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Authorship and the Director-Spectator Dynamic

A conference which has as its focus the relationship between directing and authorship itself creates an additional layer of perception. Armed with my remarks, I become aware of the similarities in my presentation of this paper with the experience of directing in the theatre. In both cases one deals with the question of authorship, and how to transfer a sense of authorship to those who receive what is offered. For this act of offering is not only fundamental to the nature of theatre, as I perceive it, but to communication between people. We possess something we believe is meaningful. We can keep it to ourselves, but something compels us to offer it to another. The trick is in the offering as much as it lies in the gift itself. As a theatre director who works almost exclusively in cultures where I am an outsider, the relationship between authorship and directing recurs at every stage of the process of bringing a play to the stage.

My central thesis is this: authorship is a transient state. Either I am the author of what I want to say to you, or a conference such as this one, through its title and its implied and explicit expectations, dictates what I want to say to the receptive agents. Working in a part of the world where dictating, in the political sense, has been developed into a bit of an art form, makes one sensitive to the nuances of such questions. Once a paper is written, burned on a disc, printed as an abstract in a programme, is it still owned by its originator? Did that person truly originate all the ideas incorporated in the paper? Lest this seem like a preamble to a treatise on the case of Napster vs. Downloading Citizens of the World, I will reduce this tortured question to a specific set of incidents related to adapting and directing a play by Bertolt Brecht in Romania. I take

possession of this article, temporarily, only so that I may once more give it away.

Theatre is not a fixed medium. There's a paradigmatic notion, at least in Canadian theatre, that a playwright owns his or her play, a notion which extends far beyond the realm of mere copyright considerations. The playwright's vision is paramount at all times. The text is reverenced. While I respect the thinking at the root of this rather proprietary idea, especially with regard to a first production, as a director I believe that once a play is within the collaborative process of production, it is no longer the exclusive property of the writer. The playwright has *conceived* the play. The off-spring is taken and raised by foster parents, (if one may torture a metaphor). The idea of the play is developed in the real world by artists who appropriate its authorship in a tangible way, even if the writer's name remains at the bottom of the title page. The scope of the play, the beliefs and values contained within it, is extended and developed (or truncated), through directorial and dramaturgical means, beyond the range of a single individual.

Taken beyond, but where, one may rightly ask. In the hands of irresponsible artists, the fledgling play floats down the river Styx to a nether world where the play neither exists as it was first conceived, nor exists in any form comprehensible to an audience. The self-proclaimed *auteur* has in truth perpetrated an infanticide. A responsible artist acknowledges that the beliefs and values, ideas and concepts in play are merely rented. In adhering to some of the structural or aesthetic traditions of theatrical performance s/he pays due homage and moves on to an elaboration, incorporating something of their own beliefs and values before the piece passes on to others.

This is something of a knotty problem, because the distinction between irresponsible indulgence in production and creative extrapolation is by no means clear. All manner of justifications are

proffered in the name of this appropriation and it is difficult, at times, to discern when authorship is wrenched away without having produced a dialectical synthesis of ideas. Perhaps one way of approaching this problem is to invert the perspective. The question should always be asked as to what is *intended to be received*, rather than what is intended to be generated.

The risk of damaging the product of authorship exists at all times in the theatre. Faced with, say, the unalloyed genius of Shakespeare or Beckett, the catalytic agent which frees the play from stasis is the notion that theatre is based in action. Action must therefore be taken with every play when it is produced. Its propagations must be addressed and questioned. It must not be left undisturbed. The playwright Beckett may be worthy of reverent headstone but his plays are not: they live on, and must be nourished. Sometimes the production may offer food that is bland or even poisonous. Such is the nature of lived experience. Artists who invest their lives and beliefs in the making of a play may irrevocably alter it - for better or worse; Shakespeare's plays almost disappeared under the emendations of Colley Cibber and the numerous bowdlerizers of the 17th and 18th century in England and France. Later, playwrights such as Beckett took to litigation or, as in the case of Shaw and O'Neill[1], to the writing of extensive stage directions to retain the authorship of their plays. In all cases these authors have failed to control the product once they have written it.

