

From Coleridge to Barbette: Variations on a Theme

Some lines into “Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I,” Hamlet ditched his script and, “cursing like a very drab,” strode to the footlights to harangue some noisy patrons in the third row. Then the actor—by now no longer Hamlet to a good many of us in the audience—ambled back upstage and took the soliloquy from the top as if nothing untoward had happened.

Now, I’m normally the actor’s ideal playgoer, prepared to give myself over entirely to even the least plausible staged fiction as long as the players are giving it their best shot. If I do this more to protect my return on an investment of time, energy, and treasure than simply because I’m magnanimous, the effect, at least, is generous. But when this Hamlet bailed on his lines, I bailed on him.

The “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy is the last place in this play for an actor to step out of character. This is after all where Hamlet berates himself for not being able, as a real person facing real problems, to generate as much emotion and will to action as a mere actor in a play. It is also a typically shameless, gotcha move that allows the ghost of Shakespeare to laugh up the sleeve of his doublet, for what **is** Hamlet but a character in play? In breaking up his lines to chew out a jerk, this actor had scored a perfect two-fer of ineptitude, at once forfeiting our identification with his character and trampling on the author’s joke.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge has given us a way of talking about this. In Chapter XIV of the *Biographia Literaria* of 1817, he explains that for a fiction to secure our assent it must be presented “so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith.” In a theatrical production, needless to say, the director, the cast, and their support troops all have their obligations to the playwright’s vision, while we in the audience have a reciprocal responsibility to use our imagination, to piece out the author’s and the players’ imperfections with our thoughts. When Hamlet copped out, the bargain frayed. The actor left between himself and his character an imperfection too large for me to piece out, and I gave up the effort.

This episode occurred in the spring of 1969, about half way through a decade in which my wife, Sallie, and I were privileged to spend roughly a third of our time in London. Those ten years were also an exciting time for the British theater, what with the creation of the National Theatre at the Old Vic under the direction of Laurence Olivier and the transformation of the Stratford-on-Avon troupe into the Royal Shakespeare Company. Following a downturn in the years of post-war austerity, the West End commercial theater was enjoying its own burst of activity, while such adventurous managers as George Devine at The Royal Court, Bernard Miles at the Mermaid, and Arnold Wesker at the Roundhouse risked the promotion of experimental works. But the sovereign advantage for audiences in the period was that generous subsidies made theatergoing almost absurdly inexpensive. For the Old Vic and the RSC at either venue, we normally paid seven shillings and sixpence—about a dollar at the time. Most weeks saw us together at two or three performances, Sallie adding the odd matinée while I read and wrote in the British

Library. We were thus able to see most of the established British actors of the era, a raft of important premiere productions, and any number of today's senior stars in their breakout roles. (An exhaustive—or perhaps exhausting—*extempore* catalogue is available to the foolhardy on request.) This intensive course in the classical English theater, available to large numbers of Brits, but a rare privilege for two young Innocents Abroad, has made us into theater addicts and given us a repertoire from which to assess hundreds of performances we have seen since, in venues ranging from Cincinnati to New York, London, and the two Stratfords, Canada and England. It has also furnished me with material for a few riffs on “the willing suspension of disbelief,” which I'll begin with an account of an actor who did not let a disturbance from the audience crimp his credibility by one iota.

The play is *The Master Builder* by Ibsen, which details the undoing of the successful architect Halvard Solness by Hilde Wangel, a mysterious, seductive woman who worms her way into the home and head of an all-too-willing victim. This production begins with a dumb show on the thrust stage in front of the curtain, where a small crowd watch as several workers stage left tie a dangling rope to a tree that is presumably on its way to top off a building just out of view, a tableau likely meant to foreshadow the final scene, in which Solness, egged on by Hilde—who knows by the way that he is afraid of heights—falls to his death as he tries to scale the steeple of his latest masterpiece.

Laurence Olivier, as Solness, enters right and stops near the corner of the thrust stage. He strikes a pose. Turned a little to his left, his left foot forward, he gesticulates magisterially with his cane in the direction of the workers, then plants the cane near his right foot and watches the proceedings with expressions and body language that project satisfaction, impatience, and disdain. I swear I heard him sniff.

