

## Books

### *Acting as Reading*

#### *Communists, Cowboys and Queers:* The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams

### The Act of Reading

Margaret Gray

*Acting as Reading*

by David Cole

1992: University of Michigan Press

Instead of *Acting as Reading*, playwright and theorist David Cole could have called his new book *Reading as Acting*—a simple rearrangement that would provide a more convincing frame for its contents. The book isn't about acting, although its subtitle, "The Place of the Reading Process in the Actor's Work," suggests that it will contain advice to actors; it's one long play on words, in writings mined from a rich variety of sources, about the role of reading and the reader, in life and in plays. As such, it's often well-written and provocative, and always charmingly intertextual. But Cole has to spend too much energy convincing us that a book about reading is really about acting.

The hypothesis into which Cole channels his impressive researches is that an actor is always reading a script, even when performing it, and that in forms of theater with no script at all, like improvisation, actors really simultaneously write and read their parts aloud to each other and the audience. (He limits his attention to Western forms of theater, admitting that "with certain non-Western performance traditions I...can do nothing.") Although he observes in the first chapter that the importance of reading in the actor's

process isn't in dispute, he goes on to defend his comparison of readers with actors on the simplest and most obvious levels, forestalling imagined objections like "The reader is silent," with conclusive counterthrusts: "He hasn't always been. But grant that he is: So is mime."

In fact, the centrality of reading in drama has been so widely taken for granted in much of its Western history, that the challenge to twentieth-century theorists has been to turn our attention away from the script, to drama's spectacle, the elusive processes of performance. Since Antonin Artaud proclaimed in 1938 that "it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a...language half-way between gesture and thought," the debate over how to reconcile text and performance has raged with an abundance that it would be tiresome of Cole to rehash, but which it's odd he barely acknowledges. After all, he doesn't need to invent weak objections to his trope of actor as reader—better ones exist. He's certainly familiar with the debates and their key players, bringing up semiologists like Patrice Pavis, who regard the audience as reader (Cole instead sees the audience as "read-to"); or pointing out that "the antitext enthusiasts of the 1960s read to pieces their copies of *The Theatre and Its Double*," but he never acknowledges that, by replacing the written word simply and innocently at the heart of theater, he is stifling decades of rallying cries.

One reason that Cole doesn't see himself in a context of theorists about the role of text in drama, is that his figure of the actor as reader seems to

him to dissolve the conflict entirely. He devotes a big chunk of the book to a psychoanalytic formula (supplemented by a chart) based on the idea that both reading and acting emerge from a "lost physical" which he names, expanding a theory of Norman Holland, "eating." Basically, an infant's urges both to resist food and to take it in become the reader's urges to supplant the book and merge with it, which become the actor's urges to replace the text and immerse himself in it. He shores this laborious model up with biology, linguistic theory, and text analysis, pointing out: "The distinction between theater that is 'full of action' and theater that is 'all talk' may no longer appear terribly meaningful, once one has recognized that, in the theater as elsewhere, action is only the continuation of active orality by other means."

Perhaps the real reason Cole doesn't directly address the performance/text debate, though, is that he's not writing dramatic theory at all. He's squarely in the tradition of contemporary literary criticism, quoting Paul de Man on page two, and speaking of *topoi* and the *lector*. He bases a great deal on the convergence of certain words in various quotations which link eating to acting, eating to reading, and acting and reading to immersion in water. As usual in this kind of scholarship, some of the comparisons are illuminating; others look suspiciously like coincidence, due to the fact that the English language has a limited number of words to describe abstract experiences like reading and acting. Cole quotes from a letter by Dickens: "I should like...to have a swim in the broad waters of one of my longer books," then wonders "Do actors likewise experience their work as 'a swim in...broader waters?' 'Your head will swim from the excitement of the sudden and complete fusion of your life and your part,' writes Stanislavski." Such dubious cobblings-together can be forgiven, as Umberto Eco recently pointed out in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, when they're charming or evocative; Cole's often are. Occasionally, though, his connections aren't bold, just silly, as when he notes that "the association of words with milk, [is] implicit in such expressions as "a flood of words" or "a fluent speech"—an untenable hermeneutic leap, unless he lives in a dairy.

Cole is at his best when at last he gets to the plays, and in his finest chapter, "Scenes of Reading as Scenes of Acting," he puts the formula aside in order to examine scenes, from Aristophanes to

Daryl Chin, in which characters read onstage. Here he begins to prove his admirable sensitivity to both text and performance, particularly in a beautifully argued subsection on Chekhov. Again, though, while he bases the chapter loosely on the premise that reading in a play can be seen as a metaphor for how the acting process was perceived in its era, his arguments really seem to be investigating how these playwrights and their eras think about *reading*. True, he must establish what he means by the elusive word "reading," and how "eating" can link it to acting—ambitious projects—before he can go on to any practical discussion of acting itself, something he still appears to plan to do in chapter three: "Eating may or may not seem a very promising basis for the work of the actor...even if it were the ideal basis, how would one go about establishing the acting process on such a basis?...What's the actor supposed to do—eat the book?" he demands in a frustration that matches, by now, his reader's. In the latter chapters, he seems to have abandoned the project, abruptly issuing a disclaimer: "Clearly, a performance isn't just a reading-to, any more than acting is just reading. But here as elsewhere my aim is to develop the implications of viewing acting as reading, not to argue that this is the only way of viewing it." He fails to mention, though, exactly what the implications of this view *are* for the theater and for actors: what is its contribution to the rehearsal process or to conceptions of character? What effect might it have on our experiences with plays in performance?

