Cultural Daily

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# For the Labyrinth of Life, a Complex Theatre

Guy Zimmerman · Thursday, July 14th, 2011

At UCLA LIVE the night after George Bush was re-elected president, 2004, I saw a production of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. It was really the perfect thing to see at that moment, partly because I was astonished at what had just happened. I think everybody in the audience felt a palpable sense that this was the right meditation to have at that point in time. And for me at that time, if not earlier, there was definitely a sense that the country I had grown up in, that had formed my sensibility, had just crossed a kind of line. And there was not going to be any going back to the comfortable certainties in the sense of easy privilege that really defined American culture in the post-war era. And that sense has only grown and I think that everybody understands that. As dire as things may seem today, you know, some serious challenges wait for us down the road three decades of Neoliberal idiocy has set us on.

A little later I was in Poland at the Grotowski Festival, 2009. David Sefton, who had brought Sarah Kane to LA when he was running UCLA LIVE, where, I think, he did a very good job, was there too. Sefton is an outspoken Brit and he just sort of unleashed this devastatingly casual observation: "It's amazing to me that anyone in the United States tries to do theater at all because…*there's no money.*" It really is that simple, which is why panel discussions when we examine why this or that funding model in the US works better we are engaging in something analogous to a debate about the embroidery on the cushions on the deck chairs of the Titanic – a little beside the point, in other words.

I started thinking about that and what it is about the American DNA that makes art so threatening. For those of us engaged in creating art, it obviously makes sense to be clear about the root cause of the problem. From the very beginning America has been defined by a kind of pragmatic attitude that actually has a religious aspect; the whole intention was to create a paradise here on earth. America is just predisposed toward questions that have answers and problems that can be solved. Yet art is all about the opposite. It's about questions that don't have easy answers and problems that can't, in fact, be solved, such as, most fundamentally, our mortality. One symptom of this discomfort with art in American culture is out tendency to confuse art, whenever possible, with entertainment on the one hand, and social services on the other – to elide the artistic enterprise with activities that can be reconciled with our basic pragmatism.

To gain some clarity about the underlying issue here, imagine you're at a party chatting with people you don't know all that well. Movies…books…plays; the conversation bubbles along…even the disagreements are fun …but then a particular movie or book or play comes up and a palpable tension enters the air. It happens to be a book that someone (maybe you) actually thinks

highly of. The conversational temperature begins to rise…it's awkward… eye contact gets broken… people find an excuse to visit the bar, the bathroom. Looking back, you can see that an invisible line was crossed, the line which separates art from entertainment.

So this is in part a story about two distinct conversations. One is fun to have with friends, family members, even complete strangers. But this conversation, which is the conversation about entertainment, is as trivial as air. In fact, the more trivial the subject matter, the more we enjoy the conversation, because the point is never the book, the movie or the music, the real subject is ourselves – who we are, what we like, and how delightful we can be when allowed to unfurl our full plumage. If we get tired of discussing movies or books, we can shift effortlessly to the topic of hamburgers or airlines – any commodity will serve.

The other conversation, the conversation about art, is too perilous to be called "fun." It tends to lead quickly into uncomfortably deep water where disagreements make us feel misunderstood in exactly the ways we most want to be understood. Works of art seem to address those areas of our selves and our lives that remain mysterious, and that contain the desire for a kind of connection and a kind of freedom we can never seem to fully realize. Works of art entail a questioning of the ways our carefully constructed self-definitions limit and imprison us.

Both conversations have their place, perhaps, but both become distorted when they are confused one for the other, or when we wander back and forth across the very real divide that separates them. Often we get lost in the concept that art needs to be "entertaining" or that some forms of "entertainment" seem to also have artistic merit. So I'd like to propose a way to distinguish the two based on very clear differences in the intentions that animate them. The intention animating art, I'd like to propose, is to wake us up to a more vivid experience of our lives and the world; the intention of entertainment is to reassure us in the cocoon of our favorite dreams.

