

DOCUMENTS 15

1988 Lecture Series on Jewish Theatre
at 92nd Street YM-YWHA in
New York

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See also: General Instructions

cover letter to
to: Michael Posnick re: May 22, 1987
92nd St YM-YWHA lecture series
Dear Michael, on Jewish Dramatic Theatre

I'm sorry to be so long getting you this statement of the ideas I outlined to you at our March meeting. Even to frame some preliminary questions which a "Jewish dramatic theory" might investigate turned out to be extraordinarily difficult.

As for The Reluctant Prophet...there's a great subject here: the 20th century as the "bad dream" of the 19th. (We always suspected we were somebody's bad dream.) I can even imagine how a play on this material might develop: the more specific the Rabbi's dreams of the holocaust get (names of death camps, poison gas formulas, etc.), the more wildly apocalyptic his "ravings" (i.e., our reality) seems to his contemporaries.

About the Bisagoge, you were right: one can't be sure how much is "Ezikielos" and how much is Jerry Rothenberg. I'm sufficiently intrigued to try to hunt down the more scholarly edition (with literal translation) which I understand exists. I wonder if whoever it was in the 'fifties who did that version of The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy realized that his project was 2,000 years old. Not that, as the author of a play about the Wandering Jew, I have anything against 2,000-year-old projects!

Best,

David Cole
137 Cottage St.
New Haven, Conn. 06511

phone: in NEW HAVEN
203-624-3982

~~NEW YORK~~
~~212-924-1040~~

Proposal for 1988
92nd St YW-YWHA
Lecture series on
Jewish Dramatic Theory

prepared for
May 1987

Barry Holtz, Jewish Theological
Seminary

Toward a Jewish Dramatic Theory

David Cole

b. 1

Is there a characteristically Jewish way to think:
the theatre?

This is not the same thing as asking if there is a
characteristically Jewish manner of doing theatre, or a
characteristic Jewish teaching about theatre, or a specifically
Jewish stage tradition. My question is whether Jewish
intellectual and spiritual tradition might conceivably provide
the concepts and images out of which a model of the theatre
as such, of the theatrical process, could be fashioned.
It certainly does not set out to provide them. But the
perennial themes of Jewish reflection--interpretation,
textuality, manifestation, enactment--are also the inevitable
concerns of dramatic theory. Suppose when Jewish tradition
speaks upon these matters, one were to insist on hearing it
as speaking about theatre--what would one hear?

I propose five areas in which such a "mishearing" might
be attempted.

I. ENACTED PROPHECY AND ACTING. In the absence of anything
approaching theatre in ancient Israel, the prophets themselves
sometimes approached it:

they were...ready to make, as it were, walking icons
of themselves. They transformed themselves into
visible personifications of the abject state and
forlorn hopes of Israel. Isaiah went about barefoot
and with loosened garments as a "sign and portent"
of the disasters that would follow the alliance with
Egypt.... Jeremiah appeared with a yoke over his
shoulders to show the Israelites that they had no choice
but to submit to the Babylonians;...Ezekiel lay on
his side for a number of days equal to the years that
the people would suffer their punishment. (Dan
Jacobson, The Story of the Stories, p.133)

These enactments recall--or rather, foretell--such contemporary forms of theatrical experiment as performance pieces and street theatre. But more generally they suggest a parallel between prophecy and acting themselves. The prophet and the actor each begin by introjecting the word of Another, which they then seek to "realize" in resonant actions.

II. THE SINAI EVENTS AND THE THEATRICAL EVENT. In a series of theophanies (divine appearances) on Mounts Horeb and Sinai, a numinous Other manifested Itself in the form of (or: from the midst of) a series of natural phenomena: a burning bush, a fiery cloud, an earthquake, a thunderstorm. In these founding events of Jewish experience, certain aspects of theatrical experience seem foreshadowed. Theatre, too, is the irruption before human witnesses of a numinous "other" reality inseparable from (but not reducible to) natural presences which both disclose and conceal it.

III. MIDRASH AND REHEARSAL.

Midrash intensively scans the rhetoric of the text; fragments it, takes it apart piece by piece and often work by word; plays with words...grammar, variant readings; fills in the lacunae. Midrash, for example, will supply motives and explanations where the text is ambiguous--such as reasons why the serpent tempted Eve, or what Cain and Abel quarreled over, or what kind of fruit it was that Adam and Eve ate. Again, legend, history, parable, sermon, anecdote will be used, and varying conflicting interpretations will be juxtaposed without the concern the Talmud has for reconciling them. The relation of Midrashic interpolations to the original text range from very close to freely associative. (Eric Gould, ed., The Sins of the Book, p. 60)

So described, this ancient rabbinic interpretative practice sounds remarkably like the work actors and directors do on

dramatic texts. Could rehearsal be understood as a kind of Midrash upon scripts; acting, as a kind of Midrash upon roles?

