

## **The Alarming Exclusion Of Charles Marowitz**

by Peter Byrne

### Book Review

*Marowitz, Charles: Alarums & Excursions, Our Theatres in the '90s, Applause, NYC, 1996, ISBN 1-55783-261-7, 306 pages.*

To gauge the Marowitz irruption in California, we should read his piece in the L.A. Herald Examiner of May 1989 when he took over as drama critic. (Page 181-3) He didn't throw down the gauntlet. He slapped the city in the face with it, and then summed up like H. L. Mencken:

*A theatre critic in Los Angeles is like a man brandishing a dowsers wand in the Sahara Desert.*

The city's playgoers were either middle-class seekers of reassurance in trivia or a would-be avant-garde burying its nose in the latest fad. The locals knew nothing of world drama beyond the fog of Eugene O'Neill. Henceforth a writer who like all the best critics was an artist in his own right would keep them in line. For starters he informed the L.A. theatre public that it simply had no taste.

There followed a couple of principles that Marowitz had never relinquished through the tumultuous 1960s and '70s. First, it was wrong-headed to think you could remedy social injustice to Hispanic, black, or other minorities by miscasting their members in inferior plays. So much for political correctness. Second, it was better to do with brio a comedy void of message than to make a social problem boring by encasing it in the cement of perfunctory drama. In the theatre, political and social points were made through art or not at all.

Were these the Cassandra cries of a critic spoiled by faraway metropolitan bright lights? The new man squashed that objection straightway. Yes, he had been formed in New York and London. But L.A. theatre's biggest mistake was to turn admiringly to those two theatre centers. New York had been brain-dead for a decade and London went through the motions now without a drop of red blood flowing.

It's hard not to begin revisiting Marowitz's work with the burst of pugnacity that is *Alarums & Excursions*. We could, however, just as easily start our enquiry elsewhere into the conundrum of his career, the mystery of why his books and endeavors haven't caused more commotion in the areas they engage with.

*Alarums* is, as its full title suggests, mainly a close look at the American stage, particularly on the West Coast, in the 1990s. But Marowitz's efforts as a director could also serve as our starting point. They reached an early peak in London, went on in various European cities, and continue in America and elsewhere. He also wrote the play he recently directed in Washington, D.C. Perhaps we should start there, with *Silent Partners*, or with the other plays he authored. That would mean going back beyond his autonomous efforts to his first adaptations of Shakespeare and other classics, ancient and modern, that amounted to personal creations as well.

But hold on. Surely acquaintance with a writer who bolsters his opinions with theory and historical analysis ought to begin with a reading of his biography of Michael Chekhov. Or of his study, *The Other Way*, which goes to the bedrock of what's involved in putting on a play today, with emphasis on the actor's dilemmas and America's current gingerly handling of Shakespeare.

That, however, would be starting at the deep end. It might be wiser to wet our toes first in *Burnt Bridges*, surely the most aptly entitled autobiography ever. This superb memoir, published in 1990, mixes theatre history as it was made with glimpses of the author's personal life. Between the lines an explanation looms up as to why Marowitz's name isn't always present in bibliographies of the modern theatre. His move back to America in mid-career -- and not to his native New York but to the West Coast -- made him hard to place. Moreover, his temperament comes through as decidedly contrarian. A passion for autonomy made him something of an outsider. Independence like his defies categorization as much as the multifaceted nature of his accomplishment. How to pigeon hole the creator of *The Open Space*, London's first genuine experimental theatre, who pours scorn on sloppily served up half-baked novelties? (See the stringent limits he places on the updating of classics and the infliction of concepts on plays.)

Which brings us, still striving to find a way into the massive block of work, back to the basic theatrical facts, to his weighing up of individual productions and his evenings in the theatre. But even this doorway isn't simple to enter. In fairness we would have to go back as far as the percussive little magazine *Encore* that sat in on the birth of the new British theater in the 1950s. Then a hard look at the mercurial and opinionated *Confessions of A Counterfeit Critic* of 1973 would be in order. Finally, if not overwhelmed, we could open *Alarums* and the new millennium.