Now, imagine for a moment that I'm Olivier—a stretch, for sure—and that Sallie and I, seated in the second row, are about as far from him as our President is from me. It's our first experience of the legendary actor on stage. Dumbstruck, Sallie turns to me and murmurs, “Now that's what I call stage presence.” Olivier moves the cane to his right until his arm lines up directly with Sallie and turns his head to fix her with a gimlet glare, just as Solness, established in his first few moments as pretty full of himself, might stare down a rowdy urchin. Then, moments later, he picks up the cane, rakes it toward the extras at the far edge of the stage and returns his gaze to them, taking the attention of virtually the whole house with him. The workmen look back at Olivier, who sweeps the cane upward two or three times, as if to say, “Get on with it!” At this cue, the tree disappears into the fly loft. The stage crowd disperses, and Olivier, after one more baleful glance at Sallie, turns his back on us and exits stage right, having used a minor disturbance to help him establish Solness as domineering and to consolidate his personal hold over the audience. The character is in charge on stage, the actor in the house: that's what I call stage presence.

If it is entertaining to see the old pro improvise his way out of trouble and into command, it is no less gratifying to see an actress at the top of her form put her stamp on a role at just the right moment. I'm speaking here of Dorothy Tutin as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, with Janet Suzman as Celia in the 1967 RSC version directed by Suzman's then husband, Trevor Nunn. Significantly younger, Tutin

would not have had the acting chops for the longest female part in Shakespeare; only a little older, and she could not have been persuasive as a girl of sixteen or so.

At that time, we knew Tutin primarily from her films, especially the 1952 *Importance of Being Earnest*, in which, as Cecily to Joan Greenwood's Gwendolyn, she holds her own in what must be the bitchiest recorded version of the bitchiest female tea scene ever written. We had seen her as Polly Peachum to the Mac Heath of Olivier in the latter's film of *The Beggar's Opera*, but missed her appearance with Olivier on the stage in *The Entertainer* (about which more later). We had missed as well her many roles with the Bristol Old Vic and the RSC, culminating with a Viola in *Twelfth Night* that had won the *Evening Standard's* acting prize just a few months before we arrived for our first long stay in London. In the Department of Guilty Pleasures, we had seen Tutin live in *Portrait of a Queen*, a sequence of vignettes based on the letters of Queen Victoria that required her to age from eighteen to over eighty. This confection, transparently commercial, no doubt served to put bread on the table of an artist who had spent most of her career with the RSC, which, like the National Theatre, used its subsidies to support low ticket prices rather than their actors. At the matinee we took in, I was almost the only male in a sea of English housewives and Anglophile American women. Tutin's performance, a *tour de force*, had made us keen to see her in her real vocation with the RSC.

It is axiomatic that plays are meant to be seen in performance, not read as one would a novel or taught as examples of literary history. Lacking the hands-on experience of theatrical professionals, most of us are not all that good at creating a satisfying presentation in our heads. While Sallie and I had both read *As You Like It*, and I had taught it rather cursorily in survey courses of English literature, we had never seen it live. We were about to learn how a vibrant production can elicit that suspension of disbelief that gets us to the imaginative heart of a dramatic fiction.

The wake-up call came with the second and third scenes of the first act, where we are introduced to Rosalind, the daughter of Duke Senior, and Celia, the daughter of Duke Frederick, who has usurped the place of his older brother and exiled him to the Forest of Arden. We had considered these scenes as little more than exposition, as a way to get the main characters away from the duchy and court of the usurping Duke Frederick, where Bad Things happen, and into the Forest of Arden, a sort of magical place where Good Things have a chance.

