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Source: *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1963), pp. 180-191
Published by: The MIT Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1125025
Accessed: 10-02-2020 11:29 UTC

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Once Again: Style

By JACQUES COPEAU

Jacques Copeau, greatest of the French directors of the first half of this century, wrote the following essay in 1941, during the German occupation of France. It was originally entitled, "The Popular Theatre." Copeau was 63 years old at the time, and his most notable work was behind him. This essay, therefore, represents to a large degree Copeau's summation—and his hopes for the future. It is of course difficult to assess Copeau's impact upon our theatre. According to Jacques Guicharnaud, "the French stage has been dominated by men who were more or less trained by Copeau, as collaborators or students: Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, Jean Dasté, Michel Saint-Denis, Jean Vilar, Etienne Decroux and, indirectly, André Barsacq and Jean-Louis Barrault. In the United States the post-war little theatres and the Theatre Guild owed much to Copeau's stay in New York from 1917 to 1919; in Belgium the Théâtre du Marais was based on the spirit of the Vieux Colombier and Copeau trained the director Raymond Rouleau; in Italy, where Copeau worked for the 1933 and 1935 Maggio Fiorentino, the Piccolo Teatro di Milano was founded in 1947 according to his principles." As we read what Copeau wrote we might do well to apply his ideas to our own current situation.—Editor's Note.

We are often asked, what will be the drama of the future? As though it were up to us to decide. As though that future form depended only on us, on our work, our intelligence, and our conceptions.

There is no drama of the future. Drama is essentially a fact of the present, a contemporary phenomenon, a proposition whose destiny depends upon the reception and the response given to it. The greatest

geniuses of the theatre, those whose immortal works still touch us in performance or in reading—Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Calderón, Molière—worked for the people of their day. Several of them were, to a large extent, improvisers. Their genius, however exceptional, appealed to the taste of the public, whether the taste of an elite or that of the masses.

The nature of the public, its quantity, its frame of mind—that is the essential, the first postulate in the problem of the theatre.

We did not understand this thirty years ago as well as we do today, but we already could feel it when we tried to give a new stimulus to dramatic art. That is why we made such an effort to bring together and to satisfy a new public. But since it was our ambition to do everything anew and to remain pure, it seemed important for us to take refuge in little theatres. The avant-garde movement of 1919 was a movement of little theatres. I do not wish to minimize in any way its accomplishments. We did what we could. It was not our fault if the time was not yet ripe. And God knows how much virtue was expended in this difficult work. But since I have never deluded myself regarding the profound results of our purely artistic efforts, I realize today that these little theatres were only technical laboratories, conservatories where the noblest traditions of the stage came to life again. To be true theatres, they would have needed a true public.

On the fringe of the boulevard we had our public. It found pleasures of a rare quality with us. But that rareness did not give them grandeur. They were de luxe pleasures, selfish pleasures; they had no more meaning than the pleasures of the mob.

The theatre must find its meaning, its sense.

A poetic sense. But we must not confuse poetry with an empty and laborious fantasy, nor with a certain kind of ornate, decadent literature.

A dramatic sense, through action and through its denouements, through the opposition of passions and convictions.

A human or tragic sense, through the creation of personalities and types, the invention of characters, the manifestation of heroes.

A satirical sense. I mean nothing negative by this, but a vigorous opposition, an *élan* of the spirit, a healthy laugh. And not these genre paintings where some pallid love intrigue is there to attenuate and make bearable the slight scratch given in passing to the fashions and foibles of the day, but a joyous device built for battle and not afraid to show its sharp teeth, nor to get a bit intoxicated, in the manner of Aristophanes.

A social and a universal sense, which would correspond to the life of

the times (the life of the city and the life of the world), which would try to consider its preoccupations, to pose and clarify its problems, to crystallize its ideas and its passions.

Each of these genres has its style. And it is by employing clearly defined genres, well-characterized, pure genres, that the theatre will find once more its sense of style.

It is relatively easy to orient oneself in theory. Experience and reflection set up surveying rods.

But who will set out on the road, and who will prepare the way?

I have read many manuscripts. I have been in touch with many young authors. I can furnish you with an outline of their preoccupations, their aims, their worries.

A good number of them attempt to treat great subjects, but they don't know how to go about it. They would like to put their art into communication, into rapport with the modern world. They are facing it squarely, and at the same time are terribly upset and intimidated by it.