This is because the responsibility of creative artists is to question, and to question is to lead, not to follow. In the context of production, the director acts not as a conduit but as a temporary locus of the playwright's ideas, transforming those ideas through selection, a forcing of the current of ideas, through a router, in a new direction. In so doing the pure energy of the play remains, but it has been altered. Similarly, from the other direction, the director, or dramaturg,

may profitably alter the expectations of the audience; profitably because in this meeting of altered expectations lies the reward of a truly social contribution. Breaking this received wisdom - this convention of the theatre that the play is *sacre*, *sancti* - enables the transference of authorship that theatre, to my mind, has always intended: from playwright to spectator.

Of course the radical playwright might now ask whether this midwifian director is at all required in the equation. A better question is: should a director adhere to this authorial breaking-and-entering if the playwright has the nerve to still be breathing? If s/he does not, does this mean that a director then owns the play, and has appropriated the authorial voice?

Such questions, and the consequences of their answers, are easier to determine if one considers the notion that theatre is a process of transference, with transcendence as its purpose. A director can be said to be the authorial voice of a play in production. A play, however, occurs on several temporal levels at once – as a staging in real time, in the time that passes within the narrative, and as a set of shifting ideas and perspectives embedded within the mind of the spectator prior to, during, and after the viewing of a production. It is therefore in constant movement, and a director has the power to affect one or more of these temporal versions at various times, but never with any sense that all of them are subject to her control. She is part of the process of transference, perhaps even in control of a stage of it, one author amongst several, working towards the goal of transcendence which has as its target agents the audience who attends a performance.

A produced version of a play does not stay within the borders of the stage, but, with each semiotic agent, leaps off that platform and is received, its significations identified and assimilated. It may be received by spectators armed with the original text of the play, who may thus perform an act of *re-transference*, a regression of text-in-play to text-as-read. The

transmutation of the play from text to living thing cannot be reversed, however: the play has become tangible, and in its physical form it becomes a vehicle. An artistic assembly line has formed as it rolls from playwright, to director, to the other artists associated with the production. The director owns neither vehicle nor its drivers. A tradition of the theatre dictates that directors are seldom present at productions after opening night. This tradition is a demonstration of the transferral of responsibility and, with it, authorship. The director takes the keys of the vehicle and tosses them to the actors. Each night they drive off with the play, leaving behind the worried director wringing her hands. A door is thrown open and the spectators are invited to come along for the ride. Destination: transcendence. The type and degree of transcendence is a matter for debate, as is the question of whether this is an imposed or received experience. Transcendence of some kind, however, remains the destination.

Having said this, and viewed the world of the stage from the perspective of a practitioner, I feel strongly inclined to look at this geography of authorship and conclude that authorship must reside with those who ultimately receive the gift of the play, those to whom authorship is transferred. This shifting of authorial responsibility - because it is certainly, like any gift, fraught with responsibility - is clear when one views the essential equation in terms of gaze. The gaze is *suggested* by the playwright, and *guided* by the director; but it is generated by the spectator. In this way the spectator takes ownership of the play and is the author of his or her own experience. If this transference does not take place, if the play remains in the hands of the author or the producing artists, it can be persuasively argued that it stands as a failure in theatrical terms.

The genesis of these thoughts on authorship occurred while I was directing my own adaptation of a Bertolt Brecht play in Romania in 2003*, Brecht În Gunoi*. A few remarks about specific aspects of this production will serve to clarify the progression of my observations.

In March and April of 2003 I worked at the Radu Stanca Theater, a large state theatre in Sibiu, Romania, directing Michel-Marc Bouchard's *The Orphan Muses* (Bouchard 1992) in German. While there I met with the Artistic Director of a new company based in Tîrgovişte, a city 70 northwest of Bucharest. We had agreed that I would direct a play there, and with mere weeks until the beginning of rehearsals, we had not begun to discuss the choice of play. I was therefore surprised when he told me that he was open to any choice I wished to make, as long as it involved as many members of his fourteen member repertory company as possible.

I pushed hard to do an adaptation of Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (Brecht 1969). I'd first traveled to Romania in the late 1980s, and since the fall of the Ceauşescus, I'd thought that this Brechtian fable of idealism savaged in the abattoirs of capitalism would be a compelling choice for a Romanian audience. The fact that Tîrgovişte is a gritty industrial town, caught squarely between the reeking obsolescence of its doddering textile and manufacturing industries and the new, pro-Western direction emanating out of Bucharest, seemed to make the play an ideal choice, dramaturgically.