In the theater we were made to marvel how Shakespeare had so fully understood the psychology and behavior of these two teen-age girls on the cusp of womanhood and captured their essence: the mutual crush, the enthusiasm, the engaging naiveté, and an appetite for adventure—all with a poignant sense that they might be vulnerable in direct proportion as, typical adolescents, they think themselves invulnerable. In dialogue stylized rather than naturalistic, but inflected with just enough throb, gush, and variation of pace and pitch, these two gifted actresses managed in a few moments to create two fully credible characters and make us not merely willing to believe in them but disposed to follow them anywhere. Tutin was especially compelling, foreshadowing the Rosalind who will dominate the remaining action, impressing herself on her surroundings by expressing her uncommonly lively personality and intelligence in uncommonly lively and witty language, holding her own and then some against such notable

characters as Touchstone the Fool and the melancholy Jacques. Enchanted, we were drawn into the world of the play, there to remain until released by Rosalind in her epilogue. Subsequent productions of this play have risen or fallen with us as they have made the same magic of these crucial scenes.

To go from *As You Like It* to *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is to go from wholesome porridge to water gruel. Whereas the former compels identification with the major characters and interest in the dynamics of their relationships, the latter only invites us to see its cast primarily either as abstractions to illustrate commonplace tropes or as placeholders in a formulaic comedy. Mention of this play to any of my Shakespearean colleagues gets you a shrug and the assertion that its most memorable character is Launce, a clown, who with his dog, Crab, more often than not steals the show. Its excuse is that it is a fledgling effort, perhaps even Shakespeare's first play. The two memorable productions we've seen both betrayed a suspicion that it's a work that needs all the help it can get. The first of these was put on by the Stanford drama department and was shot through with gags and gimmicks. Of these the most effective was that Launce the clown was made to mime his interaction with a virtual dog. Of course, he stole the show.

The second production, by the RSC at Stratford in the summer of 1970, had one unforgettable stunt. The father of Proteus (one of the lads, whose name I include only because I just looked it up) was revealed, standing by the edge of a small pool exposed under the sliding floor of the stage. He peeled off his clothes, down to a skimpy Speedo. Then, when everyone expected him to slip gently into the tiny pool, he executed a neat dive. True to form, and even though the leads included Ian Richardson and Helen Mirren, the clown and his dog again stole the show, whereby hangs the brief tale that follows.

The performance we saw was actually a weeknight preview. We had been warned by the proprietress of our favorite dining spot that the show had been running long, but she was prepared to admit us after their nominal closing hour because Monsieur Stewart was coming with a party of six. Just knock.

From our programs, we learned that one Patrick Stewart, unknown to us at the time, was to play Launce, the clown. The play ran super late, not least because Crab, the dog, proved monumentally uncooperative, necessitating a lot of ad-libbed business by Stewart. At the bistro, we were seated while a handful of parties finished their desserts. Not long after, Stewart and his group arrived and settled not far from us. Before long, we were the only people in the place. As we rose to leave, Stewart hailed us and asked if we had been at the play. I replied with a quip from one of his routines. This produced an immediate summons to meet the party, Stewart rising to greet us and ask our names. "A good Yorkshire name, Wadsworth," he said. Then, to his guests, "I give you Mr. Wadsworth, who paid attention while everyone else was distracted by the fucking dog." The next ten minutes or so were taken up by a question-and-answer session, Stewart insisting that his director, Robin Phillips, would welcome the feedback when the cast met in the morning. This exchange left us with three takeaways: that Patrick Stewart was a serious actor; that Robin Phillips was a serious director; and that the crew at Stanford may have had a good idea about the dog.

We had the good fortune to see Stewart a couple of years later as he moved up to the more senior role of Enobarbus in the notorious Peter Hall modern-dress version of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, put on to raise money for a reproduction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. The production starred Vanessa Redgrave as the Temptress of the Nile and Antony Quayle as her paramour.

Several years later, on the same site, in the completed facsimile of the Globe, we saw *The Tempest* with the same Redgrave as Prospero, a woman in a man's role requiring at least the marginal suspension of disbelief. A massive low that overhung the Home Counties had threatened rain all day. And, sure enough, only moments after the trumpets blared for silence in the audience, the heavens opened. We didn't need the frantic dialogue and sound effects of the play's first scene to persuade us a storm was raging. Suspension of disbelief was instantly gratuitous. Later, when Ariel had quelled Shakespeare's tempest and the local one did not let up, we wondered what could possibly make the stinkards in the pit imagine they were no longer being pelted. Switcheroo.

