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Drama as a University Discipline

What follows is an apology for drama as a university study. I hope, however, that it avoids the thinly disguised plea for the status of the drama faculty which most such endeavors are. My concern here is with the undergraduate student who elects a major concentration in the field of drama in the expectation of achieving that increasingly more elusive academic amalgam, a simultaneous degree and education. If changing approaches in the university disciplines, rapid growth in content and techniques as well as changes in student attitudes are making such an expectation difficult to fulfill in other areas, they make it doubly so in the study of drama.

Traditionally, and I think rightly, drama has been taught by participation: classes, laboratories, studio and major productions consist of the preparation, criticism and reworking of scenes and plays designed to increase the student's participation in theatrical presentation and his skill in its execution. Case method analysis of such presentations, survey courses in dramatic literature and theatre history, technical courses in design and lighting all augment this participation technique. The aim is to give the student a sufficient number of paradigms of dramatic styles and genres on which to base his theatrical work after graduation, as well as to give him enough experience in production to develop skills in performance and ease in working with production techniques common to the various styles.

In practice such an approach creates a graduate who appreciates, understands and is at home in the theatrical field, but as a curricular programme it has fostered at least two tendencies which, while they might seem achievements to the outsider, have crippled the student of drama. The first is professionalism.

Participation pedagogy means production; production means audiences, since presentation before an audience is the final test of artistic endeavor, and since audiences means theatres. University administrations, quick to see the public relations potential of public performance, build theatres and then discover that the grander the theatre the greater the number of starry-eyed students as well as top faculty they can attract. Drama faculties are presently judged by the number and opulence of their theatres and productions. Rehearsal time is doubled.

Quality of presentation, now in direct competition with movies, TV and local theatre, becomes important; but, since the undergraduate performer lacks the skills and experience to sustain large roles on this level of competence, the productions are picked for large casts and/or the larger roles are filled by imported semi-professionals. These "artists in residence" are expected to be models for the developing student, whose posture is now changed from participation to observation of the professional — at least, so the reasoning goes, until his third or fourth year when he will have sufficient training to play the leads himself. But the student never reaches that level: his time is taken up in the enormous labor of preparing professionally conceived major productions. The settings, lights, great numbers of costumes and properties which large-cast shows require, together with the extensive rehearsal time necessary for professional slickness in the major productions, change the student and faculty attitude toward classroom work, and sometimes even the nature of it. Design classes concentrate on the infinite details of a small number of gigantic productions; costume and technical labs become slave labor camps where learning is secondary to meeting production deadlines. Class exercises and studio productions are given less attention by students and faculty alike, and even here the criterion of excellence becomes impact of total presentation, not depth of participation nor training of the skills of an individual. Even if major productions do function as learning experiences, and they do, they limit enormously the number of production paradigms which theoretically constitute the major part of the student's training. The time and effort spent on four or five major productions each year, if channeled into studio productions, could give the student the chance at working on as many as thirty plays, and his participation would be in major areas — as lead actor, designer, director. Professional giantism gives these jobs to the visiting professional or faculty member, and further limits the choice of production paradigms, since the question of which plays are to be produced is decided in part by available acting potential and audience expectation.

What has happened is that the pedagogical model has changed from that of participation based on the idea of the science laboratory to that of the professional repertory theatre. Such a theatre is an excellent training ground in drama, but it presumes in the student both previous experience and full-time commitment. The university student, forced to budget his time to honor requirements in other university disciplines, cannot give his full time, and since he cannot, is unable to acquire the initial experience necessary for participation in the repertory learning process. By virtue of its inclusion in the university system of diversity in undergraduate learning, the department of drama cannot compete with the full-time production focus of the professional conservatory. But even if it could it should not, unless it is willing to say that the exclusive purpose of university undergraduate education in drama is professional competence in theatrical production, a stance difficult to maintain in the light of the traditional intentions of uni-

versity education. Drama faculties are the first to scream when their fellow academics think of them as being in the same category as intermural volleyball and the debate club, but professional giantism in a participation curriculum implicitly demands a limited-skills approach to learning.