Cole, the author of *The Theatrical Event*, an earlier theoretical work, also writes plays; he doesn't conceal his lively trade interest in how actors read scripts. His last chapter, despite its ponderous title, "The Actor-Reader as the Author, Reading" is about playwriting. "To write for actors is not so much to give actors something to read as to give them to themselves as readers, to *write them into action* as readers. Ultimately, it is from the practice of playwriting that theory learns the ambition to write acting as reading" he concludes—raising the question of why he didn't slant his research in this direction earlier. The angle he did choose too often falls flat; even when it does allow him to come to provocative conclusions, they are only provocative in theory. Cole never provides any advice about how to bring the new model of acting he has promised us off-book and onto its feet.

diversity allows the reader to establish possible links. Neither the book's structure nor its subject, however, suggest a postmodern biography. It is Vinaver's determination to find ways of representing contemporary reality that fuels his radical experimentation and anchors it firmly within its own time (147). While his work displays many of the preoccupations fundamental to postmodernism—interruption, discontinuity, and irony—it also implies a worldview and depends on an authoritative text (149). These qualities take their place in a context that is late Modernist rather than Postmodernist, and permit Bradby to delve incisively and authoritatively into his subject.

LORIEN CORBELLETTI  
*Boston College*

→ **ACTING AS READING: THE PLACE OF THE READING PROCESS IN THE ACTOR'S WORK.** By David Cole. Theater: Theory/Text/Performance Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992; pp. 299. \$39.50.

**THE ACTOR'S INSTRUMENT: BODY, THEORY, STAGE.** By Hollis Huston. Theater: Theory/Text/Performance Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992; pp. 218. \$37.50.

Hollis Huston's *The Actor's Instrument* and David Cole's *Acting as Reading* "think through acting" by examining theatre theoretically. Cole has a playwright's interest in the roles texts play in the work of actors (and vice versa), while Huston, viewing theatre from an actor's perspective, chooses as the site of his concerns the performer's activity in "calling forth" the stage through performance. Neither Huston nor Cole is content, however, to see theatrical theory and practice as separate domains.

Cole's book principally dwells on "the place of the reading process in the actor's work," but it also offers important ideas on the extent to which reading can be understood through acting. Cole's thesis is that acting and reading are significantly linked activities, that "acting is the recovery of the 'lost' physical of reading" (1). In his introductory chapter ("Acting as Reading"), Cole links acting to reading by positing that actors are the group of

readers most likely to work collectively; however, he refuses the easy distinction between the public reading of actors and the private reading of readers. Instead, he argues that the difference is better expressed as one "between the literal and merely implicit presence of other readers, not between solitude and society" (11). As he notes, "the communality of theater work is not the antithesis of solitary reading but, rather, the staging of it" (14). Cole locates the common origins of reading and acting in psychosocial development.

Cole's second chapter notes that criticism has recently granted reading an active role in the making of meaning, a status equivalent to writing. He argues, however, that acting is a more useful metaphor to characterize the agency of readers, for while it captures the secondariness of a reader's response to a text, it also grants to readers a function both different from writing and yet of crucial importance. Later, in his final chapter, "The Actor-Reader as the Author, Reading," Cole examines critical theories of the secondariness of all writing and shows that "to act is to reenact an author's self-division into an actor-"origin"-writer and an actor-"witness"-reader (237). Cole's argument suggests that, by considering acting, recent theorizations of reading and writing could be revised toward more nuanced understandings of all three processes.

Cole's underlying psychosocial model of reading is based on Norman Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. Though Cole raises pointed questions about Holland's theory (44-47), he accepts some of its fundamental premises, alternately treating them as developmental patterns that shape the reading of individuals and viewing them as metaphors that help to explain how readers in general use the "fantasy-management systems" of texts. Cole returns repeatedly to Holland's theory of how an infant's identity forms in relation to fantasies of eating and being eaten by his or her mother. Cole's fourth chapter spells out the structural parallels between early psychosocial development and its consequences for subsequent personality-development, for reading, and for acting.

Cole's insights into reading and acting are convincing on their own merits, but some readers may find the evocation of a peculiarly gender-blind psychoanalysis more than distracting. Cole convincingly shows how both reading and acting can be said to resemble the patterns of psychosocial development that he outlines, but he does not consider how gender inflects his theory of reading and acting. Though Cole's book leaves such important areas unexplored, the core of his argument

initiates an important theoretical discussion of the relationship between reading and acting.

Hollis Huston's *The Actor's Instrument* also aims to rethink acting and "performance/theory" (Huston's term), but in this case, the procedure is less systematic than Cole's. Even so, though Huston's book is not a handbook of advice and exercises, it is theoretically practical. Huston discusses actor training, how actors think about and use their bodies, and how distinct stage spaces are designed to work in performance (and why they are often misused). However, he does all these things not through systematic coverage of "basics," but by applying astute cultural critique to the ways theatre is thought.

The book's fundamental premise is that "we are always, were first, performers." As Huston notes, the book's title, *The Actor's Instrument*, refers not to the actor's body but to the stage; however, for Huston, this stage is not a defined platform already established and set aside, but a situation that develops when theatre is initiated by a performer. Though the kind of theatre this suggests—street theatre—does exemplify Huston's point that "actor and spectator and the virtual space that betrays their contract are the interdependent elements of the simple stage" (14), Huston does not merely reject more complicated theatrical contexts. In describing the "simple stage," he focuses on the irreducible elements that an actor must address in order to wrestle with the theatre's theoretical problems. Huston begins by suggesting that "the simple theater is perhaps not so much an empty space as an empty time" (15); by this important shift from theatre-as-space to theatre-as-time, he opens up possibilities for reasserting the historically engaged agency of performers.