Now I'd like to turn to a couple of modern, more naturalistic plays that tested our willingness to suspend disbelief.

In 1971, the National Theatre undertook O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, directed by Michael Blakemore and featuring Olivier as James Tyrone. We had seen the original American production in 1957, directed by José Quintero with Fredric March in the same role. Olivier had seen it too. His most recent biographer, Philip Ziegler, says the experience terrified the actor, who thought "I wouldn't play this bloody part for anything and, what's more, I'll never play any actor now I've seen this." Ziegler elaborates: "Whoever played James Tyrone would have to bring off that most difficult trick: to be a great actor pretending to be a bad actor, or at least a second-rate actor." When Olivier saw Fredric March in "A Long Day's Journey," he was doubtless also thinking of the play as Ziegler characterizes it: "... the story of a defunct actor, once modestly celebrated, never great, moldering in obscurity with his alcoholic sons and drug-addicted wife."

I believe Ziegler is somewhat misleading here. The play is more than the vehicle for a great role. In the years since its first appearance, critics, scholars, and directors have come to see *A Long Day's Journey* not as the story of James Tyrone so much as the comprehensive story of an entire family conflicted and riven almost beyond hope, as is clear both from the play's text and stage directions, and from the worldview it shares with the rest of O'Neill's works. Beyond this, the business of a great actor acting a second-rate one is even more challenging here than might at first appear. To act a hack doing an awful Hamlet would be much easier than acting a burnt-out second-rate actor trying desperately to play the masterful father in his own family as it spins out of his control. This last could explain Olivier's saying, at least for the record, that he wouldn't touch the role.

Nevertheless, he jettisoned his disclaimer only a few months later and asked John Osborne to write a vehicle for him. The result was *The Entertainer*, a tragicomedy with songs whose protagonist, Archie Rice, is a provincial music-hall comedian who has failed even to reach second-rate. That role plainly demonstrated that Olivier was both willing to risk playing a failed actor and able to do so persuasively.

The film adaptation—the only version we had seen—follows Archie through several desperate schemes involving his family, his current failing music-hall routine, a young lover, and, finally, an attempt to mount a new show exploiting his father, retired after a successful career. When this last venture results in the father's death on stage and the closing of the show, Archie, exhausted, simply gives up and refuses to join the rest of his relatives in a move to Canada made possible by his brother-in-law, a prosperous businessman. Olivier is persuasive as a man whose capacity to act declines nearly to the point of torpor. He is equally persuasive as a man who consistently thinks his tactics are working when they are not. The ability to project these qualities would help him in *A Long Day's Journey* as conceived by Blakemore.

In *Stage Blood*, a memoir of his time as an associate director of the National Theatre, Blakemore tells us that he was concerned from the start of rehearsals that Olivier, whether by design or accident, might come on too strong in the first act, dominating the other actors and upsetting the balance of the play as it built to a climax in the closing scenes. He probably knew the story, told by Jane Lapotaire and preserved in Ziegler's biography, of what happened during a tour of Canada when Olivier took over the role of the butler in John Mortimer's translation of the Feydeau bedroom farce *A Flea in her Ear*. Lapotaire asked Geraldine McEwan what it was like to have Olivier in the cast. She was told, "Well, it used to be a play about a woman who thinks her husband is unfaithful to her; now it's a play about a butler who works for a woman who thinks her husband is unfaithful to her."

When we saw Fredric March as James Tyrone, we thought that his portrayal, great as it was, made just the mistake Blakemore was trying to avoid. He was not nearly so persuasive as Olivier when required to project the meanness that characterizes James Tyrone throughout all of the play but the scene in the last act in which he admits to his younger son that early in his career he had bought for next to nothing a meretricious play with a romantic lead he could play with little effort. He says he became so much a slave to the easy profits to be made from this venture that he dissipated such acting skill as he had achieved through honest effort and became a hack no one would hire for more substantial roles. He says little, by the way, of the effect of all this on the family he largely neglected except to keep them in funds, at least until a series of deals gone wrong left him with a lot of mortgaged land and little ready cash. Given what March had given us up to that point, a strong figure dominating all the others and in apparent control most of the way, the play looked very much like the story of James Tyrone, failed actor. Olivier, on the other hand, seemed to be transformed for his moment of at least partial moral awakening, and then to sink back into a kind of moral lassitude. In playing down his renowned star quality for the sake of the ensemble, Olivier achieved what we felt was a better balance, yielding the reverse of what happened when he let the butler take over *A Flea in her Ear*. The play in the hands of Quintero and March felt to us like the story of James Tyrone, a defunct actor who has sold out and whose family end up as the collateral damage of his failure. With Blakemore and Olivier it became the story of a tormented family in which the father happens to be an actor who has sold out. This not-so-subtle difference prompted O'Neill's daughter, Oona Chaplin, to write Olivier to say his was the best staging of the play she had seen. And it showed Sallie and me