I would further suggest that we Americans are inherently ambivalent about art. Buried deep in our cultural DNA, again, is a mistrust of art and a rejection of its claims. Since the Mayflower shoved off from the coast of England, Americans have longed to inhabit a world in which all problems are all at least *potentially* solvable. Art, of course, is about problems that can never be "solved." We will not survive, Samuel Beckett tells us via his masterpiece *Endgame.* Our emotional needs will never be met, he tells us, and we will never *be* anybody. These truths are difficult to bear…but we secretly know them to be true, and we appreciate Beckett's simple honesty. Entertainment, meanwhile, tells us what we dearly want to hear: we CAN survive, shrieks the heroic blockbuster. We WILL be somebody, murmurs the heartwarming story of the underdog. Our emotional needs WILL be met, whispers the romantic comedy. We are charmed, titillated…but on another level we know we are being lied to.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, these issues have a political dimension. I grew up in the 1970s, the golden era of post-war American films where *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* won the best picture Oscar and *Midnight Cowboy* was considered entertainment. To me, the rightward drift of the culture was embodied as much by the rise of the blockbuster as by the election of Ronald Reagan, Hollywood's lefty politics notwithstanding. With Reagan's indictment of ecologically-minded democrats as "gloom and doom," the willingness to subscribe to comforting lies became a political imperative. This is why entertainment is now embraced with such patriotic fervor in America.

But, in fact, too much entertainment, like too much of anything else, is anything but good. When we become addicted to feel-good fantasies we grow impatient with the suffering of others. We begin to do all sorts of ridiculous things, including co-signing unnecessary wars. Before long, acts of abject barbarity seem a small price to pay for our own comforts, illusory though we may secretly understand them to be. And no matter how giddy we make ourselves, a trip to an ailing relative reminds us quickly that remain all too close to death, which can arrive at any moment. I think of Emmanuel Levinas's statement that "the face is always naked." The Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor uses this theme of Levinas's to underscore our basic vulnerability in the face of existence.

More than mortality it's the ego's desire for permanence and solidity that most troubles us. As all the great religions remind us, *what* we are, finally, is too deeply mysterious to provide the easy answers we crave. This basic groundlessness is, in fact, the real subject of tragedy, today as in the Classical and Elizabethan times. Our struggle for permanence and solidity animates the work of Inge, O'Neil, Williams, Miller and Albee, not to mention Beckett, Pinter and Churchill. We watch Willy Loman buckle as he irretrievably loses the narrative that made life seem livable. O'Neill's Hickey is the same. When we hit Albee the situation changes again, because here the questioning begins, European style, to take place in the "form" of the work. The boundary between the world on stage and the world we in the audience inhabit becomes dangerously permeable, a 2-way street. Watching a play comes to raise unsettling questions about the ways we relate to experience moment to moment, and how we deploy various sleights of hand in order to cover over the gaps.

Will this be remembered as one of those dormant periods in the history of the arts and of culture generally? Impossible to say, but art will have its effects regardless of how we feel about the matter, and it's not at all a function of direct popularity. Samuel Beckett, for example, the poster boy of thorny obscurity, wrote the play *Endgame* shortly after the horrors of World War II. A few years later came Harold Pinter's *Homecoming,* in which the character Max is clearly a descendent of Hamm from Beckett's play. One can feel Max, in turn, in Alf Garnet, the misanthropic East End *pater familias* of the 60s British TV series *Till Death Us Do Part,* which, as is widely known, was the model for Norman Lear's *All in the Family.* From Hamm to Max to Alf Garnet to Archie Bunker to all the narrow-minded, misanthropic patriarchs who have anchored two generations of American sitcoms, to the amusement of millions.

This is how high art percolates down into entertainment, changing the values by which we navigate our lives. The demographic popularity of *Endgame* is irrelevant, has nothing to do with its impact on the culture, which, one could argue, is huge and on-going. It's the artists of the future who determine the enduring value of a work of art, not critics or consumers. Integrity, the artist's intention to speak the truth about the way we live, rather than technical skill or even grand moral visions are what count in art. Understanding these issues seems important today when the culture is being corroded by an excess of entertainment and a dearth of art. So next time you find yourself in one of those complicated, uncomfortable conversations, embrace it. You will be helping us move toward a more balanced and healthier world.

*This article is loosely adapted from remarks given at a gathering of Los Angeles theatre-makers for a discussion called The Uninvited: Crashing the Party, a conference to re-imagine the next 50 years of Los Angeles theatre. The gathering was convened by John Steppling and hosted at The Lost Studio. This article also includes comments adapted from ideas Zimmerman has expressed in pieces written for Times Quotidian, Backstage West and other publications.*

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*Images: Sarah Kane's 4.48 Psychosis; Samuel Beckett's Endgame at American Repertory Theatre; Midnight Cowboy.*