In one of his most compelling chapters, "The Gest of the Breath," Huston debunks the mythology surrounding the performer's use of the diaphragm. Though his discussion is based on physiology (the diaphragm cannot be used to "draw air in" any more than a balloon can), Huston makes much of misconceptions about actor breathing. For example, his analysis uses the fundamental mirage of diaphragm breathing to examine the parallel mirages of *significance* and character motivation. The attempt to locate either the meaning signified by a gesture or the psychological origin of a character's behavior emblemizes a theatre that is forcing its breath, attempting to compel playful *significance* to ground itself and become distinct, willed "expression."

Huston's discussion of the performer's battle with theatre spaces, begun in "The Simple Stage"

(chapter 5) and thoroughly developed in "How Did We Get Here?" (chapter 6), is the book's most conventionally rigorous analysis of theatre history and the ways in which it might be theorized. Building on his idea that theatre is defined by the relationship between performers and an audience in time, Huston shows how the masked ideology underlying the construction of theatre spaces is often aggravated by the absolute failure of many directors and actors to understand theoretically the structure of theatrical space. Huston posits two fundamentally different types of stages: the "pictorial stage" and the "central stage." Though these two opposing stages are explained quite clearly in terms of their ways of organizing performance effects, these distinct models are then used to explain a wide range of theatre "muddles" that are created by institutional agendas and misunderstandings of performance. Huston's biting critique of failures to understand historical and theoretical context—both in the use of spaces and in their design—supports the main thrust of his argument: that only from the perspective of a theoretically astute actor can the idea of a "stage" make sense.

While both David Cole and Hollis Huston are astute readers of theoretical models, they are also concerned with theatre practice and what it might potentially do with theory in performance (and what performance might do to theory). In addition to contributing to current theoretical thinking on performance, each of these books has important implications for how literary studies and acting are taught. Cole's assertion that acting (performance, theatre) is not simply something to be "read" but itself a kind of reading links the two books: each claims that a theoretical initiative is integral to the work of performance.

THOMAS C. CROCHUNIS  
*Rutgers University*

on-line  
Comments on  
The Theatrical Event

A richly scintillating survey of the theatre's evolution August 23, 1998

By Ben Letzler

Format: Hardcover

David Cole's masterful 1975 opus represents a refreshingly original approach to the study of theatrical expression. His meticulously considered hermeneutics of the theatre do not detract from his elegant prose; his love of his subject shines throughout. This text is truly "brashly opinionated and eminently well argued," as the book's jacket jubilantly proclaims, and upon each rereading Dr. Cole offers fresh insights for the theatre connoisseur in all of us.

**Absolutely Essential Reading** November 27, 2011

By Vance C. Holmes

Format: Hardcover

This is arguably the most important book written on the subject in the last 50 years. David Cole's *The Theatrical Event* is more than just food for thought. It is a never-ending feast!

**FOR RELEASE: December 21, 1993**

Contact: Darryl Geddes  
Office: (607) 255-9735  
Home: (315) 449-9412

## PLAYWRIGHT, AUTHOR WINS NATIONAL DRAMA CRITICISM AWARD

ITHACA, N.Y. — Playwright and author David Cole has been named the winner of the George Jean Nathan Award for the best dramatic criticism in America for 1993, Cornell University has announced.

The Nathan Award, one of the most distinguished and lucrative in American theater, carries with it a \$10,000 cash prize. The trust establishing the award was left to Cornell's Department of English by the late author and critic George Jean Nathan, who graduated from Cornell in 1904.

Cole, who holds a doctorate from Harvard University, was honored for *Acting as Reading: The Place of the Reading Process in the Actor's Work* (University of Michigan Press, 1992). He is also author of *The Theatrical Event* (Wesleyan University Press, 1975) and several plays, including *The Moments of the Wandering Jew*, which was performed in 1979 at the Theatre of the Open Eye in New York.

In announcing the winner, the Nathan Committee praised Cole's most recent work: "Drawing on his own impressive readings in literature, cultural history, psychoanalysis, linguistics and other disciplines, as well as drama itself, Cole articulates clearly and persuasively his claim that 'reading,' in its many and sometimes buried senses, both informs and charges every action of every actor. An interdisciplinary work that resists conventional categories, *Acting as Reading* will intrigue and challenge readers and writers of plays, scholars and audiences, as well as performers in the theater."

The committee considers, on the basis of its own survey and submitted nominations, criticism that is published in books, journals and the news media. Members of the committee are Reeve Parker, professor and chair of the English Department at Cornell; H. Scott McMillin, professor of English at Cornell; David [unclear], professor and chair of the English Department at Yale University; Murray [unclear], professor of English at Yale; Lee Mitchell, professor and chair of the English Department at Princeton; and Michael Goldman, professor of English at Princeton.

page 2 - Nathan Award

The Nathan Award has been given annually by Cornell since 1958; however, no winner was named in 1975. Past recipients include Walter Kerr (1963) and Mel Gussow (1978) of *The New York Times*, Elliot Norton (1964) of *The Boston Herald*, Kevin Kelly (1992) of *The Boston Globe* and Robert Brustein (1962, 1987), founder of the American Repertory Theater Co. and drama critic for *The New Republic*.

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May 17, 1995

Ms. Bevy Rosten  
Fin-De-Siecle  
90 Bedford Street, #4B  
New York, NY 10014

Dear Ms. Rosten,

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that, on the recommendation of our Artistic Advisory Committee, Fin-De-Siecle has been awarded a \$2000 New Play Commission in Jewish Theater from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Jewish Endowment for the Arts and Humanities.

