifice, of sacrificing what most men

prefer to hide – this sacrifice is his gift to the spectator. Here there is a similar relation between actor and audience to the one between priest and worshipper. It is obvious that not everyone is called to priesthood and no traditional religion expects this of all men. There are laymen – who have necessary roles in life – and those who take on other burdens, for the laymen's sake. The priest performs the ritual for himself and on behalf of others. Grotowski's actors offer their performance as a ceremony for those who wish to assist: the actor invokes, lays bare what lies in every man – and what daily life covers up. This theatre is holy because its purpose is holy; it has a clearly defined place in the community and it responds to a need the churches can no longer fill. Grotowski's theatre is as close as anyone has got to Artaud's ideal. It is a complete way of life for all its members, and so it is in contrast with most other *avant-garde* and experimental groups whose work is scrambled and usually invalidated through lack of means. Most experimental products cannot do what they want because outside conditions are too heavily loaded against them. They have scratch casts, rehearsal time eaten into by the need to earn their living, inadequate sets, costumes, lights, etc. Poverty is their complaint and their excuse. Grotowski makes poverty an ideal; his actors have given up everything except their own bodies; they have the human instrument and limitless time – no wonder they feel the richest theatre in the world.

These three theatres, Cunningham, Grotowski, and Beckett have several things in common; small means, intense work, rigorous discipline, absolute precision. Also, almost as a condition, they are theatres for an *élite*. Merce Cunningham usually plays to poor houses, and if his admirers are scandalized by his lack of support he himself takes it in his stride. Beckett only rarely fills an average sized auditorium. Grotowski plays for thirty spectators – as a deliberate choice. He is convinced that the problems facing himself and the actor are so great that to consider a larger audience could only lead to a dilution of the work. He said to me: 'My search is based on the director and the actor. You base yours on the director,

actor, audience. I accept that this is possible, but for me it is too indirect.' Is he right? Are these the only possible theatres to touch 'reality'? They are certainly true to themselves, they certainly face the basic question, 'Why theatre at all?' and each one has found its answer. They each start from their hunger, each works to lessen his own need. And yet the very purity of their resolve, the high and serious nature of their activity inevitably brings a colour to their choices and a limitation to their field. They are unable to be both esoteric and popular at one and the same time. There is no crowd in Beckett, no Falstaff. For Merce Cunningham, as once for Schoenberg, it would need a *tour de force* to re-invent Ring a ring o' Roses or to whistle *God Save The Queen*. In life, Grotowski's leading actor avidly collects jazz records, but there are no pop lyrics on the stage which is his life. These theatres explore life, yet what counts as life is restricted. 'Real' life precludes certain 'unreal' features. If we read today Artaud's descriptions of his imaginary productions, they reflect his own tastes and the current romantic imagery of his time, for there is a certain preference for darkness and mystery, for chanting, for unearthly cries, for single words rather than sentences, for vast shapes, masks, for kings and emperors and popes, for saints and sinners and flagellants, for black tights and writhing naked skin.

A director dealing with elements that exist outside of himself can cheat himself into thinking his work more objective than it is. By his choice of exercises, even by the way he encourages an actor to find his own freedom, a director cannot help projecting his own state of mind on to the stage. The supreme jujitsu would be for the director to stimulate such an outpouring of the actor's inner richness that it completely transforms the subjective nature of his original impulse. But usually the director or the choreographer's pattern shows through and it is here that the desired objective experience can turn into the expression of some individual director's private imagery. We can try to capture the invisible but we must not lose touch with common-sense – if our language is too special we will lose part of the spectator's belief. The

model, as always, is Shakespeare. His aim continually is holy, metaphysical, yet he never makes the mistake of staying too long on the highest plane. He knew how hard it is for us to keep company with the absolute – so he continually bumps us down to earth – and Grotowski recognizes this, speaking of the need for both ‘apotheosis’ and ‘derision’. We have to accept that we can never see all of the invisible. So after straining towards it, we have to face defeat, drop down to earth, then start up again.