For M.C. Ranin, the new theatre company's founder, producer and director-designer, there were other factors at play. The company had begun operations the year before; Tîrgovişte had never had a theatre prior to this one, and its audience, he felt, had to be seduced into making play-going a regular

habit. Ranin's specialty was French farce. He wanted a production with some gravitas, one that would stretch the capabilities of his young actors, but one which would not alienate his audience.

Brecht, of course, was something of a specialist in alienation, and though the distinction between *verfremdung* and the tremulous commercial use of the term by Ranin appears obvious, perhaps the two are more closely associated than we may care to admit[2]. In fact, Brechtian distanciation begins with engagement, as he states repeatedly, especially in his later years, notably in A Short Organum For The Theatre (Brecht 1970: 73-105).

There was certainly the possibility that I, as a sometime visitor to Romania, might be guilty of a kind of cultural imperialism, a missionary mentality - *now that you're free, you need to think about this*. Then and now, I've come to the conclusion that this isn't so, though at the time I gave the matter much thought. The more I considered it, the more I felt that Brecht, who after all was an exile from his own culture, was, with his galvanic action, music, and muscular dialogue, could provide just the kind of dialectical initiative the situation demanded.

So already we were wrestling over authorship, in our various motivations for doing this play; arguing, it could be said, over who would transfer what version of authorship to the intended recipients, the spectators of Tîrgovişte. Our positions were not exactly contradictory, which is why the play was produced; but neither were they complementary. One was going to gain ascendance - the mercantile motivation or the aesthetic and dialectical one.

I say "aesthetic", a word one may not connote immediately with the works of Bertolt Brecht, because Brecht was strongly influenced by Schiller's aesthetic philosophy, especially his views on distanciation and the employment of what he called the *supersensuous* (Schiller 1974: 454). Though Brecht criticized Schiller's enthusiastic endorsement of the stage as a moral institution, emphasizing instead the theatre's potential for political enfranchisement of the spectator,

the difference between these two views may be smaller than it appears. Schiller's hybridized version of Romanticism and Classicalism demanded audience engagement to the point of identification. Extreme emotion was to be created in the spectator who, in experiencing the sublime, would then be forced to make sense of the stimuli or surely perish in the inferno. Thus, in Schiller's mind, would the spectator be forced out of the world of the play and back into his everyday experience, there to employ the lessons burned into his consciousness by the application of the reasoning faculties stimulated by the supersensuous. In plays like *The Robbers* (Schiller 1979: 25-160), Schiller utilizes an early combination of illusion-breaking conventions – music inserted at irregular intervals that is neither fully expositional nor digressively emotional, and a choral narrator to distance the spectator from the initial cathartic response to the romantic narrative. Schiller's purpose in breaking up the conventional structure of romantic drama was to take this cathartic response and transmute it into something he regarded as possessing greater social value Brecht, too, employs engagement, but disengages the spectator well short of Schiller's breaking point, *after* effective representation but before identification.

Neither Schiller nor Brecht demonstrates, in their writing, a rigorous adherence to rules. Brecht wrote the Short Organum, but this reads more like a late-career rationalization than tablets taken down from the mountain. The Epic Theatre constantly evolved, not only from Piscator to Brecht, but from Brecht younger to Brecht older; no résumé of its achievements could ever reduce it to a code or a single approach. Schiller was effusive in his enthusiasm for Corneille's *The Cid* (Schiller 1974: 453), and, I suspect, of the discomfort Corneille's cavalier treatment of Aristotelian unities caused the French Academy (Scudéry et al 1974: 211-26). Like Corneille, Schiller (as well as his contemporaries Lessing and Goethe) looked to the polymath Shakespeare for dramatic models. Corneille and Schiller both admired structural clarity in drama, their distinction from the neo-classicists being that they felt that each drama creates its own structural demands, and that in exceptional cases, Genius can dictate structure. While Brecht advised the artist to "divorce" the spectator from illusion-based "spiritual dope traffic" (Brecht 1961: 104) and specifically the sort of "moralizing from the stage

that might drive the audience out of the theatre" that he attributed to Schiller (Brecht 1974: 854), like Schiller he was, in the last part of his career, an advocate of theatrical pleasure as a tool for learning:

> Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre, it will amuse (852).

Throughout his career Brecht the practitioner consistently found himself cocking a snoot at Brecht, the philosophe; the philosophe inevitably adjusting, *post facto*, his abstract thought according to the actual *lehrstück* he had learned in the theatre, acknowledging that the spectator is wooed and then led, even to independence[3].