Your submission entitled "The Responses" stood out among the others. We truly look forward to seeing the progress of your work.

Please indicate your acceptance of the award by returning a counter-signed copy of this letter. We will send you the \$2000 commissioning grant upon receipt of your acceptance.

In all publicity related to this project, including all future productions, we would appreciate the following credit:

The development of "The Responses" was made possible in part by a grant from the Jewish Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, a program of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Please send a progress report by October 1st, 1995, and a final report within 30 days of the workshop and/or staged reading, or by May 1, 1996 at the very latest.

Congratulations on your award. We look forward to hearing of your progress. If you have any further questions, please contact Dr. Joseph Lowin, Director of Cultural Services in the NFJC office.

Sincerely,



Tom L. Freudenheim  
President

Accepted

"Acquire wisdom for your soul.  
And it shall be a crown upon your head."



# Harvard Cr.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 1961

## All Consider Studies Degree

7, the number fell to eight, and in 1958 it dropped to two. In subsequent years, the requirement was raised to 11, and then, with the advent of General Education A, to 11½ Honors grades.

The CEP proposal advanced this week would eliminate the requirement of Departmental recommendation. It would, however, demand two Honors grades in courses outside the field of concentration.

According to Dean Monro, Faculty discussion will touch upon three main issues. Some Faculty members dislike the name "General Studies," and would change the degree to "cum laude in course." While many, including Monro, see reasons for maintaining and popularizing the degree, others feel it contradicts the aims of the College. And the restriction on Seniors in departmental Honors may be debated again.

Monro said, "I think we've won the battle that started in the Thirties . . . Honors grades should qualify a student for an Honors degree."

## Magazine Offers Cash for Religious Essays

"The family magazine of the Church," is offering cash prizes to college students who write essays on "Why I Go to Church" for the purpose of the vitality of the church.

## Cole Wins Playwright Contest After Alfred Breaks Deadlock

Despite the inability of two judges to reach a final decision, David S. Cole '63 has won the annual playwriting contest sponsored by the Harvard Dramatics Club and the *Advocate*. The joint contest committee announced the decision on Tuesday.

Members of the committee said that William Alfred, associate professor of English, had to be called in to pick a winner after the judges, Robert H. Chapman, director of the Loeb Drama Center, and Eric Bentley, Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry, found it impossible to reach an agreement.

Several students active in the HDC explained that Bentley and Chapman are seldom able to make joint decisions, and that "communications were particularly strained on this occasion."

The *CRIMSON* also learned that Bentley has sent a letter to Joel F. Henning '61, former President of the HDC, telling him that in the future he hoped "a contest of this nature would never have more than one judge."

### Play to Be Published, Produced

The *Advocate* will publish Cole's winning play, entitled "En Croisade, A Comedy In Certain Quarters," in its next issue. The play will be produced at the Loeb Drama Center during the Spring Term, possibly with Cole as its director.

Cole said that the play, written last spring, was the first he has ever attempted. He has since written another play, which had the distinction of being the first student work produced at the Loeb.

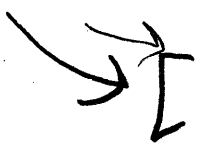
## Guerard Voted To Join Student Body



The Pic of the Harvard night election. Kirkland House as president. C. Kogan '62, vice. Wheeler '63, treasurer. Klausner '62, secretary. In other elections Harvard-Radcliffe Liberal president Peter D. L. errett House and S. Clarke Woodro. The group also ch '62 to be treasurer will serve

## Demos Warns

The Harvard  
Crimson  
Sat., Apr. 14,  
1962



is irregular, there is no  
... of a peddler and his son standing before a gut-  
ted house. The talk shimmers with movement and ten-  
sion: we watch the house become alive with terrible  
memories. The peddler has killed his own father in this  
very house, and a family cannot purge itself of a crime  
its blood passes on. Each generation reenacts a family  
sin until the last measure of evil is payed out. Having  
killed his father, the peddler now kills his son, perhaps  
to set his mother's ghost to rest. David Gullette is the  
peddler, the ruined and driven old murderer: his is a  
sly and yet dignified performance. And Harry Smith, his  
son, is capable.

David Cole's "The King's Child, the King's Child,  
Ah!", a short play in four scenes, is a delightful piece  
of self-indulgence on Cole's part. Cole is a junior, whose  
play "How I Worked It With the Bush" displayed the  
same kind of wit and competence as this new play,  
an elaborate piece of buffoonery about a King Midas  
who is granted his wish. "How I Worked It With the  
Bush," though, was a more controlled piece of comedy.

There are times when Cole's humor (which largely  
consists in ingenious shifts from classical speech to  
slang to officialese) becomes a little wearing. Portions of  
his play are difficult to follow, and some of the scenes

sent a successi  
One passage sup  
violins over coar  
thereby stresses eac  
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here, if you demand it,  
and Moevs, Layton do  
sweetly, but gives them  
The work ends unpretenti

The Claremont Quartet ca  
with remarkable accuracy. Th  
intensity into the calm ending; th  
mood from being obvious, and n  
enormous difficulties in the quart

Their ability to sense change  
hensible the austere 12-tone sty  
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nique as rational as this one is  
and the kaleidoscope of feeling  
showed how good a tool it  
accurately. Since a major pr  
careful performance, this gro

Sat, Apr. 14, 1962  
~~Sat, Apr. 14, 1962~~

THE HARVARD CRIMSON

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APRIL 14, 1962

where Midas is allowed to philosophize and act the  
tragic hero actually become serious. Fortunately Midas  
(George Larson) is a fine comic actor, and for the most  
he plays his role with a bogus sincerity that is just right.

