

READING THE PLAY

Charles Marowitz (September 6, 2009)

It has become the custom, particularly in avant-garde companies and unorthodox productions, to replace a first reading with improvisations or exercises in some way related to the underbelly of the work about to be undertaken. Joan Littlewood began work on Brendan Behan's "The Hostage" with the actors being marched around the roof of their theatre in London's East End trying to inculcate the kind of regimentation that many of its characters would have experienced in their military occupations. Several companies find it useful to perform a series of sound-and-movement exercises as a preamble to rehearsals in order to loosen up actors and get them to interact with each other without the constrictions that a text will shortly impose.

But these are the exceptions. In most cases, the first day is devoted to the first read-through of the play either with or without the presence of the playwright depending on circumstances. It is a day usually charged with tension as actors feel they have to justify the fact that they have been hired and consequently, try to prove themselves to their fellow actors. Or contrariwise, some actors (usually of the Method persuasion) will deliberately underplay their roles clearly indicating that, since no firm decisions about interpretation have yet been made, they refuse to assert feelings or attitudes about which they are not yet certain. At the first read-through of Peter Brook's production of "King Lear" at Stratford-upon-Avon starring Paul Scofield, the company began reading listlessly and without much purport but when Scofield went at the text hell-for-leather, they all took his lead and gave a spirited rendition of the play. Scofield wanted publicly to 'test' the words he had been studying for many weeks in private and so dove in. Because of the high respect in which he was held by the other members of the company, they felt honor-bound to join him.

The degree of intensity conveyed during a first read-through is very much an individual matter unless the Director cues the tenor of the Reading towards either quiet reflection or full-blooded histrionics. A spirited and all-out reading has several advantages over a subdued or inaudible mouthing of the entire text. It gives the company a chance to experience the shape and sound of the material at hand - which private study before rehearsals cannot provide. It can also be used as a barometer by the Director to test the preconceptions actors have of their roles. Often the root of a characterization problem is immediately revealed in the First reading. One sees in the blink of an eye, an actor's misconception, a deeply-rooted faux pax which is taking him in the wrong direction, and it signals the remedial action which will have to be undertaken once rehearsals begin in earnest. The great disadvantage of an 'all-out' first reading is that an actor succumbs to his initial interpretation of the role and the final performance, after weeks of rehearsal, is little more than a gloss on the rendering he gave when he first sat with script in hand. That is a good argument for a slow, gradual and uncertain start; a cautious crawl before the actor feels able to walk upright.

Certain directors believe the first rehearsal should also be something of a seminar on the play with hefty analyses of writer's intentions and articulated insights about the play's intellectual content, social milieu and psychological sub-text. If the playwright is present, that tendency is more likely to hold sway. Even directors, in the presence of authors, feel the need to prove themselves, exhibit their intellectual credentials and articulate their beliefs. It is sometimes useful to hear the playwrights speak openly about their play just to see what seems to be important to them. But in my experience, most playwrights shy away from declarations of intent. They know what they have written and why it has taken the shape it has and rather than incline actors to the author's version of the material, they prefer to let the play speak to the actors in its own voice to see what will organically evolve. Playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter flatly refused to discuss the rationale of their work in any terms and relied almost entirely on the

impetus of the material on the talents of their players. That is a sensible policy as it puts the onus on actors to find their own way, draw their own conclusions and exercise their own imaginations.

In the earliest stage of my production of Vaclav Havel's "Temptation" at the National Theatre in Prague, the playwright spoke only of the circumstances under which the play was written, its gestation-period while he was incarcerated by the Communist regime. He also described how he was gradually seduced by the idea of diabolism which came from his reading of Thomas Mann's "Doctor Faustus", Goethe's "Faust" and Marlowe's "Tragical History of Doctor Faustus". Nothing explicit was ever spoken about the 'meaning of the play' or its author's 'intentions' but the details of its progeny cast a palpable spell on the company and unconsciously directed their thoughts to the issues underlying Havel's work.

If the actor's job is to discover the sub-text which gives life to the text of his play, the more he probes its spiritual and philosophic roots, the greater his eventual discoveries will be.