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Tîrgovişte is a hardscrabble town of rusting heavy industry plants which line a highway on which Roma gypsies meander with their horses and wagons. Here, I felt, Brecht would be an accessible choice. Romania's transition after Ceauşescu has been rocky. People are poor; ex-communists have been re-elected, undermining faith in the democratic system, corporate pirates enrich themselves and hide behind gated, guarded enclaves. A woman who was loaning me her apartment took me on a tour of the new house her son had built for her. It was off the street, with an electrified gate, a guard in one of those Beefeater boxes: a hard place for other pirates to break into, it reminded me instantly of how in Brecht's *St. Joan* Mauler is constantly on the verge of submitting to his doubt and remorse – until he thinks about his rivals. Assuming, correctly, that they think and act as he does, but (perhaps) incorrectly that this is emblematic of a global ethos, he regretfully assigns Joan's idealism to the margins of socially useful thought. In the end Joan, abused, having actually obstructed the

efforts of the workers to enfranchise themselves, dies and is deified in the name of sanctimony. This experience, and my experience listening to the accounts of the lives of the actors and the workers at the theatre, inspired me in my approach to the work.

One cannot direct Brecht without thinking about these questions of authorship, because they intertwine inextricably with the idea of enfranchisement and an awakening of consciousness in the receptive mind. In choosing Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards* I was trying to avoid the passivity of metaphor. In making a statement about what theatre can and should represent to a community, the staging attempted, if not an awakening of consciousness, a salutary reminder that consciousness awaits, is available. If the reminder was not to be welcomed, then the show would become a rough, supportive clap on the shoulder.

A further danger was that, in 2003, the distanciation effect of a Brecht production may well be from the point of view of Brecht as museum theatre. To avoid this I wrote framing scenes, creating a context where we could view the Brecht play itself from a distance. An ambitious young woman working for a verité TV show comes upon an abandoned factory yard full of homeless, unemployed people. A cameraman and lighting man are with her; she quickly strikes a deal with the homeless people to film them. Their price is money - but to maintain their self-respect they decide to provide her with a show for the cash - a play they found in the garbage, one which has disturbed them, because the characters have their names. The play in the garbage is called *St. Joan of the Stockyards*. Therein results the title of the production: *Brecht în Gunoi*, or *Brecht In The Garbage*. At once it acknowledges the role of Brecht as an author while simultaneously questioning his right to ownership. The question of Brecht's authorial role in some of his plays and as a director has been

examined by various scholars such as John Fuegi and John Willett. Without drawing a conclusion based on these examinations, as an artist I felt it necessary to put the question of authorship, in wider terms, into the structural fabric of the play. It is now apparent that the lines of authorship in Brecht's own dramaturgy are hopelessly blurred in a number of plays. Rather than casting aspersions or blame, my focus in dealing with this particular product of Brecht's creative genius - for genius it was, regardless of the roles played by the many collaborators who took part in the creative process - was on how that authorship, wherever it originated from, might be transferred to its rightful owners, the spectators. Herr Brecht, with all due (ir) reverence, was going to be "trashed". If I could manage it, his role in this dialectic would be reduced to that of spectator, and the spectator heightened to the role – co-author. The actors, scenographer and I were to be conduits in the process.

As the homeless people transform, in full view of the spectator, into the characters of the play, the cameraman's videocamera feeds images to a huge cyclorama in the background, providing an echoing image of aspects of stage action filmed by the camera. The TV crew's harsh lighting lends a crime-scene air to the live action on stage, and the constant presence in view of the cameraman, interviewer and lighting man create an exteriority to every scene. Each actor shifts back and forth from homeless person to their roles in the Brecht play, visible to the spectator.