IV. THE TALMUDIC TEXT AND THE DRAMATIC TEXT. Imagine a text which purported to be the transcript of a conversation that moves toward (but does not necessarily attain) resolution of an initial puzzle or tangle; a text which offered itself, not for passive reading, but for memorization and impassioned re-enactment of the conflict it portrayed. Such a text is the Talmud. But such, also, is the dramatic text. What does this structural resemblance between Talmudic tractate and playscript tell us about the function of texts in the theatre?

V. FOLLOWING COMMANDMENTS AND FOLLOWING A SCRIPT.

A small, select group goes off by itself so as to perfect its performance of the actions specified in a text whose author's view of experience they seek to embody. This is not the ideal formulation of either Jewish observance or theatrical production; what is interesting is that any single formulation should be capable of standing as a description of both of them. To what degree is the Law, as a text of pre-script-ions and pro-script-ions, script-like? In what measure is the inevitable Jewish dialectic of adherence to and departure from "what is written" also the dialectic of the production process?

Press release for 1988 lecture series
at 92nd St. Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. on
Jewish Dramatic Theory

November 2, 1987

b. 1

Dear Friend:

In the belief that a Jewish theatre ought to be, among other things, a site of reflection upon the relation between Judaism and theatre, the Mosaic Theatre is presenting:

Toward a Jewish Dramatic Theory
A Series of Discussion Meetings
With David Cole

The general question to be addressed in these sessions is whether Jewish intellectual and spiritual tradition can provide the concepts and images out of which a model of theatrical activity might be fashioned. It certainly does not set out to provide them. But the problems with which Jewish thinkers have perennially concerned themselves--questions of interpretation, textuality, manifestation, enactment--are also the inevitable concerns of dramatic theory. Suppose, when Jewish tradition speaks upon these matters, one were to insist on hearing it as speaking about theatre--what would one hear?

At the first meeting, David will consider three Biblical "scenes of reading": Ezra Reads the Law, Ezekiel Bats the Book, and Moses Shatters the Tablets. Why begin with scenes of reading? A Jew is not simply a reader with a book; an actor is not simply a reader with a book. Yet actor and Jew "meet" in the figure of the active reader, seeking to internalize the word of another--a word which he or she then seeks to "realize" in resonant actions. It is the possibility that in this parallel we might possess the basis for a Jewish understanding of the acting process that the group, in its opening session, will explore.

Subsequent sessions will focus on parallels between the dramatic text and the Talmudic text; on the traditional rabbinic interpretive practice of Midrash as a prototype of rehearsal activity; on the similarities and differences between following "commandments" and following a script; and on the uncanny "eruptions" of the divine recounted in Exodus--burning bush, fiery cloud, storm, earthquake, etc.--as possible images of the theatrical event.

David Cole is a playwright (The Moments of the Wandering Jew, The Responses). He is also the author of The Theatrical Event, a study of the relation between theatre and ecstatic religion (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1977) and of Acting as Reading, an account of the actor's work as a physicalization of the reading process (forthcoming). He has taught at Yale, Harvard and NYU.

Each of the sessions will be organized around a set of Jewish and/or theatrical texts, to be handed out at the door. David will begin by suggesting how the perspectives of these texts can be brought to bear on some aspect or problem of dramatic theory. The meeting will then be thrown open to discussion of the texts and of the theatrical issues they evoke--a discussion in which, it is hoped, all present will join.

The first meeting, "Biblical 'Reading Scenes' as Images of the Acting Process," will take place on _____ day, December _____, from 8-10 p.m., at _____

Subsequent meetings are scheduled for January _____, March _____ and May _____.

We hope you will join us in this inquiry,

**NATIONAL
FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH
CULTURE**

*invitation to further
lecture on Jewish
dramatic theory*

MEMORANDUM

TO: David Cole
FROM: Andrea A. Morgan *Andrea A. Morgan*
RE: Meeting of the Council of Jewish Theatres
DTAE: May 13, 1988

Thank you very much for agreeing to address the members of the Council of Jewish Theatres at their annual meeting. As we discussed, your presentation will take place on Thursday, June 9, at the Mosaic Theatre. The session should last about an hour.

For your information, a full agenda for the meeting, as well as a list of Council affiliates, is attached.

I look forward to the discussion surrounding your remarks.

ANDREA A. MORGAN

