

### **Olivier's Tears: Musings On Art, Research, And Inspiration.**

If the world were clear, in the words of Albert Camus, art would not be necessary. Art helps us pierce the opacity of the world. I find these words both inspiring and daunting. This piercing is far from inevitable, unlike, say, modern taste in jewelry. My art isn't *bound* to make Camus' revealing cut. It isn't automatic. Will my art be *sharp* enough, pointed enough? Will its aim be true? To what extent must I work to understand the foundations for this opacity — its origins and particularities and construction — for my art-full dagger to cut through the world's carapace of mystery and obfuscation and allow for discovery, revelation? How should I proceed? One answer, the obvious one here today, is research. As an artist I need to arm myself with information. And though I think that's true in most cases, it may not be the whole truth. It seems to leave something out.

There's an oft-told story among theater folk about Laurence Olivier, when he was performing the role of Othello. Maggie Smith, as Desdemona, became aware one evening well into the run that Olivier's performance that night was trumping all his previous work; that he was in some incomparable zone that even *he* had yet to enter. That evening put all his prior performances of the role to shame. It was magical. She felt it. She knew it. Smith went to the star's dressing room after the show to congratulate him, and found Olivier in tears. Larry, she might have begun, what's wrong? That was the best performance of Othello you have *ever* done. It was magnificent, transcendent. And Olivier, weeping, looked up at her. I know, he said, I know. And

I have absolutely no idea *why*. There's the rub to research — the flash of inspiration: the magical sparks that can ignite a performance but over which we feel no control.

Whatever chemistry, or alchemy that had produced Olivier's sudden brilliance was as opaque to him as the world his art had likely pierced.

We tend to think of much good art, effective art, brilliant art as arising from inspiration, that unplanned discovery, the dream, the brush stroke or paint splatter that changes the way the world sees. Charlie Altieri led me to these thoughts at a discussion prior to this conference, when he noted how often people do *not* equate art with mundane, arduous research but with that spark of inspiration. If the performing arts and research are interconnected, where do sheer talent and inspiration fit into the equation? I could do all the research in the world and Maggie Smith would still throw me off the stage, reciting my well researched dramaturgy as I fly into the wings.

Research can't replace or obviate technique. In public performance, if you can't speak or express yourself at all, if you can't be heard or seen or felt by the audience, it matters little what you know. We work from some foundation of training, and at the same time we pray for Olivier's tears. Many years ago, I read an interview in the Sunday NY Times saying that all a theater director has is their instincts, and that the only way to develop instincts is through experience. Creating performance, you might then say, is some sort of devil's bargain between experience and instinct, information and inspiration, the material and the spiritual. Directing *Foe*, my extensive readings of Coetzee, DeFoe, and critical essays on both, all augmented by Laura's invaluable dramaturgical support opened up a whole new instinctual landscape.

There s no guarantee that this combination of experience and instinct will produce great art, or any art. And there are still those artists, performances or art objects that do seem to arrive fully grown from the head of Zeus —seem to be pure magic. How do we account for that, the mystery of inspiration?

Zelda Fichandler, the renowned director who helped found the Arena Stage in Washington DC, said that The imagination is very hard to develop through training or teaching because it s not about mechanics. It s about getting at imagery. She noted that though Stanislavsky had exercises to train the imagination, in a certain way, she claims, it is a gift. But she goes on to talk about the significance of *motivation* for directors, which begins to address this question and build a bridge between the material and the magical. In psychological realism, still the pervasive acting methodology in this country, understanding a *character s* motivation is at the core of the actor s process. Fichandler believes it is essential for directors as well, outside the *as if* of the stage. Directors have to have a very strong *reason* to use their image making capacity, she states. They have to *want* to put their imaginative ability into the service of ideas. The gift alone isn t enough. Unfocussed imagination goes nowhere. . . . passivity just doesn t instigate art, she claims, because art is a very active and protesting process. It embodies an attitude toward the world. It has a point. And, I might add, without a point, art has no chance of piercing anything. So . . . for Fichandler, imagination, inspiration, can be empty, point-less, without motivation, without the fuel of ideas, without a point of view. Without knowledge, she says, one s imagination can be too thin. So knowledge, research, can become the vocabulary for artistic desire.

Louis Jouvet, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century director and one of the first theorists of directing, attributes a kind of magic to research itself. To direct a production, he wrote in 1937, means finding the spiritual mood that was the poet's at the play's conception [. . .], the living source and stream which must arouse the spectator [. . .]. It means realizing the corporal through the spiritual. And later, director that he is, Jouvet as much as stages the act of making art in the theater: the directing of a play is a turn of the hand, a turn of the mind and a turn of the heart, he states, a function of such sensitiveness that everything human can enter into it. Hand, mind, heart. What more do you need? But also notice — these three turns create a space, an opening, a piercing through which everything human can enter. They create human possibility.

Art helps *us* pierce the opacity of the world. Who is *us*? I want to suggest Camus is not speaking only of the artists of the world, but of the people of the world, those who witness art, its audience, everything human. In performance, we're all in it together. The revelation of Olivier's Othello that night was shared; one might argue that the audience itself — their particular attention, their openness, their responses — contributed to the alchemy of ephemeral brilliance. And they may have wept at Olivier's performance that night just as he did, also in the dark.

If we want to think of art as research, is that research limited to those who make the art, or can art *act* as research, produce new questions and new knowledge full of the specificity, nuance and detail any scholar pursues? How do we account for Camus' *us*? Charged with the interests of the audience, Jouvet stated, the director must unite the stage and the auditorium, the spectacle and the spectators. He must *organize that area* where the active players on the stage and the passive players in the auditorium meet each

other, where the spectators penetrate and identify themselves with the action on the stage, and where the *actors* satisfy their need to prove and free themselves by *reflection* in the people who listen and look on. I don't know if Jouvett had read the passage from Camus, but here, it is the spectators who penetrate the action on the stage, and thereby play an essential role in making the opaque translucent. And it is the actors, educated in the spiritual mood that was the poet's, who arouse the spectator to her *own* discoveries. And it is the director, the choreographer, the writer, the dramaturg, the uber-librarians of art as research, who *organize* that area where these inter-penetrations can take place.

Does our research only look backwards, into the past? The world shifts, Fichandler says, and as a director, you have to be in touch with it. [We have] to be in tune with what people are thinking about even though they can't name it. So this is a research of the *present*, of the *relationship* between any work and its audience.

Fichandler: We have to address the subconscious and preconscious of our audience. We have to be *of* them, but we have to be ahead of them. Why? Because any artist who shares their art with the world is taking a stand. *Any* performance shared with an audience makes a statement. Like the product of any research, perhaps like research itself, performance constructs an argument with which the audience engages. Fichandler wants to make it clear what a *huge* responsibility performing artists have in culture. We can help pierce the opacity of the world, or further calcify that which is already opaque, or quickly becoming so.

The reason [theater] persists, Fichandler claims, is that the audience gets what it can't get from any other form, which is the *breath* of the actor, the moment in which

the thought or feeling is born. The breath of the actor. Inspiration. . . the drawing in of breath, according to the OED, or a breathing or infusion into the mind or soul, and then the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind. Olivier's tears.

Imagination breeds inspiration. Research can set the stage for imagination. Imagination is what's there after you know everything, Fichandler says. The riches come up because you've pierced the skin with your questions, your search.

Again we pierce, we search, hand/mind/heart, and the riches stream through, and if we do our job well, they help make the world clearer, our tasks more obvious, our responsibilities more pressing, and action — change — within reach.