how playing down a role can enhance the plausibility of a nominally naturalistic play. My next, and last play, illustrates how playing over the top might enhance the effect of a problematic narrative.

Some plays ask little or no suspension of disbelief. Think of “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” from which we demand little more than a series of sitcom gags that were already old when Plautus wrote it. Or “Waiting for Godot,” which gives us four characters who, in a series of self-reflexive comic turns, make us glad to have spent some two hours laughing at the absurdity of existence. Sometimes we’re not sure whether the issue will arise or not.

I know this was the case with me when, in September of 1968, I first encountered “The Dance of Death” by August Strindberg, which the National Theatre was preparing to bring back after a hugely successful first run that Sallie and I had missed.

The Dance of Death is as bleak and blackly humorous a portrait of the wedded state as can be found, a descant on Dr. Johnson’s quip that marriage represents “the triumph of hope over experience,” or an elaboration on “Marry in haste, repent at leisure.” Edward Albee has acknowledged drawing on the play for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*; but Strindberg’s games, which foreshadow *Get the Guest and Hump the Hostess*, are more savage and hurtful, while his Edgar and Alice are exponents of Extreme Marital Boxing who make Albee’s George and Martha look like Marquis of Queensberry wannabes. When I read the play, some of it seemed so phantasmagorical and absurd that I wondered if it could be staged as anything but a black farce, intelligible only as an allegory of connubial misery. The Royal National Theatre seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion, since what they allowed Olivier and Geraldine McEwan to give us was a play that, in its grotesque, exaggerated, and primarily passionate presentation, was the stage equivalent of an expressionistic picture by someone like Käthe Kollwitz. A Black farce and then some.

The play was written in 1901 and is set on a small island in the Baltic. Its twin protagonists are Edgar, a captain of artillery, and Alice, his wife, a former actress. Edgar commands the military detachment on the island. They are about to celebrate twenty-five years of marriage, which Alice, wondering aloud what there is to celebrate, characterizes as twenty-five years of misery. Edgar responds that they might as well have a little fun, since a trip in a wheelbarrow to manure the garden might be next on the agenda. Edgar will be retired and pensioned off shortly. According to Alice, he has been passed over for promotion because he is so tyrannical as an underling that his superiors fear to serve either with him or under him. The couple anticipate the arrival of Alice’s cousin Curt, who has known them both since before their marriage. Divorced, he has been living abroad for some fifteen years but has now turned up to take an administrative post on the island. Edgar and Alice regard him as weak on account of the divorce and paradoxically seem to regard their remaining married as a sign of strength.

The plot exists mostly to supply a backdrop to the continuously renewed hatred of Edgar and Alice toward each other, a relationship that Alice tells Curt is like a dance of death to which the partners are condemned till one of them dies. The dance of death notion also appears in another guise with Edgar’s repeated request for Alice to play the “Entry March of the Boyars,” a quirky, off-beat piece to which he

then often does a peculiar sword dance, after which he usually falls into a sort of catatonic trance. One has the sense that Edgar does this dance to defy the imminent death from heart trouble he has been led by the island's doctor to expect. Alice tells Curt she hopes it might kill him. A performance of this routine in Curt's presence leads to an apparently serious attack, which subdues Edgar for several days. Recovered somewhat, Edgar goes to Copenhagen. On his return he says he has seen a doctor who says he may live twenty years, which he intends to spend with another woman. He says he has filed for a divorce. Curt is drawn into the couple's dance when Alice tells him that Edgar, colluding with Curt's ex-wife, was initially responsible for having their children placed in her custody. She says Edgar does things like this because he is a vampire. Curt, who now wants revenge against Edgar, allows himself to be seduced. Alice removes her bodice, enticing Curt to bite her throat in a reprise of the vampire image.