I have refrained from introducing the Living Theatre until now because this group, led by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, is special in every sense of the word. It is a nomad community. It moves across the world according to its own laws and often in contradiction to the laws of the country in which it happens to be. It provides a complete way of life for every one of its members, some thirty men and women who live and work together; they make love, produce children, act, invent plays, do physical and spiritual exercises, share and discuss everything that comes their way. Above all, they are a community; but they are only a community because they have a special function which gives their communal existence its meaning. This function is acting. Without acting the group would run dry: they perform because the act and fact of performing corresponds to a great shared need. They are in search of meaning in their lives, and in a sense even if there were no audiences, they would still have to perform, because the theatrical event is the climax and centre of their search. Yet without an audience their performances would lose their substance – the audience is always the challenge without which a performance would be a sham. Also, it is a practical community that makes performances for a living and offers them for sale. In the Living Theatre, three needs become one: it exists for the sake of performing, it earns its living through performing and its performances contain the most intense and intimate moments of its collective life.

One day this caravan may halt. This could be in a hostile environment – like its origins in New York – in which case its function will be to provoke and divide audiences by in-

creasing their awareness of uncomfortable contradiction between a way of life on stage and a way of life outside. Their own identity will be constantly drawn and redrawn by the natural tension and hostility between themselves and their surroundings. Alternatively, they may come to rest in some wider community that shares some of their values. Here there would be a different unity and a different tension: the tension would be shared by stage and audience – it would be the expression of the unresolved quest for a holiness eternally undefined.

In fact, the Living Theatre, exemplary in so many ways, has still not yet come to grips with its own essential dilemma. Searching for holiness without tradition, without source, it is compelled to turn to many traditions, many sources – yoga, Zen, psychoanalysis, books, hearsay, discovery, inspiration – a rich but dangerous eclecticism. For the method that leads to what they are seeking cannot be an additive one. To subtract, to strip away can only be effected in the light of some constant. They are still in search of this constant.

In the meantime, they are continually nourished by a very American humour and joy that is surrealist, but with both feet firmly on the ground.

* * *

In Haitian voodoo, all you need to begin a ceremony is a pole and people. You begin to beat the drums and far away in Africa the gods hear your call. They decide to come to you, and as voodoo is a very practical religion, it takes into account the time that a god needs to cross the Atlantic. So you go on beating your drum, chanting and drinking rum. In this way, you prepare yourself. Then five or six hours pass and the gods fly in – they circle above your heads, but it is not worth looking up as naturally they are invisible. This is where the pole becomes so vital. Without the pole nothing can link the visible and the invisible worlds. The pole, like the cross, is the junction. Through the wood, earthed, the spirits slide, and now they are ready for the second step in their metamorphosis. Now they need a human vehicle, and

they choose one of the participants. A kick, a moan or two, a short paroxysm on the ground and a man is possessed. He gets to his feet, no longer himself, but filled with the god. The god now has form. He is someone who can joke, get drunk and listen to everyone's complaints. The first thing that the priest, the Houngan, does when the god arrives is to shake him by the hand and ask him about his trip. He's a god all right, but he is no longer unreal: he is there, on our level, attainable. The ordinary man or woman now can talk to him, pump his hand, argue, curse him, go to bed with him – and so, nightly, the Haitian is in contact with the great powers and mysteries that rule his day.

In the theatre, the tendency for centuries has been to put the actor at a remote distance, on a platform, framed, decorated, lit, painted, in high shoes – so as to help to persuade the ignorant that he is holy, that his art is sacred. Did this express reverence? Or was there behind it a fear that something would be exposed if the light were too bright, the meeting too near? Today, we have exposed the sham. But we are rediscovering that a holy theatre is still what we need. So where should we look for it? In the clouds or on the ground?