While heavy with specifics, these reviews of 1984-1995 also reveal nagging preoccupations that are occasionally underlined by a think-piece. Marowitz is no friend of Method acting. He never loses sight of the importance of actors' training. As a director, he has a definite idea of how actors should enrich their roles. He continually defends the irreplaceable function of the theatre critic. All this comes across in such sharp and fiery language that another constant of his reviewing disconcerts us. Marowitz, at the end of the day and his excursions, demonstrates a disarming tolerance for those who take another path than his. Is this one more ambush for the panjandrums of pigeonholing?

His case against the Method is a long and funny story. To keep afloat in London in the 1950s, he rashly put himself forward as a teacher of Method acting. At a time when Strasberg, Kazan, and the Actors' Studio were all the rage, Marowitz, barely twenty but a New Yorker, seems to have had little trouble convincing Londoners of his expertise. However, he himself rapidly cultivated doubts. The Method couldn't really deal with the classic texts that interested him. Strasberg hadn't even followed all the developments of Stanislavski's later thinking. Very soon young Marowitz found the Russian master himself and his System an obstacle to the kind of non-naturalistic acting that could render the new theatre of Ionesco, Beckett, and Brecht. Marowitz's stance against naturalism and the Method would become integral to his subsequent work.

Indeed the weakness of American actors' training is a running theme of *Alarums*. Marowitz seems to agree with the critic Irving Wardle, who wrote a thoughtful introduction to *Alarums*, that he left England just as the energy petered out of its theatrical life. Yet when it comes to the training of actors, Marowitz measures American inadequacy by British accomplishment. The British repertory system put young actors through years of coping with a great variety of roles. They were immersed in the classics -- the only plays, according to Marowitz, in which an actor can grow. For America, he prescribes a remedy that would flabbergast the custodians of the public

purse. He calls for national conservatories, one east and another west, that would go beyond Method technique and "address the problems of style and stature which immediately come into play when classical work is undertaken." (Page 195)

Marowitz' personal take on how actors should proceed also resounds through *Alarums*. He's written of it at some length elsewhere, notably in the memorable last pages of *The Other Way*. Baldly put, he feels that grasping the play's text and the psychology behind the words -- the sub-text -- are merely the first two steps for the actor. Method naturalism stops there instead of plunging on into the actor's unconscious to discover an ur-text. The great classical roles call for this descent into one's self in search of the fundamental and universal. Marowitz the critic gauges just how far actors in performance have advanced on this voyage. Elsewhere, as a director and teacher, his aim has always been to help them down that road.

Marowitz never stops exalting the vocation of critic. For him it's a dedicated and essential job. His own reviews bear him out. Always trenchant, never hedging, they regularly take off from an evening's performance to touch larger issues. He sees the critic as an overseer of the organization and operation of theatre as an art form. But he also exercises his judgment farther afield, since a play is "like an enlarged detail in a vast landscape which, when scrutinized, provides specific data on the surrounding environment." (Page x-xi) Moreover, as its subtitle indicates, his book honors the spirit of the great artist-critic George Bernard Shaw. Marowitz's passion for criticism is such that he occasionally leaves off reviewing plays and reviews the critics. He's full of praise for Kenneth Tynan and Harold Clurman, manages to admire the astringent Mary McCarthy, and settles scores bluntly with his bugbear Frank Rich.