During the first interval, which followed this scene, Sallie and I repaired to the lobby, where the smoked salmon and white wine we had ordered awaited us under a number on one of the small shelves stationed around the lobby of the Old Vic. On the way we heard couples arguing whether Edgar or Alice was more at fault. The men were all defending Alice; the women, Edgar. This was doubtless an artifact of the sexual politics of 1968, no man wanting to be a chauvinist male pig, no woman wanting to be tagged a fanatic women's libber. In spite of the bizarre goings on and heightened presentation, everyone seemed to be treating the couple as plausible human beings in a naturalistic setting. This was almost certainly because the acting of the principals was supercharged, suffusing the hall with palpable emotional violence and with the atmosphere Curt had found in Edgar's quarters:

... There is a smell as of poisonous wall-paper, and one feels sick the moment one enters ... There are dead bodies beneath the floor, and the place is so filled with hatred that one can hardly breathe.

While we were trying to make some sense of the play to this point, Dorothy Tutin and her husband approached us, laden with smoked salmon and wine. "Might we trouble you to share your shelf?" Miss Tutin asked. I answered that it would be no trouble at all and that we would trouble her only to say how much we had enjoyed her Rosalind. With this Miss Tutin's eyebrows shot up and she started backward into her husband, sloshing the wine in his glass. An "Ah!" escaped her. Then, leaning close and lowering her voice by many decibels and an octave or so, she said, "You're very kind. It's always gratifying to be noticed for one's serious work." No sooner had my goose bumps registered than she added, volume and pitch rising to their former levels and ending with a snort, "Nowadays, nearly all I ever get is the bloody queen!"

I suspect the startlement was genuine, the interjection spontaneous. An American familiar with one's serious work: cause for mild surprise at least. The little speech may have been scripted, but I'd guess its sentiment was real enough: actors generally don't like to be pigeonholed, and the RSC/National Theatre ethos could have been at work here too. It's hard to tell with people whose job is dissimulation.

Clearly grateful for a place to plop their provender, the pair lost no time in occupying a piece of our shelf. They nodded their thanks. Not stopping to eat or drink, they then faced each other, and, oblivious of Sallie and me, began—or resumed—a heated conversation about the play.

The content was not what we might have expected from two graduates of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Not a single remark about craft, no “Larry this,” no “Gerrie that.” Only a replay of the argument we had heard all around us, both having bought into Edgar and Alice as credible human beings worth their attention.

As the play continued, we learned that Alice thinks she can prove that Edgar has been embezzling army funds in league with the Quartermaster. Meanwhile, Edgar has admitted to Curt that there is no other woman, that he has not filed for a divorce, and that he is in fact mortally ill. He also inadvertently gives the lie to Alice’s claim that he is in cahoots with the Quartermaster, who is his enemy. He then asks how Curt how he is enjoying Alice now that he knows her. Edgar is not surprised that Alice has taken revenge on him and does not blame Curt for being her means. Ashamed, Curt asks forgiveness, and Edgar obliges. Alice, still thinking she has the goods on Edgar, comes upon them shaking hands, Curt’s arm around Edgar’s shoulder. She draws Curt to her and taunts Edgar. His lover is in Copenhagen, hers is here. Edgar draws his sword and attacks her. Curt flees. Edgar confesses that he has not filed for divorce and forgives Alice for trying to put him in jail, saying he has known all along what she was up to. He says his recent collapse and the look it has given him of real death make him prefer the living death of their marriage to the alternative. As to Curt, Alice thinks him a hypocrite for fleeing, while Edgar thinks him merely an honest man corrupted by being around them. When he admits he was also lying about his health and that he has not long to live, Alice agrees to be his nurse. They conclude they might as well carry on and attend the Silver Anniversary celebration the Colonel has planned. Curtain.

