

THE PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY 16 September 23

The play within the play is a convention in which some of the play's events are hidden from some of the characters but are known to other of the characters and to the audience. An example is the murder of Hamlet's father. Illusion, revelation, fiction, ideology are pivots of human society. What is the hidden Society within Society?

Drama is a fiction that is about, and contains, the structures of human reality. In the theatre performance the audience are a fiction unless they are understood as the play within the play that is hidden from the actors. This is a basic interpretation of humanness and society. Human reality resorts to fiction for explanation and practice. Humanness creates culture. Society establishes ideology that uses force and violence to impose structure. Culture and ideology create the jungle in which we live. This is the site and text of the audience as the play within the play. Its reality is the street -- prices, debt, confusion, officialdom and so on. This does not require that dramas should be documentaries. The subjective self is not documentary. Its categories may be inscrutable. The subjective consequences of the play within the play are hidden from the actors when the audience's subjectivity cannot produce its own actions and reactions (applause is irrelevant) so that then the play within the play is never revealed. Instead we live in times that combine destructiveness, repression and the phantoms of authority with the mawkish and the sentimental. Our theatre is one symptom of this. Its a market product, a vaudeville version of the tragic.

Humans are a different sort of animal. We inherit our biology from pre-human animals. We are born in an "animality" condition. The sow doesn't know it is suckling its piglets. The piglets don't know they are being suckled by their sow mother. Such human knowledge would be of no use to them. Animal behaviour has no text. A bird calls but doesn't sing just as a convict's number or the rattle of cell keys are not music. Primates grunt expressively but don't speak language. A human neonate doesn't know its hands will one day be able to lift things. Farm animals and pets imitate human behaviour. It adds to their security and comfort and gets them more food but they don't become human.

The Creation of the Self

The womb creates the neonate. How does the neonate become human with knowledge of its self? Animals have no knowledge of self. Biology and neurology can't give it to them. The following invented incident could apply to countless situations that would have the same logical consequences. The neonate is propped up in a furnished room. The neonate stares at the furnishing. He sees that the furnishing doesn't see him, doesn't react to him. He sees also that he is not a furnishing. Across the room is a door. The door opens. A person (another non-furnishing thing) comes into the room. At that moment the neonate creates its post-neonatal self. No one else can be his self. It is an act of will and so is the haunting moral mandate that lies in the crises of drama. This knowledge of self is what creates morality. Morality is the self's responsibility to itself to be human. That responsibility makes us the drama species. Society may teach morality but that's like hanging a coat on a clothes-peg that isn't there. Society is unjust. Society uses ideology to impose order, group morality, on society and the self. Really that is gang conspiracy. The cause and reason for this is history and the knowledge that history gives us of our mortality. Morality rescues us from the

isolation of the post-neonatal self. We see we are responsible for others. That makes us the drama species. Without drama there can be no democracy. To repeat, contemporary theatre is a market product, a vaudeville version of the tragic.

Then In the incident described above the door opens. Someone enters the room and furnishings. After that there are only two ways of making a thing. One is creativity. The other is construction. The self creates its self. There are two elements. One is the room -- this repeats the space of the new post-neonate self and its horizon. It is the site of creativity. The other site is the door -- it is wood and mechanical. Its after this that there are only two ways of making anything. One is creativity -- it is in the horizon of the new post-neonatal self. The other is construction. A bomb and a dining fork are constructed tools. Construction has no moral purpose. A hospital is constructed but may be converted into an abattoir. All created things relate to human moral purpose. Modern society is not creative, instead it constructs. It is a mine that replaces whatever is extracted from it. Capitalism creates money and exists by selling money to itself -- that is, to capitalism. Humanly cash is the wound in which the Biblical disciple pushed his finger -- the finger that presses the button of the cash machine. The world-wide capitalist market is a material and moral battlefield. Creativity recreates itself, construction is a dead end. Thatcher unleashed modern capitalism on the UK. Her chancellor Lawson was an egregious fat lout who denied that the present market chaos -- and even the existence of global warming -- were caused by the economic superstitions he preached. Capitalism destroys society, the earth sea and sky -- and drama. On my web site and elsewhere I've written about capitalism's destructiveness. I needn't repeat it here.

The Actor's Creation of the Play Character

To create the play character the actor repeats the creation of his own post-neonatal self. (Everyone working on a drama -- writer, director, designer and so on -- creates their own version of the processes in which the neonate created its self, and then relates it to their craft.) The new post-neonatal child enters society and lives under its pressures. He may resist being pressured, distorted, broken by society's culture and ideology. He may resist but create the illusion of conformity and even submission. Or he may compromise himself and "join the wrong team". All these reactions are potential in the audience as the play within the play. The fractures these reactions create in society may be reflected in the drama or be its subject. The fractures work as a false horizon. The drama writer seeks to create the reality of the existing or (if its appropriate) an historical society but even in the past he will find the roots of the present.