The gods who grant Midas his request are excellent,  
and make you wish Cole would write a real unpreten-  
tious comedy some day. I wonder if Harvard is good for  
somebody as clever as Cole; it's filled his head up with  
a set of allusions it will take him ten years to forget.  
But, pedantry aside, Bacchus and his father Silenus are  
two really engaging comic characters you won't forget:  
Bacchus (who is crowned with myrtle, but wears shades  
and is hip) is William Keough, who is almost as good as  
Allan Mandel, the drunken old God who gives imita-  
tions of Mars trapped in the net at parties, and who  
chases sea nymphs. At the play's end, Midas—a tragical-  
ly wiser king—is standing dolefully orating about life  
and aspirations; and back of him, the two cavorting  
Gods dance their way offstage, Bacchus still wearing  
his sunglasses.

Caroline Cross directed the two Yeats plays, and Joel  
Crothers did a fine job of direction on Cole's farce; both  
made excellent use of the small space in the Inner Court  
at Dudley House, which is a wonderfully intimate place  
in which to watch a play. I can't think when the



DUDLEY HOUSE

"THE KING'S CHILD"  
CHIEF  
by David

"KING OF  
TOWERS"

Friday

# THEATER

## IDENTITY CRISES

Elinor Fuchs

Winter Dancers  
The Phoenix Theater, 221 E. 71 St.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater  
Entermedia, 189 Second Av.

The Moments of the Wandering Jew  
(closed)  
Theater of the Open Eye

Soho Weekly News

Vol. 7, No. 5

Nov. 1-7, 1979

### IDENTITY CRISES

Continued from page 48

vention of science-fiction writers he admires extravagantly, offers to write out checks for all of them and slobbers, "I love you sons of bitches" — which is pretty funny. In the musical he repeats this endearment throughout the show like a Wagnerian leit-motiv four ponderous times — and not one of them drunk, mind you, because we might then stop loving the son of a bitch ourselves.

I missed this musical at the W.P.A. last season when it was a work-in progress. It looks as if the love got squeezed out of it in the move to a larger theater and bigger business. In that sense only, the show may be sheer Vonnegut.

Too bad *Moments of the Wandering Jew* by American scholar-writer-performer David Cole ran so few performances. It is an epic of over six hours in its original form, spanning history from the Crucifixion to the Last Judgment. It was presented in condensed form in a reading last spring as part of the New Works Project at the Open Eye. In this full production only Part Three, the *Hochhimmelfahrt* (Ascension Day) *Passion Play*, nearly the length of a conventional play itself, was performed.

In the lonely quest of the Wandering Jew of European legend, Cole is not so much interested in the historical

Jew's role in events, but in the symbolic Jew's role in consciousness. The play is thus fashioned as a monumental search for identity, with the "Jew" — that is, the one who is isolated, even paralyzed, by consciousness — its leading edge.

Thought-intoxicated as this may sound, the *Hochhimmelfahrt Passion Play* section turns on a robust theatrical conceit. The Wandering Jew, now in the mid-19th century, has stumbled into a rehearsal of one of those vast medieval Biblical plays that Cole's resembles. The actors are rehearsing the old scene between Christ and the Jew, traditionally in the play for comic relief, but now offensive to the assimilated Jewish community. How to rewrite it? In an effort to find a new version, the Jew ends up stepping into the play itself. The archetypal moment is recreated, and the myth is born afresh.

Bevya Rosten's direction and actors' performances were excellent — especially Nicholas Kepros' intelligent, half-mad Jew — but where does the play, not just this segment, go now? Dramatic canvases of this scope and brilliance were a phenomenon of European Romanticism: Goethe's *Faust*, Madach's *The Tragedy of Man*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* come to mind. With Strindberg and Shaw (Cole seems indebted to both) the tradition ends. In America, such an ambitious undertaking has only O'Neill as precedent. Will it be published? Performed on two successive evenings or in all-day marathon? I will follow its future with interest.

# Ewige Kunst

By Erika Munk

THE MOMENTS OF THE WANDERING JEW. A play by David Cole, directed by Bevy Rosten, presented at the Theatre of the Open Eye, 316 East 88th Street, 534-6363.

David Cole's *Moments of the Wandering Jew* is about the legend of the Wandering Jew, the man who, when Christ carrying the cross stopped to rest beside his shop, told Him to move on. Christ, irritated, said He'd go, but the Jew must wander until His return. As He hasn't returned yet, the Wandering Jew neatly turns into a symbol of both Jewish damnation and the Christians' damnable treatment of Jews; also of Jewish homelessness, persistence, and pretty much whatever you want. Cole's conceit is that the Wandering Jew's "offense" was to see, in the suffering Christ, only a geometric image of circle and cross: the Jew's perception was formal, aesthetic, perhaps of high significance, perhaps merely inhumane.

The section of Cole's play being done at the Open Eye is called "The Hochhimmelfahrt Passion Play," and in its best moments—which include the entire first half—it is as witty as its title. Around the turn of the century, the Hochhimmelfahrt play (Obergammerau, of course) is in rehearsal. There is trouble with the Wandering Jew sequence, traditionally a broad burlesque, very anti-Semitic. A Jewish Inspector, with the leverage of the local Duke's indebtedness to the local Jews, has come to negotiate a new version of the scene—for after all, the Hochhimmelfahrt play is a mirror of the European mind, and that mind is getting more tolerant. He is accompanied by Solomon Ash, whom he picked up on a train; Ash is, in reality, the Wandering Jew.