The second crippling tendency is not, as is professionalism, the unfortunate overgrowth of an otherwise useful pedagogical approach, but lies in the nature of the case method participation technique itself. In such training, analysis of the art work, even in classes of dramatic literature and theatre history, is directed toward creation of production paradigms. In acting and directing classes, scenes which are analysed, critiqued, coached or reworked by the instructor aim at giving the student insight into theatrical methods of realization in performance of the structure which the instructor feels is implicit in this particular script. History and literature surveys in drama departments also emphasize this single instance conversion of dramatic structure to production effect: how given historical stage designs augment dramatic construction; how the various dramatic elements of a school of playwriting create, in juxtaposition, their unified effect; how successive emphasis of one or another of these elements creates a variety of production styles. And since production of scenes in class, even on a minimal scale, is time consuming, and since survey classes allow by their nature only a surface analysis of any one play, the critical approach to drama remains on this level for the undergraduate. Aesthetics, the finer points of rhetorical analysis, theories of action and symbol, drama as a sociological transaction and the insights of philosophy, psychology, anthropology must wait until graduate school.

It is not that the "how to do it, how it is constructed, how it works" approach is inadequate for the study of drama; as Theodore Hoffman suggests, " . . . the techniques of theatre in themselves provide the tools of investigation needed to understand plays . . . good theatre work is a branch of intellectual inquiry."[1] An undergraduate student trained in participative case method work is an articulate and accurate critic of drama. He has developed sensitized instincts and sensibilities through continuing participation in a large number of dramatic paradigms and can feel the rightness or wrongness of a given moment in dramatic production, can articulate in terms of "how it should be done" the essential structural demands of the play. But he cannot say "why." He can only point to the script, ask others so trained to feel the rhythmic or organic rightness of what he says, show them where other scenes and other moments build toward and prepare the moment of which he speaks. By so doing he communicates to other drama people, and often to critically trained people in other disciplines since his method of mov-

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[1]Theodore Hoffman, "Theatre and the Intellect," in *Drama at Calgary*, 1:4 (March, 1967), p. 27.

ing from participation perception to a structurally parallel articulation is essentially theirs. By staying close to the written dramatic structure, by speaking in terms of "how," the student guarantees that his critical insights are valid for production; but in terms of speaking to students trained in other disciplines and in terms of applying the training he received in classes outside the field of drama to his understanding of plays, he fails.

The problem is not simply one of vocabulary. A student trained in philosophy reporting on a play in a class in dramatic analysis, sees in the play a demonstration in terms of action and symbol of a particular philosophical stance. The drama majors see that the analysis is inclusive, accurate, persuasive, interesting; their lack of enthusiasm comes not because the analysis is not "right," but because they cannot translate it into "how": cannot see the application of this insight to production. The result is not that drama students are frustrated by their fellow students and by their classes outside of drama (indeed they find these areas of thought exciting within the closed "bag" of each), but that the major rationale for the curriculum of the liberally educated university undergraduate here breaks down. Traditionally such training consists of exposure to the insights of a large number of disciplines, the selection of an area of special interest for depth study (the major) and, theoretically, illumination and augmentation of the training in the major study by the techniques and insights of the other disciplines: the student is allowed depth work in his specialty and carries with him into that depth a continuum of insight from his other studies. In drama the continuum is most often not created: the depth study functions in its own way with its own tools and the other disciplines remain cut off and peripheral. Between the participation oriented "how" of drama training and the rationally structured "whys" of the other disciplines there is a great gulf. At the moment undergraduate drama curricula can turn out articulate, informed and well trained people in the field of drama, but cheat them of both a university education and the insights into their chosen field which such an education implies. Drama's position is not that of chemistry, where laboratory participation is illumined and reinforced by theory, but of alchemy: the laboratory work is stimulating and often beautiful, the theory interesting but of little practical use.

