


An Actor Prepares
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A blog for actors, actresses and directors who would like to acquire professional tuition about their crafts without enrolling in a theatre-academy or a formal university context. The blog consists of essays, insights, exercises and observations that will help theatre-artists achieve their professional aims.



Curtain Calls

Charles Marowitz (April 10, 2010)

Actors are obsessive about curtain-calls and if a director does not comprehend this obsession, it may be his undoing. In the catalogue of professional manias, curtain-calls are second only to billing.

It is the director's job to organize the call in such a way that it properly reflects the hierarchy of the company. But that is not always easy to ascertain. The supporting roles are clearly identifiable, but when you get to the leads, things tend to get murky. If, for instance, you have a high-visibility actress in the role of Lady Macbeth and a less experienced actor in the role of Macbeth, which should be given prominence in the curtain-call? Most directors would agree that the former takes priority over the latter despite the fact that Macbeth is the larger and more dominating role. But if you have a tetchy actor playing Macbeth, his subordination in the curtain-call may cause resentment. If you give them a joint curtain-call, the more accomplished actress may feel she is not being given her due. It sometimes pays to discuss the sequence of calls with the actors in advance of the curtain-call rehearsal to 'feel them out' on what you (and they) believe is the correct order.

Calls are frequently arranged in doubles – or, in the case of larger casts, quartets; two actors or four actors coming out simultaneously. This gets your company on stage in an expedient manner and reduces the length of curtain-calls which can often be tiring on an audience who feel bludgeoned into protracted applause when all they really want to do is gather up their coats and avoid the inevitable traffic jams. But leading players expect that they will be given a solo curtain-call and clearly, if you are presenting Hamlet or Lear, Tartuffe or Tamburlaine, Hedda or Medea, they are fully entitled to it. But what if you are presenting an all-star version of "The Importance of Being Ernest" and your Lady Bracknell is a celebrated character-actress and your Cecily and Gwendolyn are well-known TV personalities? Should one persist in believing that Jack and Algernon are really the leads and that therefore, they should appear last?

The simple solution to pecking-order problems of that sort is to bring the principals out altogether - half from one side of the stage and half from the other – to have an ensemble call. Let each artist individually step forward for their solo call and then gather them all up again, for a final group call. If, as everyone claims, theatre is a collaborative art, collective curtain-calls make the most sense.

These may seem to be infantile quibbles but they are not perceived that way by the players. They have an importance for them which directors do not always grasp. It is their time with the public or, as they perceive it, their public and, in regard to the performance of that play on that night, they are absolutely right. It is their interaction with the spectators that constitutes the show and it is only proper that at the end the two parties directly involved should commune.

Some times, an actor who has been enthusiastically received by the audience is coupled with a weak actor who has left virtually no impression whatsoever. The fact that they share a curtain-call together is subversive to the more popular artist. (“If I weren’t standing beside this galoot, they’d be cheering their heads off.”) Or contrariwise, the duller actor finds himself the subject of an ovation that has no bearing on the tawdriness of his performance. He is, of course, delighted. But his partner, who is the real cause of the furore, has fumes flaring out of his nostrils. Invariably, the unimpressive actor will tell his fellow artists: “Did you hear the cheers they gave me at the curtain-call?” and unless they are particularly spiteful, they will fix a smile and allow their benighted companion to live on in Cloud Cuckoo-Land.

In a production of Ionesco’s “Makbett” in Coventry, my cast included Harry H. Corbett, who had become a popular favorite in the series “Stepney & Son”, and Terry Scott, a popular TV personality in his own right – both of almost equal standing as British comedians. Corbett automatically assumed he was the star of the show and behaved accordingly. At the end of those performances where audience-reaction was particularly warm, he would step forward from the curtain-call line-up and, blithely assuming the leadership of the ensemble, make a little speech on behalf of the cast. Scott, frozen in the line behind him, would seethe quietly and go purple in the face. His speech completed, Corbett would smile his goofy, ineffectual smile and step back for a final round of applause, assuming everyone loved and adored him as much as he did himself. I don’t believe Scott’s anger ever erupted but had it done so, it would have demolished the theatre and a good deal of the surrounding neighborhood.

Curtain-calls are mini-dramas in themselves and immensely varied. Some, particularly in musicals, merely merge unobtrusively into the final scene. Some reveal subtle human factors that inadvertently convey themselves to the audience.

Sometimes, at a curtain call, the manic glaze in actors’ eyes suggest a perverse joy, as if the sound of smacking palms were the equivalent of orgiastic flagellation. Sometimes, as in Russia, the actors clap back as if the audience’s contribution was not a whit less than the performer’s. In continental companies, the unrehearsed actors often mill around, bumping into each other, and peer back stupidly at the clamor exploding around them. Some actors give their best performance at the curtain-call. Donald Wolfitt used to lean against the proscenium arch clutching the curtain like an exhausted gladiator, implying that no collective burst of energy – no matter how vigorous – could equal the labors he had just undergone.

Some actors don a mask of jolly complicity, their expressions insisting ‘we all did it together’. Some actors, many of the best in fact, go rigid with tension or receive their volleys of applause like so many dollops of castor oil. Still others turn down the sides of their mouths and contemptuously bide their time considering the plaudits of the mob to be a wholly unjustified intrusions into their craft. Some, the more egoistic, wallow in the sound as if it were music from the spheres, exaggerating personal triumphs by mentally transforming dull thuds of polite applause into Vesuvian eruptions. Some stand around jitteringly contemplating the trains they will catch and the late dinners they will shortly wolf down. Some actors, at the end of a long, satisfying performance, step forward like the triumphant torero to receive the ears of the prize bull. Sometimes, in certain political productions, the curtain-call is a massed act of defiance with actors radiating their antipathy to a disgruntled and disgusted public and one can hear the crunch of conflicting ideologies crackling through the auditorium.

There is one curtain call I have never forgotten. It came at the end of the National Theatre production of Carl Zuckmayer’s “Captain of Kopenick” which starred Paul Scofield. The actor, his gaunt, creased tousled head peered into the auditorium, clutching the hands of fellow-actors as if permitting the public to view his genius, untrammelled by art, undisguised by artifice, then stepping forward to the apron and nodded his head with the kind of graciousness King George probably showed to Handel when he stood up in his box during the Hallelujah Chorus of “The Messiah”. Then, being waved forward by his colleagues for a solo call, he tacitly shared with his audience the knowledge that skill and imagination had combined to produce an experience which had forged bonds of brotherhood that nothing could ever rend asunder;

bowing to acknowledge and, at the same time to confirm, the mastery of his craft and the perspicacity of our appreciation of it. Smiling wanly, as if to say: Life is not all art and you would be wise to temper your enthusiasms with a certain amount of philosophic detachment. Holding out his hands again to invite his fellow players into a charmed circle; they, approached him tentatively as if he were a witch-doctor too charged and holy to touch, but touching nevertheless; grasping his hand on either side and receiving the magic electricity which the house had authorized him to distribute evenly among his colleagues; then retiring with a hand-wave, he shuffled down to the privacy of his dressing-room, causing our din to evaporate in the air like a kind of pointless obstreperousness which, having made its point, had outlived its usefulness.

I can't for the life of me remember anything about the play, but the curtain-call is enshrined in my mental archives.