I can see several reasons for this. The first is that the world they are holding a mirror up to only reflects itself confusedly. It is too broken up, too tormented by contradictory or negative ideas. The essence of drama is to affirm and to conclude. The dramatist is an architect. He builds with durable material and sinks his foundations in solid ground. He has nothing to do with shifting sands. The uncertainty of living conditions, variations of climate, transformations of mores, revolutions of ideas, the ephemerality of styles, furnish matter for analysis and observation which is much better suited to the formlessness of the novel than to the rigid form of the drama. Objects escape us; and it is from objectivity that tragedy, like comedy, spins its thread. Personality evades us today; it is crumbling away. It presents only anomalies, curiosities, contradictions, mysteries. This is contrary to the theatrical *presence*. It is the principal stumbling block to the functioning of dramatic genius. The young writers I am speaking of are looking for a person, a character. I hear them cry, "Give us heroes!"

They are looking for greatness. They find it neither in the subjects which their elders drew almost exclusively from sentimental and sexual complications—for which they have neither time nor taste; nor do they find it in the skimpy, tired, worn-out form which the past century willed to them; nor in the flatly realistic style of the actors; nor even in the bourgeois trappings of the stages and auditoriums of our theatres.

They feel themselves hemmed in on all sides and cannot yet find either enough confidence in themselves or enough encouragement in their epoch, or enough strength, to free themselves.

More than the individual, perhaps, at least as much as the individ-

ual—and this is something new in literature—collectivities interest him. Groups, classes, nations, races.

Today, within the experience of a man of thirty or forty, there are battlefields, international assemblies, numerous voyages, and distant expeditions.

The unity of place and the unity of action reduced to the palace of classical tragedy, to the couple or the family of bourgeois comedy, or even to the city, are singularly jeopardized.

The universal is penetrating more and more into the heart of the individual. Literatures have begun to penetrate one another through the widespread use of foreign languages and by the many new translations now available. This is a phenomenon analogous to that of the Renaissance, when scholars, by discovering Antiquity and bringing its way to life and its works closer to their own period, offered a new field to the poets. Ethnic contacts and mixtures have been brought about by the great military movements and the profound chaos of war. The cinema that parades before our very eyes the strangest of landscapes and of ethnic types and mores, rapid communication, happenings around the world put daily within our reach through the newspaper and the radio, all of this helps to give our average culture an international look, to place within our experience "a broad comedy of a hundred different acts, whose stage is the universe."

To grasp such an international spectacle, the writer will feel obliged to open the legs of his compass wider and wider. And the question of giving his dramatic vision a means of expression which is capable of seizing and conveying it will become more and more urgent, like a question of life and death.

New forms in art have always been engendered by new needs of the spirit and of the senses.

It is easily understandable, therefore, that contemporary dramatic art should be tormented by ambitions which it has not the means to realize, and that this disappointment should be translated into a desire to break with old forms. That is what it means when it says it is trying to *get out of the theatre*: that is to say, to get away from methods of exposition and development which paralyze it, methods of presentation which thwart it, and architectural conceptions which, on the stage and in the auditorium, no longer fulfill its needs.

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What we must do now is to find, in that vast rubble of living thought and national ideas, the roots, however weak or mutilated they may be,

that we had planted with our own hands and which it is our duty to save, to cultivate, and to make again grow green.

We must rebuild our own ideal ourselves. But to begin with we must try not to be too ambitious. It is upon sincerity, upon truth, that all must stand. It is up to us to see clearly and deeply, up to us to guide ourselves by the purest of laws and to call upon the best of men.

After living with the theatre, studying its origins and its various developments, I am convinced that it does not progress like practical and scientific knowledge, by leaving behind it old truths in order to rise above them towards truths which take their place, until they will, in turn, be corrected or replaced. In art inner strength is renewed as it was by the giant in the myth—by a periodic return to primal sources, to the maternal lap.

If we wish to create healthy, natural, live works, essential and durable, we must become attached to this *renewing of inner strength.* It will give meaning to all our efforts. It will become one with the unanimous aspiration of our country, with the unique duty of all Frenchmen today: the remaking of France.

There is no alternative, no choice possible. What we need is a Theatre of the Nation.

It is not a class theatre, a theatre which makes claims for any particular group. It will be a theatre of union and of regeneration.

A reform of such breadth cannot take place undirected. It can be directed and be fertile only under the aegis of a severe authority, provided this authority is well-informed.

Competent people are not lacking nor are upright wills. But we must be able to discern them, to promote them, to discipline them, in the name of impartiality, knowledge, and love for the sake of simplicity, sincerity, and greatness.

