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THE AUDIENCE IN SPITE OF ITSELF: ODETS, GENET, AND OSBORNE

By David S. Cole

Going to see John Osborne's **The Entertainer** is an experience different in kind from any other evening at the theatre. It is not that anything happens in **The Entertainer** which we have never seen on a stage before. The uniqueness of the theatrical experience is not, as in **Endgame** or in **The Bald Soprano**, the result of a dramatic action that never was on sea or land. There are two alternating kinds of action in the play, vaudeville sketch and (slightly stylized) naturalistic episode; both are familiar, and the alternation itself will not take wholly by surprise any one with an experience of the "show business" musical comedy (**Kiss Me Kate, Gypsy**). In **The Entertainer**, however, onstage action is put into a new kind of relation with the audience. The audience is not being "interested" or "moved" or "delighted" or "instructed" - all these reactions imply an audience which merely looks on, whereas the great triumph of Osborne's technique is that he gets his audience to take a part. Without - and this is the great thing - without blurring the edges of dramatic illusion, Osborne picks you up and sets you down in the thick of the action. He forces you into a certain position; and being in that position, you have to take the play a certain way - his way. The advantages of this kind of control to any playwright with an educative intention are evident. For the moment, what I want to ask is, how does Osborne get us where he wants us, and why does he succeed in this process of manipulation where other dramatists have failed?

To look for a moment at some of these others. Genet is an example of the sort of playwright who aspires to create dramatic illusions so complex that the audience at some point ceases to be able to distinguish them from reality. The techniques of this writer are, Lord knows, sophisticated enough; and yet the assumption behind the techniques - that an audience can be bullied into the after all insane conviction that imitation has become reality - shows a glaring naivete. To put it simply, nobody's fooled. In **The Blacks**, for example, as depth upon depth of illusion is revealed, the only effect produced in the spectator is a sense of having somewhere lost the playwright's track. Genet intends our surrender to the illusion, but the very effort we make to appreciate the play's organism keeps us from even considering such a surrender. Genet fails to "bring us into" the play - and by that I don't mean "get us interested." but "incorporate us as elements of the action" - because if we are to grasp his intentions, we must stay outside to do the grasping.

For all the care which he lavishes on the stage action, Genet neglects to find a way of putting his audience in touch with it. A much less imaginative playwright, Clifford Odets, grappled with this problem and came up with a plausible solution. **Waiting for Lefty** is the dramatization of a strike-meeting, and the proceedings onstage (rostrum speeches, etc.) are calculated to give the audience a feeling of participation in such a meeting. Audience "plants" are present to quicken the illusion; but nevertheless the illusion is still-born. An audience does not take seriously a playwright's efforts to impose some collective character upon it. And a playwright who attempts such an imposition makes precisely those demands upon his audience which he makes upon his actors: "Imagine you are an industrial worker at a strike-meeting; imagine you are Prince of Denmark..." Neither of these delusions is likely to be within the spectator's imaginative capacity. Anyhow, this kind of dramatic experience is self-destructive. To the extent that a spectator has the sense of really being at a strike-meeting, just to that extent he has lost the sense of really being at the theatre. Insofar as he experiences the strike-meeting as reality, he fails to experience the play as dramatic art.

It is no use a playwright trying to impress his public into the action of a play; the customers did not come to theatre for that, and no piece of structural artifice will ever persuade a theatre audience to believe itself anything other than a theatre audience. This is a fact of dramatic life. Genet and Odets, Pirandello and Wilder, must have chafed at this discouraging limitation. Osborne not only accepts it, but finds a way to turn it back upon the audience, to catch the audience in a snare woven of its own imaginative deficiencies. Osborne makes the dramatic point of **The Entertainer** by forcing upon his audience an awareness of just what it means to be the audience at a play whose dominant metaphor is the Theatre.

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In the vaudeville sections of **The Entertainer**, Osborne requires his audience to undergo the only transformation which, as audience, they possibly can undergo: the transformation from audience at one kind of theatre (John Osborne's **The Entertainer**) to audience at another kind of theatre (Archie Rice's vaudeville). When the band strikes up and the tatty drop descends, then you and I in the third row become - are forced to become - the music-hall audience, for the simple reason that a place where music-hall acts are being performed is a music-hall, and the kind of theatre audience we are is determined by the kind of theatre we are at.

Thus Osborne arranges his stage action in such a way that we are put into a precise and inescapable relation with it. His approach has none of the crudity of Odets' attempt to enroll the

audience directly; he gets at us indirectly, through the stage action, yet in his careful manipulation of that action, he avoids Genet's careless assumption that no matter how complex representation gets, the responses of the audience can be expected to follow suit. Osborne's strategy succeeds where Odet's and Genet's fail because he concentrates his attention neither on the audience nor on the action, but on the validity of the relation between them.

We have seen how Osborne gets the audience where he wants it; we have now to consider where he wants them and why he wants them there. **The Entertainer** is a dramatized indictment of contemporary English society. Leaving aside the question of precisely what is being indicted - this has been discussed often enough - I want to consider Osborne's solution to the problem of indictment as a dramatic stance.

There is, first of all a built-in paradox: the more forceful an indictment, the stronger the tendency of the audience to dissociate itself from what is being indicted. That is why Shaw is so little taken to heart. He makes one side of a question - the Pothinus side, the Roebuck side, the Mrs. Dudgeon side - appear so unthinkable that one finds oneself willy-nilly in the camp of the angels. So untenable are certain positions made to appear that, although in real life you may yourself be occupying one, you can't, for the moment, believe that anyone could. Far from thinking to amend, you refuse to recognize the possibility of offense.

