
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Evolving an Authentic Theatre

John Stepling · Thursday, June 23rd, 2011

*Playwright John Stepling recently convened 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 party being “crashed” was Theatre Communication Group’s annual meeting of regional theatres, which was being held at the same time. Here are John’s opening remarks.*

The title of this counter conference is taken from the title of the TCG/CTG conference; Reimagining the Next 50 Years of Theatre in Los Angeles. Now, I can’t know, nor should I try to know, what theatre will look like fifty years from now. To do so is utopian at best. What I hope we can do is to suggest a method to tear down a broken model, the corporate non-profit (sic) model, which in this city is represented by The Center Theatre Group. It is impossible to provide easy glib answers. In fact, it’s wrong to even try.

I think to really understand the ways in which this model is broken one has to at least trace, however reductively, the evolution of theatre and the forces that shaped it, in the modern era. So bear with me for just a few minutes as I go back and look at how we arrived at this mausoleum on the hill downtown that is CTG.

In the 18th century we can see the start of the publishing business – and the start of a sociological critique of literature – and the first real split between “high art” and market demands. Between art and commerce. Writers were separated from an absolute dependency on patronage (church, royal families, etc) and handed over to a new dependency on market forces. This split evolved over time and if we fast forward to the 20th century, to what Adorno marked as the start of ‘modernism’ (1910), the engine driving the culture was an avant-garde (or really, several different ones) that was connected, intimately, to a political critique of conformist Capitalist society. Modernism in a sense was a reaction formation against liberal bourgeoisie institutional authority. Against what was perceived as an increasing domination by cultural institutions (as well as political ones, in another context). Since I’m being schematic here I will pass over important topics – ranging from Baudelaire to the French Revolution to the Enlightenment, though all are profoundly important.

Now after WW1 and more significantly WW2, the avant-garde continued to engage in a critique aimed at institutional homogenizing. Prior to WW2 however, the critique aimed at a process of

social domination that was taking place at all levels of society. After WW2 – and due no doubt to a seduction born of the Enlightenment notion of progress, and manifested in an intoxication with all things technological, the critique began to accommodate itself to bourgeoisie values and norms. And understand, I'm being pretty simplistic here. Still, Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944 in their famous book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, labeled the cultural infrastructure of mass culture as the 'culture industry' (in the sixties The Situationists would call it the society of the spectacle). They saw the marked increase in cultural homogenization as manifesting itself in a kitsch aesthetic, and a leveling of difference that would exclude radical voices from the growing institutions of culture....whether academic or private. It was an ideological shift from use value to exchange value. And it marked the start of valorizing anything that sold well. If it's popular it must be good. Attendant to this was an ideological dimension of faux populism. "Meaning" in art fell more in lock step with the norms and values of a corporate system and mentality. The cultural values were imposed from above, unlike genuine folk culture which rises organically from below. So, from the 1950s onward the private interests of a corporate capitalist class determined the parameters of institutional public authority. It resulted in the imposition of industrial time and space on human perception. Schools looked like factories or prisons and vice versa. Kitsch was essentially the dominant value aesthetic – and so began the endless recycling of the familiar. If we examine the language of the corporate non-profit theatre (or look at the physical plants in which they are housed) we see the lifeless, bloodless, and spiritless realm of the focus group spread sheet and dental clinic brochure. Administrative concerns dominate discourse. Textual domination begins at the level of marketing analysis. As Andreas Huyssen put it, the individual was left in a "state of alienated subjectivity". Or as Leo Lowenthal put it, "the culture industry was like psychoanalysis in reverse."

Today's culture is largely predicated on a model that is there to put you to sleep. The sleep is both literal and figurative. Our society chemical warehouses people with anti-depressants (including, increasingly, children) or psychological dependence on narcotizing TV and film product that is essentially a branch of the advertising industry. Artworks have become products, commodities.

It's the colonizing of consciousness, mental factory farming.

Today in theatre there is a hegemonic system of funding domination by big corporate non-profit theatre. The society reproduces itself at an ever more compulsive and rapid pace. Art, especially theatre, has the potential to be transformative, to be emancipatory. As it is practiced today in the non-profit model we see exemplified by CTG, we have neither. In fact, for forty years CTG and other big corporate entities of culture have actively discouraged the transformative. The professionalization of art coupled to a careerist mindset in young artists, results in comforting non-disruptive product.

This conference was called in an effort to find a method of opposition to this spirit killing model. To find a new sensibility of seriousness. One that is linked to history, politics, and a mystical dimension that reaches beyond the bland reproduction of an illusory pre-packaged reality.

The paradigm shift in sensibility that brought in, for lack of a better term, the post-modern era, is no doubt real. I am not suggesting a nostalgic call to reclaim a lost past. Such nostalgia is itself kitsch. Nor do I look to the pseudo-Wagnerian kitsch of in house art producers such as Robert Wilson. There is a critical vacuum today as well. Corporate news media...the *LA Times* in our city, or worse TV, cannot be expected to do other than please their corporate bosses. One might ask for more critical depth, however, from what passes as the alternative press. Theatre is not moral

instruction, nor is it self-help or distraction. What it can be is a transformative medium that might begin a process of the reclamation of meaning in text. If we had more time it would be useful to see how plays are now treated as product, and hence a discreet encouragement is present to direct young theatre artists toward a 'director's theatre'. If text can only be seen as commodity, then genuine writing will suffocate. And so it has. Sarah Kane or Pinter would have a hard time getting a play accepted (were they new and unknown) at any major institutional theatre. However, even in its spiritually truncated form, the text retains a ghost of subversion that is best avoided if you a curator or artistic director. The de-commodification of art will require a serious exploration of how the experimental must evolve, and how a laboratory platform can aid in the fragmented unfinished project of authentic writing. However, this won't happen if the endgame is to be ticket sales or providing comfort to a subscriber base.

The Uninvited gathering was hosted at [The Lost Studio](#).

This entry was posted on Thursday, June 23rd, 2011 at 12:59 pm and is filed under [Theatre](#), [Discourse](#), [Lifestyle](#)

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