In order to transcend differences and petty individual disagreements for the benefit of a professional community, it would be desirable for the State no longer to content itself with information gained through a "commission" which is often incompetent and sometimes subject to dubious influences, but to make a direct contact with the creative forces themselves.

The first step in this direction would be the organization of a study center, where a small group might gather, men old enough to speak with experience, young enough to rethink the future of the theatre according to new methods, for new needs.

These needs are not unknown. They are not even mysterious. They have been felt by artists before, and sometimes expressed. They had not yet been cleared of their hesitations, their groping. But they were al-

ready alive. And these needs have become more obvious today, more pressing than ever. We must examine them, define them, propose programs, and put them to the test.

The most important of these needs is the creation and the organization, first of all and as the basis of everything else, of a center of *theatrical culture.*

A great school, to a large degree subsidized by the State, in which all forms of dramatic invention and performance would be studied and practiced; where each section would be directed by the most qualified person, without taking into consideration official titles or political recommendations; where the ensemble would receive a harmonious impetus dominated by a spirit.

* * *

I wish to transcribe here a rather long passage from a little book I published not less than twenty years ago:

"If we wish to reconstruct the theatre which has been destroyed, we must not blind ourselves to the immensity of our task. We can never be objective enough about it. To succeed, it is not talent we are lacking, nor ideas, nor courage for the work. It is, above all, the discipline in our work which formerly ruled over the humblest of masterpieces. It is the rule of thinking well becoming the ability to do well, competence as a preparation for perfection.

"Art and métier are not two separate things. Inventiveness and genius cannot get along without knowledge or method. And those who work to acquire them, then to perfect them, will accomplish something durable only if they think of transmitting them by teaching.

"It may be true that during happy eras instinct seems to provide for creation. What we call instinct in such cases is only the strength and the ease of personal genius nourished by the teaching of the ages, inspired by a living tradition. Now, for us it is a question of something more than following the rules, or learning them. We must find them again....

"By asking for less license, more professional culture and training for a man who wishes to practice a métier, I do not propose that we should put the finest artistic gifts at penitential work in a dark seminary. I only want them to be more fully realized.

"We must be very careful; the total sincerity of an artist—what is most spontaneously, most intimately, most personally his—is put into jeopardy in the act of realization, an act which includes a combination of acquired and common elements. In order to avoid putting into our work something that is not ourselves, we must have a knowledge of all

the means at the disposal of the artist, the joint heritage of all generations. If technique can only live on sincerity, sincerity can only develop through a solid technique. There is no durable renewal which is not grounded in a continued or rediscovered tradition, no revolution which does not cast its roots into the most distant secrets of a tradition people thought was dead.

"The love of beauty and the impulse to produce it may subsist, even where the principles and the methods of work have been lost. Interesting attempts, even works of taste, are not lacking—only the simple workman-like capability. That is why so many untrained amateurs and professionals live in disgrace amidst their aspirations. The productions of great masters furnish them with authentic examples from which they make only counterfeits and shams. . . .

"Those who think that nothing good can come out of an art school speak of a 'calling.' They say that a great vocation has always gotten along without organized instruction; that it has usually gained nothing but suffering from it; that where the vocation is lacking, no instruction can replace it; and that by illuminating somewhat the ungifted, we run the risk of encouraging mediocrity.

"It is possible that a great vocation does not always find instruction worthy of itself. It is probable that it has always gotten along without it. But it is not certain that this vocation has not regretted its lack of education, nor that this privation has not sometimes misled it or retarded its maturity.

"The exceptional individual outstrips the education of his day. This does not mean that he shouldn't receive it. He adds his own genius to it in order to endow those who come after him with a richer heritage. Here again we find the idea of transmission, that is to say, of teaching.

"But is it right to consider only the exceptional individual, to consider legitimate only what serves his development? And can we say that only the man of genius is worthy of assuming the responsibility of culture?

"One may believe, with Goethe, that only extraordinary works are indispensable. But there are less illustrious works in which we can see health and strength gleaming and which hold their places solidly, play their roles faithfully, if only by preserving the taste of a period and maintaining its orientation. They bear upon their shoulders the weight of the highest works, bind them to each other and to the surrounding countries as a chain of mountains binds together the various peaks that tower over it. We aid, then, the development of an art; we raise its level; we make it more intelligible, more familiar, and, hence, more alive by applying clearly conceived methods to the instruction of an

artistic collectivity, by assuring its unity, its cohesion, its endurance—all things which are matters of schooling and instruction.

