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Possibilities of the School Theater

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Useful as the insights provided by Mrs. Penrose's theory may be, its application to concrete cases is limited because it does not lend itself to statistical verification. The theory after all is admittedly a first approximation. This limitation should not thereby diminish the importance of the book especially in a field like industrial organization where much work remains to be done in what may seem such simple matters as asking the right questions or getting meaning out of a usually highly disorganized mass of hard-to-get facts. It is just as important to get one's bearings before starting to make the trip as to start driving.

ANTONIO V. AYALA

Possibilities of the School Theater

In "The Lost Art of Seeing Plays" (*Tulane Drama Review*, Autumn 1959), Theodore Hoffman laments in passing that academic theater, the theater in schools, is more academic than theater:

Drama departments have often had to begin as offshoots and stepchildren of speech and literature departments merely in order to exist and in the process have surrendered their rights to autonomy. They exist under the aegis of drama as the "spoken word". Their play programs are under the scrutiny of literature professors whose recognitions of drama rarely extend beyond a few English classics and whose hostility to contemporary anything has been notorious.

The dig at literature professors may yet be taken with a grain of salt. I am pitifully wanting in statistical backing, and I cannot prove that the university I attended is the rule rather than the exception; but in my time its theater, which seemed to me to be at least as bad if not worse than any at the back of Mr. Hoffman's mind, boasted of a repertory with methodic madness: "The Confidential Clerk," "Dial M for Murder," "The Alchemist," "Blood Wedding," "Menaechmi," Shakespeare, "The Sea Gull," "Desperate Hours," "Emperor Jones," originals, "Our Town," "Waiting for Godot," "The Family Portrait," "Beaux Strategem," "Ondine," "Juno and the Paycock," "The Crucible," "The Doctor In Spite of Himself," "Joan of Lorraine," "Misalliance," "Finian's Rainbow."

Before Hoffman, Francis Fergusson had pointed out that the theater in the university must be precisely academic if it is to do justice to its purpose. It is "a tool of liberal education" ("Note on the Academic Theater", *The Human Image in Dramatic Literature*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1958). This is not to say that it must necessarily be the bane of Broadway, for its service to the professionals is more than Mr. Hoffman seems to admit. Granting that the drama graduate may have to unlearn a lot of the refinements of the drama school

when he plunges into the living theater, still it is the classroom, the seminar hall and the drama workshop which sustain the new movements everywhere. It is the thousands of university students, talented or talentless, who assure one generation of artists of a generation of audiences. "The academic theater thus provides a sort of subterranean continuity for our theater, cultivating its skills, remembering its resources past and present, and tiding it over the periods when the recurrent off-Broadway movements dry up."

I am sure that the two positions—one for, the other against, the purely academic theater — are ultimately reconcilable. But the reconciliation is the sort of thing we in the Philippines need not bother about just now. The reason is that the circumstances of the theater abroad do not exist here, no matter how much we pretend that they do.

In the history of art forms the artists have normally come first and the critics afterwards. But that is to regard the development of the art form generically. With us the process of development must begin with transplantation, a prospect our artists find intolerable because they are better patriots than artists. They insist that we must begin from scratch, refusing to recognize the fact the time is past for us, or anyone else, to give birth to a really new theater form; that we can only adopt to our particular uses the forms already in existence; and, that we shall adopt our theatre form from the Western and not the Asian tradition.

The point I am making is that with the inevitable process of transplantation through which alone we can seriously begin, the critic may have to precede the artist. The hit-or-miss procedure is fun, no doubt, but it is scarcely practical. Producing theater is a most expensive art; raising a school of criticism is relatively cheap. Whatever the critics — the term is used here in its widest extension—shall become, teachers or practitioners of the art, they shall be able to give direction to the work in general.

There is something else to be considered. Because there is no Filipino theater as such, there are, strictly speaking, no drama departments in our schools today. Even if we did have the critics envisioned above, they might remain as voices in a well, dying out after a couple of repercussions. And while there will be no drama departments as long as there is no professional theater, the likelihood is that there will be no professional theater until there are drama departments. The reason is simple. There will be no audience developed in the art, as Mr. Hoffman puts it, of seeing a play. We are thus caught in a vicious circle.

But perhaps we can escape this vicious circle. Would it not be possible at least to make a start by having a school theater (*pace* Mr.

Hoffman) "under the scrutiny of literature professors"? What I mean is that whosoever handles the school theater must profess literature as salutary to the human spectator no matter what his specialization is. If the concept of liberal education has been attractive to all but the most radical educators, I think it is because the assimilation of culture is something every individual of teachable mentality is capable of. The mind is enchanted, as Marianne Moore says: has the legerity to leap from economics to chemistry to poetry like Gieseking playing Scarlatti.

What the school producer should not attempt is to be a master of entertainment, like the court juggler whose vocation is to make money by dazzling us with insipid virtuosity. The virtuosity cannot be there for obvious reasons; insipidity for sale is where we came in.

On the other hand, the school theater can go a long way in pointing out to the student that culture is not a pain in the neck. The theater is a happy interpenetration of human arts, and if we are to believe the theorists who say that the arts grew out of a desperate desire to satisfy archetypal needs, there is no reason to suppose that students, after they have learned to search, will find in them something for screw-balls only.

If the school theater is to do more of the English classics and less of contemporary anything, it is not because we are worshippers of the dead; it is simply because we are interested in communicating to the young the secrets of the human spirit in forms easily recognizable by them. By its very nature, the *avant-garde* in art is still a coterie affair and is therefore impractical for purposes of a college repertory.

Mr. Fergusson explains exactly how the academic theater becomes invaluable as a tool of liberal education:

We face in every generation the tough problem of the transmission of culture, and we find that even when the masterpieces mean something to the teacher they may say nothing to the young; we know that the arts of life and letters, when the clue is lost may die. It is at this point that the college theater may perform a uniquely valuable service. For theatrical production seeks to restore the play to its full life, first in the performers and the imagined scene and the movement of the play as a whole, and then in the response of the audience.

It is obvious of course that Mr. Fergusson is still spousing the cause of literary masterpieces as an end rather than a means. For the moment let us not even think in those terms. Let us teach our students merely to unlearn the vices of specialization which have transfigured our milieu. If they should end up feelingly in gutters—as a radical "educator" I know suggested to me once—because they are anachronistic in a world of machines, at least they shall be human beings starving, not machines running out of gas.