*A writer without prejudices, idiosyncrasies, and bees in his bonnet lacks three of the prime requisites of a good critic. (Page 182)*

His aphorism might define Marowitz' modus operandi. Going back as far as *Encore*, he's always been outspoken in argument. He can be absolute and downright harsh. But reading him we gradually discover an alter ego, the critic's laid-back double:

*There is one part of me that feels: no matter what esthetic objections a critic may raise against an artifact, if it confers pleasure to others, it should run and prosper. Whereas the other, more fascist part of my nature, feels that flawed artistic vessels should be torpedoed out of the water or, at the very least, run aground. (Page 166)*

Glancing back at *Burnt Bridges* we find this anti-fascist persona extolling "belly-laugh" and the professionalism of the commercial theatre. He's "a secret admirer of the best being produced within the established convention." (*Burnt Bridges*, page 178-9) What Marowitz calls his "schizoid attitude" means that the lifelong devotee of the experimental theatre proves to be a connoisseur of man-in-the-street comedians like Jerry Lewis and George Burns, and can pinpoint the unique ordinariness of a figure like Frank Sinatra. No one has been more eloquent on traditional vaudeville or so open to new forms of performance art. He's capable of urging a solution with force, defying compromise, and then adding as an afterthought that of course some practitioners might do better using their own quite different approach. He has his way but is always willing to be astonished by what others accomplish their way. It's as if a long life in the theatre has taught him that only the quality of the result on stage matters. Then we remember that he called his meditative prescription for the theatre *The Other Way* and not *The Only Way*.

But whatever the critic's mindset, a book of reprinted reviews stands first of all by the words on the page. Do they thrill us by their perspicacity and, yes, do they add up to fun?

Listen to Marowitz on a prime case of social criticism successfully delivered by art. David Mamet's *Glengarry Glenn Ross* "condemns the ethic by which Americans live and prosper, and it is positively ghoulish to find the well-heeled exponents of that system sitting before their theatrical prototypes and rising at the close to give them a standing ovation." (Page 4, 1984)

As for wry fun, here's the critic at *Private Lives* that reunited the overripe couple, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton: "I went to the show, as I'm sure many people did, just to see the varicose-veined porpoise ponce about in material she could not possibly enliven and to observe the smoldering remains of one of the potentially greatest stage actors England ever produced." (Page 5, 1984)

At a Los Angeles *Richard II*, the critic watches victory go to political correctness over an "eviscerated" Shakespeare. The absence of awe for kingship in the Bolingbroke rebels produces a "Shakespearian western instead of a classical tragedy." The rebellion becomes no more than a multi-ethnic crusade for democratic reform. "Where else but in Los Angeles would such a complex and ambiguous role as Richard be entrusted to the readily-recognized featured player of a popular TV series?" (Page 66-7, 1992)

For all his mordacity, Marowitz knows well that "what distinguishes great critics is the quality of their enthusiasm -- not their contempt." (Page 281, 1994) In *La La Land*, however, he doesn't always find the example easy to follow. His appreciation of *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner at the Mark Taper Forum is something of an exception. But even here bouquets aren't thrown and discrimination rules. Marowitz's appreciation of the play epitomizes his approach and values. He likes Kushner's story because, though beginning in naturalism, it "cracks open to permit birds of paradise to swoop through the theatre and they are what gives the work its ethereal texture and intellectual richness." (Page 83, 1992) The travail of two gay lovers in the midst of the AIDS epidemic opens on to larger issues. What happens to love in the shadow of death? Did the Reagan decade do irreparable damage to the American moral fabric? Can spirituality thrive in a society where a Roy Cohn calls the dance? Marowitz recognizes that this monument to gay sensibility has a vaster scope:

*'Angels' validates the anguish of the sexually marginal and the sexually spurned in exactly the same way that the Civil Rights marches of the sixties defined American blacks and affirmed their dreams and dignity. (Page 81)*

Marowitz hawker of messages? While *Angels* makes us ask big questions, he doesn't feel the theatre is the place to peddle answers. As with Kushner's play, theatre's job is to show us people in times of crisis offering or withholding "mercy, charity, empathy," in a word, love. (Page 85) This isn't drama criticism that lets a reader off the hook.

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Swans -- ISSN: 1554-4915

URL for this work: <http://www.swans.com/library/art13/pbyrne53.html>

Published November 5, 2007

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