"A real instruction given by a real teacher does not produce mediocrity. It does not aim at the creation of those artificial talents which flourish in the atmosphere of salons and academic competitions. Contact with a man born for the noble task of teaching who possesses the dignity and the preparation for his work, the confidence which he inspires, and the respect which his students have for him—all of these things help to form character. Aesthetic truth, like moral truth, gives a sense of order to the soul, fortifies it, elevates it.

"A lively, continuous, well-organized instruction, if it is seriously given and received, provided that it is begun early enough, even if it is received by a student with only average capabilities, will produce results which talent without a guide can never attain, and will make possible artistic work of which our century has lost even the notion. . . ."

* * *

What were the writers of the early 1900's trying to do?

They were attempting to renew, to refurbish the theatre through its literary, ideological, and human substance, but using the same form. They had not envisioned a recasting of the means of expression corresponding to the thing which they proposed to express. The dramatic form was not questioned. They simply took over the form as they found it, as they received it from their predecessors. By saying they had no repertory, they meant that they needed well-made plays, plays built according to the bourgeois canon of the nineteenth century. They grafted their popular movement onto the boulevard theatre of 1889 and Théâtre Libre of 1897. Then, of course. . . .

The young men today are infinitely freer in their conceptions. They have before them a field which is incomparably more vast, more varied, more elastic. They address themselves to a public which is fresher than the Parisian public, and, being less learned, is also much less limited. They need not fear the cane of routine, pedantic, and unimaginative criticism. They are more or less free of naturalism. That is the chief service that the art theatre movement of 1920–1940 has done them. They benefit from a technical liberation which has cost no little work. Lyricism is not forbidden. Pantomimic development does not frighten them. They know what play is, what it means to establish a sense of play among themselves, and even one between them and the public. They have established a contact with the classics. Molière is alive for them. The Greek theatre is alive for them. They are not unaware of the

theatre of the Far East. They have had some contact with Commedia dell'arte. They have great confidence in the actor and make no attempt to produce illusion by a change of scenery. They have found poetry again.

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Theatre *for* the masses is not necessarily theatre *of* the masses.

I believe that the more the theatre intends to appeal effectively to a wide public, to remain vivid in its memory, to influence its life on the deepest levels, the more it will have to be simplified and purified, reducing its elements numerically in order to develop their force.

Let us remember once again the spirit and the conditions of the Greek theatre four hundred years before Christ. The mass of people is in the auditorium. Thirty thousand spectators assembled, but assembled in a chosen place where everything has been prepared and calculated so that no one misses a gesture of the action or a word of the sublime text.

And facing these risers is the barest stage that ever existed. There is a small number of characters: three, four, six at the most, but colossal in stature and apparel, as well as in content.

The audience is represented here in the orchestra area by a chorus, small in number, but so musical, so rigorously trained and docile to the flute that leads it, that it can express through dance, song, and declamation all the reactions necessary to represent the great sentiments and the great attitudes of the popular soul: waiting, worry, doubt, horror, revolt, jubilation.

It is upon that essential instrument which had not one superfluous note; it is with these reduced and formidable means, the same for all poets; it is in this austere and incorruptible style that the drama of men, heroes, and gods was played out. It was equal to the greatest themes which the theatre of all times has tackled—those of fatality, faith, revolt, justice, war, and the anguish of peoples.

Contemporary authors have shown their inability to treat these themes without diminishing them. Modern drama no longer has enough vigor to display itself under the open sky. Its actors are lost on an empty stage. They cannot get along without the little props which were unknown to the antique stage. Spectators without endurance have lost the habit of stone risers.

And yet, all those who have denounced the failure of our theatre and the narrowness of its vision, all those who have dreamed of a radical renaissance of the theatre, have begun by evoking the Greek example.

If tomorrow our theatre should turn towards the masses in order to show them and paint for them our day and our world, I would not be surprised if it developed for its own use a form very similar to that which the Greeks, as in many other artistic enterprises, invented once and for all.

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Isn't this a point of departure, or at least a basis, for the spirit of renewal? And will this desire for a radical renewal be the object of laughter if it tries "by an intimate marriage of knowledge with experience to reëstablish in all good faith its ties with ancient traditions and rhythms, to examine not the forms of the past, but that spiritual bond which puts us easily into contact with their principles?"

Nothing more clearly denounces the impotence of our era than our fear of taking on a primitive language.