The National Theater decided to append a shortened version of Part Two. I won’t trouble you with the details except to say that it has two major plots. The first involves machinations to assure Curt’s financial failure, the second an attempt by Edgar and Alice’s daughter, Judith, to marry Curt’s son, Allan. When this is broken up by Edgar, Judith tries to queer his pitch with the Colonel. It is suggested that the misery of the current generation may be passed to their successors. When Edgar eventually dies, Alice admits to being sorry.

By the end of the play, we were still unsure what it all added up to besides a lot of high intensity projection of hatred and malevolence directed by everyone in all directions, which seems to justify Edgar’s assertion that people drawn into their orbit end up with them in the dance of death.

I need to interject here that throughout the entire performance, Olivier, except, during his spells of weakness, maintained a ramrod posture; jerky, almost robotic movements; and a perpetual pout, corners of the mouth drawn down and the flesh on his chin pushed forward and drawn up; when he laughed, which was often, his mouth never got beyond a grim rictus. It must have been excruciatingly difficult to maintain that expression. Obsessive stagecraft, anyone?

Curtain calls. The house went nuts with sustained applause. Edgar’s mask and posture still in place, Olivier led the whole cast to the footlights for a bow, then

back. Others took their bows, McEwan last. Olivier took his solo bow, still as Edgar. The house erupted in bravos. He stepped back. The bravos continued, growing in volume. McEwan shoved Olivier forward again, and suddenly he was no longer Edgar, but himself, his jaw back where it belonged, the bulge of his chin no longer pressed up, his face creased by wide smile, his posture relaxed. Three or four bows later—dour, stiff, pouting Edgar once again, he backed up to lead the entire party in one last bow before leading them off.

Sallie said, “He shouldn’t have done that,” meaning he shouldn’t have relaxed the Edgar face and then put it back on. I said, “Why not. Barbette.”

Barbette? When I was a kid in Sarasota, wandering the Ringling Brothers’ Winter Quarters, I knew him as the man who choreographed the aerial ballet and trained showgirls to perform it. His real name was Vander Clyde. Illness and injury in the late ’thirties had left him unable to do the music hall act that had made him famous. Under the name of Barbette, sporting a wig and a skimpy costume craftily shaped fore and aft to make him credible as a female aerialist, Clyde would execute virtuoso moves on the trapeze. Back on the floor, he would remove the wig and become a shamelessly mugging, strutting, muscle-flexing male. Audiences realized they had been conned, but they ate it up, calling the impersonator back for numerous curtain calls, until, with a coy wink, he’d disappear, confident that most of the pack would become free advertising. In college, I read an essay penned in the ’twenties by Jean Cocteau that praised the apparent ease with which Barbette created such an effect of femininity that his audience did not reflect that most of his moves were impossible without a man’s upper-body strength. To Cocteau, this act was a supreme example of artistic craft at the service of illusion.

You can see where this is going. “Barbette” had become my shorthand for a performance that makes you believe when you know you should know better, when you know you’ve been conned but come back for more.

Which is just what we did, about ten days later, hoping to figure out how the actors had succeeded in drawing us into such a preposterous story. They did it again, and we were none the wiser. We simply acknowledged that the play acted with such unrestrained emotional violence as it was by Olivier and McEwan offers us a couple who have made their mutual hatred into the principal activity that gives their life meaning. While each claims to wish the other’s death, and while each has claimed a wish to die, one is left feeling that they really do not want to give up their living death for the real thing. These contradictions suggest affinities with the so-called theater of the absurd. I suspect besides that the couple are meant by Strindberg to represent everyone’s potential for that kind of destructive behavior that is indistinguishable from self-destruction, a death wish facing two ways. And I wonder if Strindberg didn’t fear that an era of widespread nihilistic self-destruction might be just around the corner.

In any case, even if it remains problematic to us, this *Dance of Death* gave Sallie and me the two most compelling evenings of theater either of us can recall. If we were conned, we have the consolation of knowing we were conned in good company and by a great actor in what he and many contemporaries thought was his best role. It was Richard III on steroids. We’ll settle for that.

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