The interviewer intervenes. First she breaks into the performance of the play, performing a narrative function, announcing scenes (projected slides were considered and rejected) in the manner of an on-site news reporter – or a play by play announcer at a sporting event attended by rabid fans. Then she begins to alter the narrative, progressing from a questioning of Joan and the workers to written "suggestions" she forces upon actors about to make an entrance. She physically leads Joan to

certain scenes, and forces Joan to make ill-advised decisions by withholding information from her, so that TV - and in Brecht's view the corporate interests that manipulate society as embodied in the form of Pierpont Mauler and the Meat Packers of Chicago, can capture the ending they want. This ending, of course, is the death of Joan for a putatively noble cause. The death, to Mauler and his cronies, should inevitably lead to the comfortable reification of the status quo through the passive acquiescence of those who are observing the event - the poor people and the Black Straw Hats attending Joan. Their gaze is thus manipulated and neutralized. The other audience, those in the comfy chairs of the theatre, is left in a profoundly uncomfortable state, one in which they are asked to acknowledge an ignoble death, and their passive role in contributing to it. There is little in the way of moral or spiritual solace. Joan appears in no way bound for heaven, but rather for a concocted pantheon of manufactured heroism, to which her ascendance is directed by the very worldly forces with whom she has engaged in mortal combat.

As not only the director but the adaptor of a play by a director and adaptor, entrusted with the near-total authority for scenography typical in Eastern European theatres, I was aware that I was in constant peril of appropriating authorship and in effect becoming an obstacle to my own desires to achieve the transference of authorship to the spectators who would come to see the production. As a theatre director who works outside his own cultural milieu, I am an *other*. When I direct in Romania, Hungary, Finland, the Czech Republic, or Serbia-Montenegro, I am a visitor eager to learn, confident that I come bearing useful gifts, conscious that the form of the offering is as critical to the process as the offering itself. An internationalist by inclination, I have created a curiously satisfying theatre career directing plays in languages I do not speak in countries which have nothing to do with my own ancestry, and in leading actor-training workshops which meld together a variety of cultural influences. Always, I am the visitor. Brecht, too, was the eternal visitor, not only in his peregrinations but through his philosophy. Together in Romania, we were to be the two eager faces pressed against the window of a house of culture, tapping insistently at the door. It is important, in my view, to be invited inside. This is were the art of theatre resides, in the creation of a thing sufficiently attractive to make a person open his or her door, to come outside or invite one in, to trade views. Mindful of these gaping traps with regard to the question of authorship, my focus, then, was to apply myself to the transference of this status, to remind myself that no technique, no approach, could be justified unless it served to facilitate this shift.

Another factor came into play. Directing generally involves teaching, particularly as contemporary actors are, in my experience, poorly schooled in things not immediately within the purview of the theatre. I have a passion for teaching, and a teacher can often be, if s/he is not careful, a kind of proprietor of authorship, a dictator of thoughts and opinions. I observed my

actions warily in rehearsal, in meetings with the scenographer, especially in my encounters with artistic staff and the technical staff of the theatre. This was exhausting, as if I was creating a Kafkaesque world consisting only of myself. It is difficult to create freely within an environment of self-censorship. Theatre, generally, is not a hospitable medium for the polite tip-toeing of the academy or the politically correct. Its approach to uncovering truth has historically been rather rough-edged and provocative. My response to this conundrum was startling in its circularity. Having decided that giving up ownership was to be the focus of the production, I turned to a new form of authorship, keeping a journal that soon amounted to almost 60,000 words. I wrote so that that I could distance myself from my experience, but also so that I could reassert my gaze and that of the artists I was bringing together[4]. It was an epic battle of wills with no one else in the room.

The creative process was not easy, beginning with the fact that when the German-language production of *The Orphan Muses* ended in Sibiu, I had just four days before rehearsals were to begin in Tîrgovişte in which to adapt the play and write the framing scenes. We had five weeks for rehearsal, but even that was a chimera. Unbeknownst to me, several of my actors were also rehearsing a second production. I had been placed in direct competition with the director for rehearsal time and resources. Worse, the promised Romanian translation did not appear at the beginning of rehearsal. We worked through physical improvisation exercises, and with a few hand-written pages a day, until the end of our third week.

Adding to the stress of the process was the fact that the Artistic Director had declined to furnish us with an interpreter. Of the young Romanian cast of thirteen perhaps four could be considered usefully fluent English speakers. Ranin had rather optimistically over-estimated the English abilities

of his actors as a rationalization for avoiding the cost of an interpreter. The promised existing translation having never been located, it was left to my lead actor, already carrying the hefty responsibilities of playing Joan and assimilating an unfamiliar approach to the acting style of the piece, to translate the play. She was also rehearsing Kate in Shakespeare's *Shrew* at the same time.