We see various versions of the scene—the original gross caricature, a new one with the Jew as a human-potential type with Faustian aspirations, another showing the Jew as a revolutionary, eternally agitating, another claiming the Jew's wife is infatuated with Christ. Ash despised them all and performs his own, in which "nothing happens." When it's laughed at (rather in tones of early commercial criticism of Beckett), he has a spectacular breakdown, in which his concept of the image and its meaning comes through, at length. This is also the moment when the play breaks down. Until then, it has been a dialogue of ideas and a very funny one. The only uneasy times were when Ash, in "true" moments, was meaningfully spotlit, with meaningful music behind. At the end, this tone takes over. It is a tone woefully discordant with the Hochhimmelfahrt joke.

Nicholas Kepros as Ash compounds the error, playing for Wounded Significance every time. The other per-

formers, particularly Martin Barolsky as the Hochhimmelfahrt Christus, are very good, and John Michalski as the Passion Play's director has an uncanny resemblance to Andrei Serban. Too bad Cole didn't trust the genuine seriousness of his satire, and had to add spurious Seriousness to it. ■

# Stanley Kauffmann on theater

## The Theatrical Event by David Cole

(Wesleyan University Press; \$10.)

"We live between two kinds of truth . . . Imaginative truth and present truth each provide what the other lacks, but only at the expense of lacking what the other provides . . . Theater, and theater alone of human activities, provides an opportunity of experiencing imaginative truth as present truth."

This is the credo of David Cole's fascinating book. He begins with a recognition that "our experience of theater lies in fragments" and "we are not even sure what they are fragments of." His short and intense work, full of feeling and thought, tries to supply the means to help correct this situation. Cole, who has taught in Yale College, is not out to tell us yet again what is wrong with the theater, although he does point out conceptual errors; nor is his primary purpose to tell us what to do about it, although he makes some provocative suggestions. His basic point is to say what the theater *is*: essentially to restate, in terms aided by new knowledges, some old forgotten truths, so that the restatement may be a kind of purging and enabling—and a touchstone.

The historical origins of the theater being what they are, it's only fitting that Cole's principal terms come from comparative religion. The key phrase of his discourse is a concept of many religions, *illud tempus*—"that time"—the time of origins, which is not only the time when the religion began but that time as it continues to exist and which can be made *present* at any moment by ritual. (The relevance of Jung is not lost on Cole.) The play-script is the site of the *illud tempus* for the theater, the site of those forces beneath and around our lives that govern and can clarify them. The actor's function is to journey to that *illud tempus* and bring it back to us, make it present.

In doing this the actor takes on the functions of two universally known

religious agents, the shaman and the hungan. The shaman makes the journey to the *illud tempus*; the hungan himself becomes "the 'way back' of the *illud tempus* toward us." The actor has the responsibility and power of both functions. The moment of reversal, when the actor passes from one function to the other, Cole calls the "rounding." For him it is the "defining characteristic of theatrical performance. It is in the moment of the rounding that the theater, as an event, is born."

Two other terms are basic to his views. He uses "Image" instead of character or role because he wants to emphasize "that the beings whom actors (and through them, audiences) encounter are numinous dwellers in an eternal imaginative *illud tempus*, not just an assortment of persons who happen to be imaginary." And he takes the term "hierophany" from Mircea Eliade, probably his most-used source, to signify "the manifestation of a numinous presence" in and through physical things other than an actor's body—such as scenery and light.

Some of Cole's corroborative quotations from theater writings are surprising—Max Reinhardt, for instance. Most of them come from expected, essential sources like Stanislavski and Grotowski. Stanislavski's concept of the subtext is of a source beneath the text that produces the words and the actions, the source to which the actor must journey and return. Grotowski's central concept is of the "holy actor" whose task is to penetrate to his own sacred essence and bring it forth. Cole's main work has been to provide a philosophical distillation that both supports and is supported by many of the best theater minds.

To do that would have been helpful enough; but Cole then goes on to apply his quintessence to various elements of theater practice and to make clear why we have been uneasy about some of them. For instance, in the chapter on The Audience, he explains why many of us have felt uncomfortable with the idea of "audience participation" (as practiced, let's say, by the Living Theater). He makes clear that the groping and grabbing of us by actors, far from joining us closer to them in contrast to the often torpid conventional theater, actually destroys the actors' shamanic powers, destroys the requisite mystic "distance," destroys the "dread" of rounding that "is the sure, joyful sign that some measure of susceptibility to [the theater's] Images has survived in

us." In the chapter on The Scenic Means, where the idea of hierophany figures beautifully, he uses his special vocabulary to explain why the "thrust" stage is not necessarily the solution to all our staging ills, why the proscenium stage, too, assists hierophany.

Writing on Language, Cole compares passages from different plays to determine whether the writing manifests what is beneath the writing. "Does it move with consciousness?" is his only criterion. Pirandello, I add, called dialogue "spoken action" and wrote an essay with that title in which he developed ideas cognate to Cole's.

A recurrent small weakness in the book blossoms into a full-scale defect in the last chapter. Occasionally he extrapolates a subjective state of his own into universal law. For example, he says that when a friend puts on a mask or an actress comes offstage after a splendid performance "we" are not comfortable with them—and then he builds theory from that questionable generalization. Then in the last chapter, "Interpretation" (his quotation marks), he argues that directorial concepts imposed on plays constitute a refusal of "an offer of participation in a universal—or at any rate, a larger than personal—way of seeing," an interference with the actor's journey to the *illud tempus* and his bringing of it to us. As one who has suffered through many deformed "concept" productions, my immediate impulse is to agree with Cole, but the danger for both of us is, again, this extension of the personal into the

(continued on page 41)

### Films Worth Seeing

*Love and Death.* Woody Allen invades Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Often frantic and forced, often funny. Allen's performing and directing get sharper.