A playwright, then, who means to indict the society of which his audience are members, has to forestall their dissociating themselves from the image presented of that society. This is where Osborne's strategy pays off. It is Archie Rice's audience which is being indicted, but as we have seen, the **Entertainer** audience becomes the Archie Rice audience the moment the **Entertainer** theatre is converted to a music-hall by Archie's performance. The audience cannot refuse the role in which the dramatic action compels it to appear because the vaudeville keeps taunting the audience with the questions: What do you mean, you're not them? There you are, sitting in **their** seats!" The remarks that Archie makes to Jean about his audience, that they are:

> a great mob of dead drab erks... the whole inert shoddy lot out there..I don't feel a thing and neither do they. We're just as dead as each other,

the Entertainer audience is trapped into applying to itself. And how is the **Entertainer** audience to exempt itself from the scorn behind Archie's parting shot?

> You've been a good audience. Very good. A very good audience. Let me

know where you're working tomorrow night - and I'll come and see YOU.

Any distinction between the audience of the entertainer and the audience of **The Entertainer** has long since been blotted out.

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As a result of the reality which Osborne is able to impart to theatrical experience, the theatre, with its techniques and conventions, tends to become for the spectator a metaphor for other kinds of experience. Now of all the dramatic metaphors which a playwright might use as vehicles of his dramatic intentions, the theatre has this unique advantage: it is **there**, it is what is going on **right now.** It does not have to be given life on the stage (as must Adamov's pinball machine or Arrabel's automobile graveyard); it is itself the life of the stage, the medium in which the dramatic action lives, moves and has its being. The playwright who chooses The Theatre for his dramatic metaphor has the same advantage as the traveler who, to illustrate his point, chooses the metaphor of a journey.

The Entertainer is a very theatrical play, alive only on the boards, full of meat for actors and full of **coup de theatre.** But when I say that the principal dramatic metaphor of the play is The Theatre, I am not referring to a surface theatricality. I mean that most of what gets expressed in the play, gets expressed through the metaphor of theatrical performance. For example, that ideal honesty of feeling which Archie pines after is embodied in a performance: the fat old Negress' "beautiful fuss." And the closes approximation to this ideal in the world of the play is also a performance: Billy's lusty rendition of the hymn-tune. The expression which the playwright finds for Archie's dominant attitude, his indifference, is a theatrical gesture:

Whatever he says to anyone is almost always "thrown away." Apparently absent-minded, it is a comedian's technique; it absolves him from seeming committed to anyone or anything.

Human relations take the form of an ensemble relation between performers: Frank is Archie's "feed," and Osborne describes Archie's feeling for him an "an almost unreal **pantomine** affection."

The family scenes have something of the structure of the vaudeville routines with which they alternate. It is significant that the episodes and the vaudevilles are numbered together consecutively, so that, for example, No. 7: "Archie Rice - Interrupts the Programme" is followed by No. 8: "Billy, Phoebe, Jean, Archie and Frank." Each scene, whether music-hall or at-home, is introduced as if an act in the vaudeville:

On both sides of the proscenium is a square in which numbers - the turn numbers - appear.

and the following lighting note is also revealing:

The scenes and interludes must, in fact, be lit as if they were simply turns on the bill.

Earlier in this essay I called the naturalistic scenes "somewhat stylized." The style that shapes these scenes - and this is a hint of the source of unity in the play - is the vaudeville style. For example the timing of scenes is staggered: in No. 1, the exchange between Billy and Jean, one speaker is always a step ahead of the other, with comic effect. Again, there are refrains - e.g., "Nobody listens to anybody" - which turns up in scene after scene with the regularity of the comic tags which run through a succession of Milton Berle routines. The vaudeville pattern of life in Archie's household - another facet of the metaphorical use of "Theatre" - is a dramatic metaphor (and a highly theatrical one) for the degeneration of real human relations into series of perfunctory gambits and responses. We might compare Osborne's earlier use of this dramatic metaphor in Act III, Scene I of **Look Back in Anger**, where Jimmy, Cliff and Helena are hard at work on a vaudeville "routine" which will take the place of (now unfeasible) genuine relations among them.

If the naturalistic episodes receive their form from vaudeville, the vaudeville scenes receive their substance from the life of the Rice family, as represented in the naturalistic episodes. It is this interlocking of the form of one kind of scene with the content of another that brings into a unity the two very different kinds of dramatic representation which compose the play. Much of what appears to be mere comic patter as in fact merciless commentary upon the character conflicts and issues central to the play. For example, Archie's run-of-the-mill vaudeville joke about his "cold and stupid" wife ("moron glacee") - applies with terrible irony to Phoebe. And his wisecrack to his audience: "I've taken my glasses off. I don't want to see you suffering" is a fair description of his attitude toward the misfortunes of his family. The great traditions and institutions which bulk so large in the lives of the Rice family (Jean's sterile idealism, Billy's unseviceable past) are here seen in their right proportions:

I've played in front of them all!" "The Queen," "The Duke of Edinborough," "The Prince of Wales," and the - what's the name of that other pub?

The structure of this joke records the experience of great institutions in the world of the play: the sordid fact behind the fair name.

The dramatization of false personal relations and false institutions being so essential to the play, Osborne is able to make his going metaphor of The Theatre work for him in still another way. It's a loser's game trying to persuade audiences that stage action is real, but one thing people are always ready to believe about the theatre is that it's false. Usually, the sense of falsity damages dramatic experience, but here it's just what's wanted. The very nature of theatrical experience compounds the sense of Archie's falseness and the falseness of all he represents. Once again, having thought through from the beginning the nature of the theatre, Osborne not only comes to terms with the limitations of his medium, but actually turns these limitations to his own ends.