

The Second Speed

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On September seventeenth I bought a bike at Goodwill for \$10.38. It has a handlebar, which isn't at all adjustable. Good news- it runs and that's all that counts. On top of that, it has at least five gears. I have to admit that as a playwright I am far worse than my own bike. I have no handlebar at all and I only have 2 gears, which are essentially my two modes of operating as a professional playwright.

In my first mode I respect my own work and the work of my colleagues. In my second mode I do not. In the first mode I know how to write plays, and I write them. In the second I do not. In the first mode I can be interested in a play where the author just wants to convey their personal history. In the second –I can't. Sometimes I forget to switch gears and that's how I crash in those little, yet beautiful accidents.

According to Guy Debord, we live in “a society of performance,” a society of non-stop show and bright never-ending dreams.

If that is the case a playwright doesn't even need to be multi-gear. The first gear is sufficient enough for him to get to the common yet meaningless destination, which is an apt and comfortable termination at death. By merely acting within limits and choosing socially-approved ways to provoke and criticize a society, he can expect to be financially rewarded and acclaimed.

On the other hand, full adherence to the second gear is instantaneous and painful. It means a full awareness of death: a short, dependent existence at best.

But what if Guy Debord was exaggerating? Let's assume a modern human still has the ability to live through, and not just watch the performance. Let's assume that there are zones of Authenticity, where the Word is equal to the Act, and performance can accomplish tasks different from the mere protection of a hibernating society.

In this case risking and switching to a second gear would probably make sense.

Well, let's get to the Drama of Today. The worst thing about it is that it is already a Drama of Yesterday and I don't mean a long production cycle. A huge number of good contemporary plays (no, we are not analyzing bad ones here) have been written with no regard to society's informational obesity and without an understanding of the theater's new role.

Theatrical performance is the ultimate manifestation of total influence and consequently the last sanctuary of spontaneous experience. In a society of infinite choices that scream at us, theater is a single, softly spoken sentence, authentic and full of truth. Any theatergoer is a hostage and, surprisingly, this is good. He is a hostage in a more intense way than a reader or even a movie lover. The latter always has a chance to wait until the movie is released on a tape or a DVD. A theatergoer is in a worse situation than a TV watcher whose channel surfing, meal, and available sexual partner all protect him from shock and awakening. And the worst part is – he is still

outside of the performance, one step away from reality, on the edge of spontaneous experience.

Typically a casual spectator is best prepared to live through spontaneous experience. Since theater-going is still viewed as an indicator of social status, you can find in Moscow a high ratio of casual spectators. A tired grocery store manager, who is talked into going out to watch a stage play by his wife or girlfriend is an ideal visitor of the theater. He is least prepared for the transformation and as a result goes through it most fully.

I guess “transformation” is a word from Naive Man’s vocabulary. But, having switched to the second gear, we commit to belief in the possible improvement of the human mind, increasing human sensibility, and the ability to become immune to mass culture techniques.

The existing dramatic art, however, is based on the opposite premise: that man never changes and is ready to empathize only with problems familiar to him from his own experience or the experience of a show. The highest achievement of the real theater is the readiness of the spectator to admit that the people of an alien culture are “just like us...and have the same problems as we do.” What a miserable result! Yet another popular way to create a real drama is the notorious “asking questions” method, without any attempt to answer those questions over the course of the play. Nothing bad about that technique itself, yet it has been overused and has exhausted its possibilities.

Let's try to put together the principles of a drama of “the second gear”:

1. No technological sophistication. Principle of “well-made play” works only on a single scene level.
2. Work with ideas that are otherwise inexpressible and for which the audience does not have an automatic, easy response.
3. Author’s ruthlessness to the spectator. Ninety-nine of the audience are villains. One percent are really bad villains.
4. Author’s ruthlessness to himself. The worst criminal who watches a play is a dove compared to the author.
5. The answer contained within the text. The author should show the way out of a desperate situation. Otherwise his work is vain.
6. Presence of didactics.
7. “Not guilty until proven guilty.” The author must be the passionate protector and defender of the “bad” characters.
8. No music, songs or dances.
9. Ignoring art and political context.
10. Realized freedom from the principles set forth

The theater of the second gear does not exist. Perfect plays that may fall under this definition are occasional. Personally I did not manage to write any. But that’s how I see the Drama of Today.