It would be deplorable, even absurd, and certainly a hopeless situation, if the people coming to the theatre today should only accept the worn-out forms which the writers of the past century used and fiddled with time and again without getting anything new or viable from them.

Or the pseudo-Medieval and pseudo-Elizabethan forms of the romantics. Or the pseudo-Classic or pseudo-Antique ones of the professors.

Let us continue to perform the masterpieces of our heritage in as faithful a style as possible. Let us continue to study them and venerate them as prototypes which cannot be surpassed.

But if the popular theatre is to undergo a healthy birth and live its own life, it must live through this entire developmental experience for itself. It must take its point of departure from the soil, drink at the source, discover and assimilate to itself gradually the laws of dramatic creation, composition, and performance. In other words, it must reinvent its form according to its own needs and its own powers, according to the nature and the capabilities of its public, and not create through great effort, and following ancient recipes, false antique dramas, false classical tragedies, false Shakespearean dramas.

Let its tragedy begin with choral chants. Let its comedy begin with gatherings and festivals, embellished with songs and local farces, haunted by the silhouettes of characters known in the area. And at last perhaps this tragedy and this comedy will reach the sublimity of literary masterpieces when they have found their own Aeschylus, their Aristophanes or Molière. At least they will have grown out of the people for whom they were made, they will have been renewed, refreshed at the

very source, and will have developed organically, naturally. They will be truly new because they will be truly living.

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Our work in the theatre permitted us to find again an aesthetic truth which has been bandied about since then by people who perhaps were not sufficiently aware of its meaning. It is this: that a given dramatic conception postulates a certain stage design; and just as much or even more: a given stage architecture calls forth, demands, and gives rise to a certain dramatic conception and style of presentation. In this domain the reactions of the material on the spiritual, and vice versa, are close and constant, so that it is difficult at first to say which is responsible for the formation of a particular style, the form of the drama or the form of the theatre. But it is certain that a clearly defined, deeply rooted dramatic genre corresponds to a clearly defined and stable theatre architecture and cannot dispense with it. We cannot conceive of Greek tragedy independent of the Greek stage, nor Shakespearean drama detached from the Elizabethan stage. The moment that stage structure becomes fluid, dramatic poetry begins to lose its foothold.

People might answer that it would be paradoxical to build theatres today for a dramatic form which does not yet exist and which no one can yet say much about.

As a matter of fact, we have undertaken enough imperfect experiments, we have made enough mutilated efforts, we have struggled, invented, worked enough for thirty years in an attempt to get away from the theatrical conventions that keep us prisoners, to have at least a feeling and a foretaste of this new dramatic form, of this *Mystery of Modern Times* around which, little by little, the poets and pioneers of today's theatre in all countries are turning, and near to which they are approaching.

Moreover, we are no longer in a primitivistic state. We possess a desire for a renaissance. A proposal must be made. It will be made consciously, by an effort of the spirit and of the will.

We can make this proposal, trying at the same time to spare existing theatres. But an experiment undertaken under such conditions will always be imperfect and inconclusive. It will be sumptuary, artificial, and, I believe, doomed to failure, if we propose to build permanent buildings according to new plans.

We must not build according to hard and fast plans. We must leave a margin for evolution, a white space for the poet to fill in sooner or later.

We must not simply refine what is already built, as was done at at the Théâtre Pigalle, without any real inner necessity. All such things are outdated.

We don't need "the latest word." We need the *first word.*

It is not a question of building the most perfect theatre in the world, but the simplest and healthiest, a house conforming to our present-day poverty, and, if you wish, to our current humiliation.

What we need is not a masterpiece of stage machinery. We need a masterpiece of architectonic articulation.

At the moment our program, in its purest outline, must be to bring together a great public and a great performance. In one building, men who need to see and hear something will meet men who have something to tell them and to show them, and who will find a way to present this to them as sincerely, as simply, and as honestly as they can.

This meeting place between two dramatic wills, that of the actor animated by a poet, that of a collectivity eager to hear the poet's words, can be built without great expense, on some land at the edge of the city, or better still in the suburbs, out of temporary materials and in portable units. It will be a kind of first hypothesis, a life-size model, easily modified or completed, of the theatre of the French people.

When this exists, with its carefully calculated proportions, equipped with its essential organs, obeying recognized and accepted laws and conventions, we shall then ask our poets to lay their creations of their genius upon this pattern, our directors to construct their poetic fiction in this open field.

Translated by LEONARD C. PRONKO