Contemporary theatrical production in Romania is always a complex negotiation of the possible – wood, is in short supply, for instance, but iron can be "found" and welded on the spot; there may be no gels for the lights, but one can find a brand new videocamera. Personnel management is also a constant issue in the Romanian theatre. Typically one encounters dozens of low-paid theatre workers, sweeping, working on the Artistic Director's car, even, in Sibiu, charged solely with the heavy responsibility of bringing strong coffee to the actors on demand. Finding a skilled worker who will do anything without a written directive is an exercise in futility. Developing artistic collaborators is complicated by the fact that virtually every enterprising Romanian works as many jobs as possible.

So it was that, the senior lighting technician being unaccountably too busy to work on my show, I was left to work with, and thus train, a lighting technician who was completely new to the theatre. The company dramaturg, a brilliant woman with a mastery of English and the ability to help coördinate the developing strands of my concept, was busy at work at a local television station. The director of *Shrew* was frantically working behind my back to steal my rehearsal time and prevent the further postponement of her production. My male lead, playing Mauler, who was also cast in *Shrew*, informed me that he would leave rehearsal for three days – to rehearse a third show in a third city!

As rehearsals commenced I found myself in an unfamiliar city with a group of actors I'd only met once, in passing, to begin the process of articulating a sprawling play to a relatively

untutored theatre audience, armed with no script. Bereft of text, the issue of authorship became tangible and at the same time malleable and negotiable. We were forced to work physically and improvisationally, in so doing freeing ourselves from a reliance on text and overt canonical pressures. As the actors and I constructed a working methodology and vocabulary together in rehearsal, we bonded: the prospect of an interpreter became less welcome. This may have been because ownership of words and ideas was already so much at play that an additional player would function more as an obstruction, an additional authorial voice, re-interpreting my words and actually creating a barrier to meaning.

Carefully constructed verbal tactics and text-reliant techniques were abandoned. The actors, too, were forced back to a physical approach most actors, particularly repertory actors, believe is left behind with their final conservatory class. We worked on physicality in various ways, creating exercises in *gestus*, for instance. First we developed a function-based, *social* gestus and then a gestus based on character and status. This last may be closer to Michael Chekhov's *psychological gesture* than to a purely Brechtian sense of gestus (Chekhov 1953: 63-84), but its suitability to the process obviated any question of its appropriateness in doctrinaire terms.

To these two gestures I added work in characterization and given circumstances, utilizing environmental improvisation. The incorporation of Stanislavskian techniques may seem heretical to true initiates of Brechtian theatre, but I felt that two reasons justified their employment: first, the Romanian actors had been trained in the Russian form of Stanislavski's System, and second, Brecht was no stranger to Stanislavski. While counselling against character identification and the dangers of what Stanislavski referred to as the Magic If (Stanislavski 1936: 51-67), Brecht was

always willing to find methods to develop the necessary theatricality of a piece – particularly a character's relationship to place and circumstance. This is a subject of much fascination to Brecht, who believed that environment is possessed of characteristics, and that characters, when portrayed in the objective manner he demands, must have a relationship with things and places. Context is everything in Brecht: we are never to lose sight of it in the heat of a present moment. Stanislavski's Given Circumstances proved useful in this regard (1936: 31-50).

Early on, I diagnosed something else that required attention in rehearsal. These actors needed to re-learn *how to play*. Using simple ball-oriented games I have developed with actors into a workshop called *BoxWhatBox* over the past ten years, we worked on unlearning rigid patterns of thought and physical habits, dislodging habitual, reflex choices. One part of the BWB process involves *demechanization*. The post-Brechtian practitioner and educator Augusto Boal created *demechanization* exercises (Boal 2002) to effect alterations in the actor's body and thus in the manner or perspective in which they view the world. Using some of these exercises as well as others, we began to shift the actors' physical perspective, creating tableaux made up of our gestural work and exercises in animal characterization. The actors were developing a physical vocabulary they could put to use as both characters and witnesses to action - as the homeless people of the framing scenes and then as the characters they openly portray in the found play by Brecht. With the handful of hand-written pages supplied to us each day as the only counterweight to this approach, the actors were being encouraged to employ this physical vocabulary in a conscious manner, to use it to manipulate their understanding of the received text, and, eventually, the understanding of the spectators. They began to play with this emerging vocabulary, freed by the absence of a full script: they could alter, add, or subtract elements of the

vocabulary, arranging them in recurring patterns which then changed and were re-ordered, in the way a composer arranges and recapitulates phrases.