The writer records natural and social reality. For drama (not theatre) the audience (the play within the play) is always present to the writer when he writes the play and to the director and actors when they rehearse it. Drama is in history inscribed in reality. All creative fiction and fantasy are derived from reality. It is decadent to allow the text to be squeezed by academic ignorance or corrupted by ideology. The performers must not treat the audience as their hostages (the opportunity of larger profit). Its as if the writer chisels "shapes" out of water and creates them as rock. The director and actors must enter the chiselled reality of the text. It is the moral truth of tragedy and relates to the profoundest cast: the audience as the cast of the play within the play. Comedy is not the debris of tragedy, it is the assertion of humanness -- comedy laughs and even the human tongue has the shape of a footprint. All this is true also of any adulteration of the tragic. We can now see that in the account of the neonatal creation of self (given above) the door becomes the lid of the coffin. We

should not flinch from this. The infant knows nothing of death but he already knows that reality casts shadows. To serve a human purpose we must be as mature as God. Greek drama failed. Its failure created the chaos of modern life. But it is still the hope left in the play within the play, even if it has only the resilience to go to the football match or take a night out. The Greek theatre failed but drama itself is the doorstep on the map of reality

“The audience as the play within the play” is a simple formulation with extreme consequence. These notes are about the causes that make the audience the play within the play. I will indicate them briefly. Hamlet sees ghosts and is a murderer. Humans murder but there are no ghosts. Ghost, demons, spirits, phantoms, gods are irrational imaginations of the human mind. We are the only animals that have imagination and self-consciousness. They are our greatest assets but also our greatest danger because they can be bought and manipulated by money. All this is done in the way I've shown in these notes. Some people are born blind or without a limb. In the same way some people are born with mental impairments, malfunctioning brains. But no one is born wicked. That some are is a fantasy of irrational culture, reactionary politicians, the gutter press, and fanatical sects. Punishment is a crude response that repeats what it is punishing. And if we can find no way round this then we are lost. We are in a desperate relay race in which the relay stick is a human bone. Even the products of science are working against us. We have lost control. We can't go on as we are. Ideology always believes in itself but there are no ghosts haunting us, no ghosts tormenting us, no demons, spirits, no god. We do not make reality but we are responsible for it. This is the strangely reassuring calmness that comforts us.

All this is in the plot of the audience as the play within the play.

Playwrights must write what they see.

The Greeks created drama and democracy. It helped in creating drama that all the characters, men and women, were played by men and were masked. This subtly biased the handling and analysis of its core subject: war domestic and political. It trapped the two problems, domesticity and politics, in one net held by the hands of the Gods. The Gods and humans were on stage together. The Greeks had more than one God. That was a mistake. It was as if the neonate could create itself as a pair of twins. It jumbled up creativity and construction (manufacture). There is something municipal and smallminded about all this -- the Victorians greatly admired it. But in time it led to the war between Sparta and Athens (which we are still fighting) and later on it became the suppurating wound of Capitalism.

Aeschylus wrote what was a sort of founding play for his times -- the Oresteia. Agamemnon kills his daughter, in revenge his wife Clytemnestra kills him, in revenge her son Orestes kills her. There is no one left to kill him. How can he pay the blood price he owes the law? In the Eumenides (the last play in the trilogy) the goddess Athene pardons Orestes and founds the perfect law court. Its judgements will always be just. This worried Euripides. He was a realist. Where was this court? Where was the navel of the world? All his plays can be seen as a search for it, for an institutional phoenix to rise out of the ashes of human crime. When he was middle-aged Euripides wrote Medea. Medea kills her two young sons. A God descends in his chariot not to punish her but instead to take her to safety in Athens (later she murders again). I wrote a version of Medea. A London theatre critic said neither I nor Euripides had explained Medea and her infanticides. The critic wanted an explanation that would satisfy a policeman. The crime is greater than that. It is the crime of civilization. Euripides'

obsession grew. When he was old he wrote *The Bacchae*. In it he created the Fascist God Dionysus. In reverence for Dionysus Agave lynches her politician son Pentheus. A mob of religious fanatics help her to lynch him. Afterwards Agave plays with her son's severed head. Euripides left Athens, went into exile. He wrote his last surviving play. It returns to the original problem: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is reverential. Euripides' *Orestes* is a profane farce. Its characters are liars, betrayers, opportunists, louts. Orestes himself is a pathological schemer. At the end Apollo appears to sort it all out. Too late. Euripides' *Orestes* is about the collapse of society, the end of a search for civilization. After Orestes Euripides left Athens in despair and went into exile. Euripides was the greatest of the Greek dramatists. He writes the epitaph of Greek Drama. Its gravestone bears one word: No. Athens' Theatre of Dionysus dwindled into irrelevance. Rome took over. In the place of Athens' Theatre of Dionysus it put the Colosseum. It replaced drama with the savage vices of the arena. Exhibition murders, cremation of the living, torture of children, humans fed to animals as food -- it unleashed the bloody appetites of modernity - in time the arena was replaced by the Holy Inquisition -- the middle ages -- serfdom -- papal torture cells -- priest police - living heretics burnt on the market square -- witch hunts -- the new world -- loot -- slave trade -- the reformation -- religious wars -- enlightenment -- science -- industrial revolution -- manufacture replaces creativity -- child labour -- slum cities -- industrial diseases -- typhoid -- stock exchange -- world market -- trade wars -- imperialism --- Fascism -- dictatorship --- world wars -- Auschwitz -- nuclear weapons -- Hiroshima -- global warming -- species extermination -- earth burnt -- air polluted -- sea infected -- sky defiled -- a walk on the moon goes no further than a walk on the street outside your house