*Nashville.* Mammoth comment on this country through country music. Smoothly whipped along, but less than meets the eye; and ear.

*The Passenger.* Antonioni. Not much more to say than that, but certainly no less.

*Smile.* California teen-age beauty contest. The script is stale satire, but the direction (Michael Ritchie) and performances are fresh.

SK

though. "The depression," President Hoover said in a radio address on October 18, 1931, "has been deepened by events from abroad which are beyond the control either of our citizens or our governments."

Paul Morsey  
Owensboro, Kentucky

ones, the eye has very little more choice than at a film.) I believe that almost every power that Cole attributes to the theater is possible to film—and film has some that are denied to the theater. The physical presence of imagined truth takes place, except for the literal-minded, in film as well as theater. The director of film takes on some of the shamanic-hunganic attributes that the theater director does not have, but I cannot see why such films as *Persona*, *A Man Escaped*, *8 1/2*, *La Grande Illusion*, and *The Gold Rush* are not exalting experiences of an *illus tempus* made present.

Cole ends his book with a two page "set of propositions" that fix much of what he has been saying. He calls them "half-truths." So do I. He knows that no one book or set of views is a prescription for perfection. But his book, the product of insight and fervor and reflection, is very valuable.

**Kauffmann, from page 26**

absolute—the implication that there exists a platonically ideal performance of (say) *Hamlet*, that we know what it is, and that any deviation from it is a refusal of the play's *illus tempus*. I despise the director who begins by asking himself, "What can I do to this production to put my imprint on it?" There are clear-cut cases of directorial distortion which, like actors' audience-groping, leave no doubt of their failure. But I have seen highly individualized "concept" productions that were not my ideas of those plays but that still seemed attempts to reach the *illa tempora*. Can Cole rule absolutely? I can't.

Further, his concentration on the shamanic-hunganic function of the actor leads to such statements as: "Historical period and social class count for nothing in determining how a theater character may speak . . . The only limit on a character's ability to manifest consciousness is whatever limits there may be on his consciousness itself." This seems to move his principles from the spiritual-archetypal into the merely mediumistic. The power of Cole's rediscoveries for me is that he crystallizes a force for the deepest manifestations of human diversity, not an undifferentiated electric current that will light up a lot of identical light bulbs.

And I offer one difference with Cole, not a criticism. Except for a few passing references, he makes no mention of film. (I think one of those references is wrong. He says that in contrast to film and TV, the theater is the place where the eye "chooses for itself when to zoom, where to pan, what to watch." Only in bad theater productions. In good


# The Classifieds

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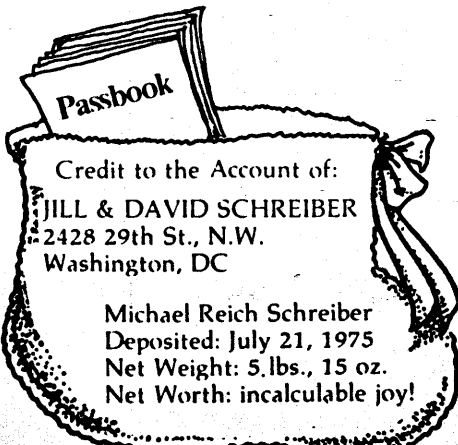
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**Ellen Schiff, Ph.D.**, is a former professor of French and world literature. She edited *Awake and Singing: 7 Classic Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire*, the first book in this two-volume set on American Jewish theatre, also available in a Mentor edition. The author of *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama*, Schiff has contributed essays to numerous books. Her articles about theatre of Jewish interest have appeared in many periodicals, including *The New York Times*, *Modern Drama*, and *American Jewish History*. A consultant on theatre to the National Foundation for Jewish culture, she lives in the Berkshires.

# FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLYING

9 Contemporary Plays from the  
American Jewish Repertoire

EDITED AND WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY

Ellen Schiff

See pp. xliv and liii  
for discussion of, and  
references to, *The Responses*  
(play) and "Toward a Jewish  
Dramatic Theory" (Tikkun  
article) 

A MENTOR BOOK

1996

31. Companies dedicated to American Jewish drama figure among many ethnic-specific theatres that blossomed in response to invigorating postwar opportunities and fertile grounding in multicultural vitality. Writing in the 1982-83 *Best Plays Year Book*, critic Mel Gussow remarked on the conspicuous role in New York theatre of Hispanic, Black, Greek, Irish, Jewish, and Asian American companies (p. 42).

Nor was this a uniquely New York phenomenon. In 1976, the American Theater Critics Association (see note 21) made its first award to an outstanding new play professionally produced outside New York. It is surely a reflection of the respect earned by ethnic drama that the winner was Wakako Yamauchi's *And the Soul Shall Dance*, an adaptation of an Asian American short story by Frank Chin.

32. Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Summit, 1985), 201.

33. Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 19.

34. Quoted by Lawrence Graver, *An Obsession with America*, Frank, 89.

35. See Introduction to *Awake and Singing: Seven Classic Plays From the American Jewish Repertoire*, xvi-xix.

36. Fein, 159.

37. The designation "unpublished" should be read only as a sign of the capriciousness that governs the publication of plays. Interested readers and theatres are urged to contact the authors or their agents. Most of the unpublished scripts mentioned here are by members of the Dramatists Guild, 10 West 44th St., New York, NY 10036; (212) 398-9366.