With regard to our approach to the question of authorship this was a critical phase. In receptive terms, it was crucial that the audience should not forget the homeless people who appear at the beginning and at the end of the play. To deprive these framing characters of authorship – by presenting them, separating each homeless person's gestic representation from those of the characters they then portray in order to create an illusion of reality for the *Joan* part of the script, and thus relegating them to the sidelines – would have been expedient, and explicitly contradictory to our intent in presenting this Brechtian re-telling of the Joan myth. Thus, even in the most convincing moments of their characterization, one which was representational in the Brechtian sense, incorporating a true investment in not only the character but the telling of the character's story, this vocabulary of gestus would return, altering our gaze and returning us to those homeless people who are fighting for their identity at the play's beginning.

It was soon apparent that, with a new acting approach to learn, rehearsing in Romanian but working in English, and my own incessant self-observation of potentially proprietary attitudes and behaviour, that we were all frying like bacon on a skillet. Other factors contributed to the occasional lassitude I encountered in the studio. Actors in Romania are low-paid salaried employees—their income averages about $ 100USD a month—who rely on the theatre to provide accommodation. In the second week of rehearsal, the actors were moved from their dormitory an hour out of the city to newly-built apartments close to the theatre; the mayor made an appearance, handing over the keys as cameras flashed and recorded the scene. The only problem was that the apartments had no working water or electricity. So the actors, for the

duration of our rehearsal period, made do with sleeping on the floor of the theatre, in the dressing rooms, on stage, anywhere they could. It was a 24 hour a day occupation. There was no respite.

The metaphor could not be overlooked. We were rehearsing a play wherein the nature of ownership and the means of its procurement are laid bare, where Joan's identity as the proprietor of certain values and ideals is manipulated, commodified, and finally transmuted into something that she can no longer recognize as hers. The actors were moving from a place of residence that was already temporary, to a new home that was, in functional terms, an illusion. They were forced back to the only true home most of them will ever know, the theatre. This sounds romantic and reassuring until one distinguishes the metonymic *theatre* from the reality of the physical plant. The physical space of a theatre belongs to an *owner*, and that owner is not the cast of a play. A spiritual home is cold comfort when its material manifestation is cold, damp, and bereft of beds. The actors had now become reluctant visitors given a grudging temporary home, in the very space where they were expected to commit their creative energies on a daily basis.

Even without this added complexity, the work, while exhilarating – imagine skating on ice as it forms in front of you and you'll have a sense of the experience – was profoundly exhausting. The link between the actors' experience of disenfranchisement, and the sense of exhausted acquiescence which all too often accompanied it, was so similar to the questions of denial of authorship in the play that it could not be avoided. We were also becoming increasingly aware (or at least I was) that we were surrounded by truly disenfranchised people working in the theatre. The Roma workers in the theatre were shadowy presences, found most often in the small back courtyard of the theatre, smoking, working on the set, carrying out maintenance chores. Darker-skinned, leathery, possessed of wry, wizened smiles, they entered rooms with a

gestically fascinating ducking bob of the head and a shuffle of feet. These were the people I felt should see this production.

As rehearsals progressed into late May and early June and temperatures soared above 30 degrees Celsius, we all fried together. The air in the city was bad. Everyone smoked. Much industrial coffee was swilled. Then I lost one of my actors three weeks into rehearsal. She had displeased Ranin for some reason. She had to go, he said, so within three days she was gone and her multiple roles in fifteen scenes yawned like a crevasse in our march towards production. A new actor was brought in from Bucharest. Progress was incremental. I trained the lighting technician whenever I was not in rehearsal and dealt with the near-total absence of the Artistic Director and the linguistic schism which separated all my politely urgent requests from the secretariat staff. I was assigning authorship as quickly as I could, concentrating on those, like the neophyte lighting technician, who appeared most willing to take it on. To their credit, the actors never panicked.