Humans tumble about like blind fish in the sea and think they can catch the future with their hooks but the hooks are in their mouths and the sea can't wash the blindness out of their eyes. Nature has a solution. In the eons before there were humans fish turned into birds. I use this extravagant image (you could find others) to illustrate the problem. Mass manufacture is not a solution.

The present always inherits the past

The past is like a skeleton of mist more tenuous and tenacious than bone or steel

We inherit the organisation of Rome and not the civilisation of Greece

Hitler wore the screaming mask Euripides made for him

Why the world? Why anything?

Some of these notes are abstract. I will clarify them by describing my play *Summer* and my direction of it in 1982 on the Cottesloe stage of the British National Theatre. The play's events are historically true. I added some fictional parts and characters to explain the truths. Its set in the late nineties. It deals with events in the second world war. It takes place on the coast outside Dubrovnik. Just off the coast there are two small islands. In the war the occupying Germans used them as concentration camps where they imprisoned and shot hostages. The play takes place in a house overlooking the islands. Its owner was a wealthy business man. A philanthropist. He supported charities. Helped locals in need. Built a new hospital wing. Sent sons of poor families to universities. During the war he often entertained German officers in his house. After the war he was arrested as a collaborator. His daughter Xenia married an English officer. Went to live in London. Runs an expensive boutique. In

the war Marthe was a servant in the house, now she owns it. Every year Xenia invites herself back to the house for a summer holiday. With her she brings her daughter Ann. Last year Ann slept with Marthe's son David. He is a doctor. Marthe is dying of cancer. David nurses her.

In the war resisters shot a German soldier. Hostages were rounded up and taken to the islands. Martha was one of them. She waited in a cell with the other hostages. They told each other their life stories so that after the war they would be remembered. Martha was silent. She stared at the strip of light under the door. She knew it would happen. She understood the mechanical interlocking of culture and morality with ideology. She was taken outside. Xenia was waiting for her with a German officer. The other hostages were shot. Marthe was not. It would have been awkward. Spoilt the evenings Xenia's father spent with the Germans.

Marthe has never thanked Xenia for saving her life. Time runs out. Next year Marthe will be dead.

There is a big row. Xenia accuses Marthe of clinging to the past -- cant forget -- cant be human -- cant thank Xenia for saving her life. Xenia is bitter and strident. The actress playing her wanted her to be sad, understanding, conciliatory, noble. That's why you become an actress -- to show the audience your humanity. I insisted she played Xenia as written. Bitter and angry.

Playwrights must write what they see. Actors must play it.

In the middle of the National Theatre there is a well to let in the light. Round the sides of the well are offices, store rooms, dressing rooms. One day by chance I was looking down the well and saw into the dressing room of Xenia's actress. She was sprawled face down on the table before her make-up mirror. Arms outstretched, flailing, fists banging the table. I couldn't hear it but could see she was howling in rage, frustration, self-pity. It was Xenia as I had written her. The despairing victim of the forced interlocking of culture and morality with ideology. Ive written about this above. Perhaps unconsciously that's why she became an actress. To escape the depression of her childhood submission to ideological repression -- the mistake of "joining the wrong team." She didn't understand Xenia because she didn't understand herself. It's the fault of our society and its culture. We replace creativity with construction. With manufacture. Drama has become part of the Entertainment Industry. We may have to pay a big price for that. Civilizations never make small mistakes. "Summer" enacts the struggle between the morality that creates humanness and the ideology that builds concentration camps.

Then it occurred to me what I must do. Move the interval. All the cast are in the first half of the play. It lasted two hours. Only Ann and David are in the second half. They are young. It would last five minutes. I told the acting theatre manager what I intended. (Peter Hall was in Germany directing Wagner's Ring in a production he said would be suitable for children. "Mummy what is incest?" "Well dear, you remember when Aunty Hannah comes to stay. . .) The manager was angry. Five minutes! There would be a public protest. People would want their money back. He would put a notice in the bar warning the audience. Then none of them would come back for the second half. So it didnt happen. Nothing happened. A pity. It might have done some good. Been a token. Our drama is dying and something must be done to save it.