38. John Beaufort, "Neil Simonizing the Story of Jesus," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 Dec. 1974. *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, XXXV:22, 147.

39. Asked what drew him to dramatize immigrant life, Kushner, who was born in Manhattan in the mid-forties, explained that he wanted to go beyond the attitude of the milieu in which he had been raised. He had been taught "Don't be obnoxious about your Jewishness, but never forget you're a Jew." He was in adapting *The Scarlet Letter* for TV that he observed that in the nineteenth century, Hawthorne had written

through conflicting messages by going back to seventeenth-century Puritanism. Kushner took the lesson to heart. That a Jewish playwright is inspired to return to his own origins by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a genuine "only in America" story.

40. Though the two fine collections in English of Holocaust plays are dominated by European scripts, each does include American works. *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Skloot (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1982), contains Harold and Edith Lieberman's *Throne of Straw* and Shimon Wincelberg's *Resort 76*; *Plays of the Holocaust*, ed. Elinor Fuchs (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987), has James Schevill's *Cathedral of Ice*.

41. This apt phrase was coined by Lawrence L. Langer, eminent critic of Holocaust literature.

42. See the introduction to *Awake and Singing*, xviii-xix.

43. Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity," *New Republic*, 28 Nov. 1994, 24-32.

44. David Cole, "Toward a Jewish Dramatic Theory," *Tikkun*, IV, 2 (1989), 26-28ff.

45. Edwin Wilson, "Herzl," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Dec. 1976. *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, XXXVII:24, 101.

46. Robert Brustein, "The Use and Abuse of Multiculturalism," *New Republic*, 16 and 23 Sept. 1991, 31-34.

zation makes a strong case against American Jews who "march and fight in every cause, except a Jewish cause," for fear of making themselves too conspicuous. The organization successfully enlists the activism of a highly assimilated businessman who, despite his all-American success and Beverly Hills refuge, has grown increasingly anxious about resurgent anti-Semitism.

Playwright and scholar David Cole views the exegesis of dramatic literature as a fertile bond between Jewish doctrine and the practice of theatre.<sup>44</sup> He puts his theories to the test in a Beckettian work, *The Responses* (1980, unpublished). Here an eminent rabbinical authority addresses inquiries about unresolved matters of law and practice sent him from all over the world, sometimes answering with riddles and unanswered questions of his own.

5. *Israel*. The Jewish nation is a momentous fact of life for American Jews. In life as in the theatre, however, Israel presents numerous problems. One may be overearnestness. For example, when Dore Schary and Amos Elon adapted Elon's biography of Theodore Herzl for the stage in 1976, reviewers tried hard to respect the work ("If good intention could make good plays, 'Herzl' would be a work of great power," wrote Edwin Wilson).<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Israel figures more and more frequently in recent scripts, sometimes as subtext, other times as their explicit subject.

The former is illustrated by Donald Freed's *The White Crow* (1987), a play constructed of interviews between the imprisoned Adolph Eichmann and a German psychologist clearly modeled on Hannah Arendt. An embodiment of the intelligentsia extirpated by the Third Reich, she tries to prevail on the Nazi to assess the humanity, rather than the legality, of his guilt. The implications of their encounter transcend the hermetic jail cell where they take place. The significance is suggested by the play's subtitle, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," a reference to Arendt's vigorously disputed *New Yorker* essay of that title in which she originated the notion of the banality of evil.

Israel moves closer to the foreground in Gordon Rayfield's *Bitter Friends* (1988). The play depicts the divided loyalties of David Klein, an employee of the United States Defense Department. Convicted of passing secret military information to Israel, Klein is given a draconian sentence of life imprisonment. Though Rayfield denies any real-life re-

ferences, his play inevitably rings echoes of the Jonathan Pollard case. In common with the works discussed in the last sections, *Friends* explores the difficulties inherent in acting on one's beliefs about what it means to be American and Jewish in our day.

A number of plays explicitly about the Jewish homeland are notably evenhanded in portraying Arab-Israeli relations. Marilyn Felt's *Acts of Faith* (1989) depicts both the tension and the need for mutual recognition between an American woman and the Shiite Arab who guards her during a hijacking. In Merle Feld's *Across the Jordan* (1991, unpublished), the relationship between an Israeli woman lawyer and her difficult Palestinian client, accused of terrorism, acquires depth as it is interwoven with the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, both wives of Abraham. In addition to *Vow of Silence*, included in this volume, Allan Havis provides a forum for conflicting points of view in *The Road from Jerusalem* (1992, unpublished). The work depicts the fierce encounter of an American, a German, and a Palestinian forced together in a bomb shelter.

Elizabeth Swados's 1988 oratorio celebrates its title, *Jerusalem*. Its action follows a Child Traveler through the city shown as sacred to Christians, Moslems, and Jews alike, and wracked by contemporary strife. Swados has woven her own material together with folk and liturgical melodies of more than a dozen nations. Deliberately conflated images reinforce this internationalism; for example, the Rachael who weeps for her children is a Muslim mother lamenting her war dead. *Jerusalem*, which combines the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, the book of Jeremiah, and improvisational texts created by its original multi-ethnic LaMama cast, is a quintessential example of the phenomenon Robert Brustein was talking about when he observed in 1991, "Transcultural blending may be the most fully acknowledged artistic development of our time."<sup>46</sup> More pragmatically, Swados's *Jerusalem*, like the Felt, Feld, and Havis plays, recognizes that Jews are not alone in their zeal for Israel.

## V

The plays that follow vouch for the robust health and multiplicity of the late twentieth-century American Jewish repertoire. It is evident that the tradition pioneered in the

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