While it may be true that communication difficulties exist among other disciplines, these problems are at least among various "why" fields. But it is essential that the "how" orientation of drama study remain. To substitute traditional critical and historical techniques in drama courses will simply move the gap closer to home and return us to the position of those universities whose drama curriculum consists solely of production and who rely totally on other disciplines for analytic study. The answer must lie in the drama department's willingness to enlarge its critical approach to plays, and give to the student a continuum between

"how" and "why" to span the gap which now exists. It must be given him early and at the same time as the participation training; as his sensibilities grow in sensitivity and complexity of insight so must his understanding. "How" analysis can lead to complex structural and formal critical insights which do articulate with the theories of other disciplines, but the teacher-critic must tie such analysis to practical participation. He must be actor-director and critic-theorist; and he must be there, in the acting and directing classroom, to give to each participation insight of each individual student a name, and the critical and historical theory to back it up. Historically, the separation of analysis into other disciplines or into other classes within the department have failed. If the student is to have his intellectual continuum, sensibility and theory must grow together and in interaction.

Such an approach means radical changes in curriculum and in the training of faculty. The instructor in such a curriculum must be able to tie together theory and laboratory experiment as does the teacher of chemistry, but the object of his study is not the laboratory measurement of the properties of some substance in the light of a unified theory of elements; it is an art work, a microcosm of the mind of man. Its unity is not accepted and measurable theory but the unity of a single artistic mind; its confusions and contradictions are those of that mind in conflict with its age; its limitations are not the possible, but the conceivable. The recreation in production of the edifice implicit in a script is an enormous task, requiring great amounts of time, energy, trained insight, openness, and patience that come only from years of experience. To ask a single instructor to perform simultaneously as creator and theorist is to ask him to secure training offered by no university of which I know, though many pretend to offer it. Teachers who do fulfil these functions have come from long experience in production to academic studies and have worked out for themselves the ties between the two; or, trained in traditional critical approaches, they become involved in production and must bridge for themselves the gap here described. But this objection is only to say that drama instructors have been themselves the victims of the current drama curriculum. If students are to achieve as undergraduates what it has taken their teachers half a lifetime to create for themselves a beginning must be made; the classroom will suggest its own techniques.

In this new curriculum the instructor will enter the classroom blind. He is armed with training in production and also with theory and analysis which he has found of great use in his art. But whether they will be so for the students or for what students at what level of participation development or in what way he does not know. He must begin with production, pause, bring analysis to bear, return to participation in the scene at hand, pause, and again discuss. Analysis must never move further than the level of complexity or abstraction at which the student cannot see practical application. Feedback will be of maximal

importance, both in discussion and in changes in what happens in the presentation of the scenes: the eye of the director must be as acute as the mind of the theorist. The goal is the gradual development of parallel complexities of sensibility and critical insight, and the ties between them must never be broken: if any point of analysis or historical background is not clear in terms of artistic augmentation in the scene at hand, the gap is reopened. This teacher will have to teach, not function as a purveyor of information alone, no matter how articulate.

Obviously this approach, especially in its initial stages, will be extremely time-consuming for both teacher and student. It will mean that not only the professional giantism but possibly even the production of major works for public performance must be abandoned, at least for the undergraduate. It will mean that there must be a solid core of participation-theory classes to move each student, not only those who are "talented" in performance, to a level of complexity of participation insight at which his corresponding and connected complexity of analytical approaches can articulate with the approaches of other disciplines, and at which the illumination of drama by these other areas can begin: it must build a continuum.

The creation of the continuum between dramatic production and the rational disciplines of the university offers benefits far beyond the education of the majors in drama. It may well offer one of the solutions to the increasingly loud protests on the part of students today that the university curriculum is fragmented, unattached to the world and to life as they experience it, and even irrelevant to these concerns.

University disciplines by their natures offer the student distinct, if not discrepant, understandings of man in his world. Implicit in the term understanding is the rational point of view, the choice of stance which makes each discipline distinct: that pinnacle of detachment from which the chaos of life is viewed, dissected, measured and mapped. At least part of the students' demand is, I feel, for a return to participation in the chaos, not as hedonistic indulgence, but as a testing of the schemata gained by the clarity of vision of emotional detachment in rationality: a demand not only for the map of Kenneth Burke's "Semantic and Poetic Meaning,"[2] but for the "battle"—emotional, experiential, participational knowledge.

Participation in drama, indeed in any of the arts, offers such a testing ground, if the continuum here pleaded can carry the maps to the battle. Seen from this point of view all the participation arts offer a means of unifying the distinct experiences of the university disciplines, not in a rational and continuing Theory of Man, but in the momentary experiential unity of action and emotion of each art work. It may well be that

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[2]Kenneth Burke, "Semantics and Poetic Meaning," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 121.

this role for the arts, as well as the students' desires, is an abandonment of rational stance, what McLuhan would call a skin dive into the tribal chaos of unconsciousness. But it is not an abandonment of rationality: the diver takes his air down with him, and in this return to the tribal he is conscious of the unconscious.[3]

The faculty too can benefit from such a continuum. At present, at least in drama, profitable interaction among experimenters in the art must consist of first seeing productions and then talking about them, since the gap between sensibility and analysis is as wide between the field of drama and the journals that service it as it is between drama and the discursive university disciplines. The existence of many producing companies in large metropolitan areas, travel grants for those on isolated campuses, TV and cinema productions all help in this regard, but drama is far from being in the position of world-wide mutual communication held by the scientific community. Far too often the result is that individual faculty members leave the large centers of mutual learning and interaction of graduate school or conservatory, and, isolated from the pioneer work going on in their art, dedicate the rest of their lives to improving the quality of what they have learned in the few years of training. This vertical growth is carried on at the expense of horizontal expansion of sensibility, with the result that the faculty loses touch with the current forms of life, represented in their students, and cannot speak in artistic form to students' problems. The drama department becomes a museum, indeed this is one of its functions, but under these conditions it cannot even fulfill this role successfully since the purpose of a museum is to connect the sensibilities of the present age with those of the past. The drama teacher finds himself in the position of attempting to deal with contemporary life by means of old artistic forms, is politely ignored, feels alienated from his students and his fellow faculty, and complains of "cultural split."

The continuum, the means of meaningful discourse among artists and among artists and theorists in other fields, can begin to put the drama teacher back in touch with the contemporary. Hopefully, it can even put the university drama department into the position of experimenter in the rapidly changing forms of art today. This possibility has enormous potential scope since "works of art, psychological forms, and social forms all reflect each other, and change with each other."[4] If drama, in contact on the one hand with the radical experiments and theories of the discursive disciplines, and on the other with the new forms of contemporary pioneers in the arts, can make the resultant dramatic techniques available to its students, we may at last be able to find an answer, in participation, to the students' complaint that university approaches

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[3]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 233, 247.

[4]Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1961), p. 299.

are irrelevant to their lives. It will mean that students can function as creative artists in drama, creating the dramatic formal equivalents of the social and psychological forms which they themselves live and develop. For the teacher this will mean contact with his students, and living in the forefront of his art.

Such an approach must again and inevitably reduce the amount of time spent in "practical" training for the drama student. But seen in the light of such rapidly changing social and artistic forms, practical training, at least as presently taught, is anything but "practical": it is instruction in archaic modes, important as the tools of creation of the art, but useless if the work to be created cannot communicate. The approach here urged will, I hope, give the student trained sensibility and the trained mind working together, and send him into professional training, if he desires it, with that discipline of intellect and ability of insight and comparison which is, traditionally, the product of university education.