By this point I was into my third month living in a foreign culture and onto my second challenging production without a break. My words seldom seemed to be mine anymore, transmuted, as they were, through the prism of linguistic incomprehension and cultural dissonance. My position as a guest director was amorphous – staff didn't know whether they could do what I asked of them without a directive from their boss, who was absent. Each night in my temporary home, filled with artifacts of a life I had not lived and with which I was not familiar, I schemed strategies to employ for the giving away of this authorial gift, even as I struggled to acquire enough authority to pursue the project's artistic ends. Each day I ran along the pot-hole strewn highway leading to the edge of town, passing exhaust-spewing factories and the Roma in their horse-and-carts, through the brown haze, stepping gingerly around the lethargic wild dogs endemic to the Romanian landscape, pondering Joan's unpragmatic idealism

as I passed the tree-lined enclosure which concealed the execution site of the Ceauşescus, thinking how it seemed to match my own deluded idealism, hoping that the result would not be the same.

Positive signs began to emerge, just as the gloom seemed to acquire the chestnut haze of the city's air. The Roma workers had begun to take possession of the play, too. They had been asked to build an iron platform that stood two metres off the ground at stage left, as Mauler's platform at the Chicago Stock Exchange . The resulting construction looked suspiciously like a Communist-era reviewing stand.

The two women who worked in the bowels of the theatre in the tiny costume shop created tuxedos from scratch using nondescript material; red for Mauler, white for Slift and the brokers. The formal aspect of the clothing contrasted nicely with the brutal demeanour of the Chicago meat packing men. I decided on bowler hats for every character, with a top hat for Mauler, not realizing how difficult such hats would prove to find. The actor playing Mauler took it upon himself to find a hatter at the other end of the country who would supply us with the necessary hats, delivered by train. Beyond these naturalistic details the costuming was designed to be emblematic, rather than illusionistic, from materials plausibly found in a junkyard, but not slavishly devoted to that kind of verisimilitude.

My relationship with the show's scenographer was proving to be more problematic than I had expected. Alin Gavrila had worked with me on the production of *Orphan Muses* in Sibiu. We'd worked well together – I'd given him freer rein than he was used to and he had gone far beyond the parameters of the scenographer's role in response. Having tasted that newfound responsibility, however, it appeared that authorship would now have to be wrested back from him. This was profoundly distressing, as it seemed to contradict the transference aesthetic I was hoping to construct for the production. The fact of the matter was that Gavrila did not know the play. There being no Romanian translation of the Brecht, and no version of the framing scenes, Gavrila was dependent on my explanations of the concept. Because he was working at the same

time on the huge international theatre festival taking place in Sibiu, the amount of time to discuss conceptual application was extremely limited.

Therefore as changes were requested by actors and ideas coalesced, I walked downstairs and talked directly to the costumiers and the set builders, using, my own gestic vocabulary and fragmentary Romanian. It was becoming evident the production was an orphan gift that was to be left in my hands. In darker moments it seemed as if no one else understood the play, not only its content, or aesthetic, but its potential significance. What was I doing here? What gave me the right to try to articulate—impose, perhaps, in the eyes of others—this sixty year-old play for a foreign audience in their own home? Was there no adequate answer to these questions, was perhaps the entire enterprise an act of hubris disguised beneath a layer of idealism? The ego is responsible for much in the theatre that is both good and bad, selfish and transcendent of the self. A gift is not a gift, after all, if it has no value to the receiver. I vowed to look anew at my staging concepts and my relationships and root out anything that did not create value for the spectator.

The actors requested, and were given, a lecture on capitalism with particular emphasis on the role of the markets. Discussions of representation vs. psychological identification were numerous, conducted in clouds of smoke. The actors renewed their commitment as their understanding of the play grew. They began to take on the responsibility my directorial style afforded them, and to gradually leave behind the role of acquiescent subordinate, common to the eastern European model, which they had become accustomed to playing with each incoming director. At the flat each night a new journal entry would be written, typed out on a beautiful, unfamiliar dining room table in a looking out on a street where people passed by, people I did not know, would not know; and in this I felt comforted, for it is so with urban existence in a home culture. The questions arising out of the day's work would be typed and sometimes addressed. Constantly, one question recurred: how could the patrimony of the play be transferred to its rightful owners, the audience, if the vehicle was constantly stopping to ask directions?

As our opening approached, the issue of authorship arose in the mind of the proprietor of the

theatre company, M.C. Ranin. Four days before opening he attended an evening dress rehearsal with one of the theatre's sponsors, an influential local businessman. They sat and conversed in whispers at the back of the theatre after the run had finished. The actors appeared and sat at the edge of the stage. We waited. Finally around ten-thirty the businessman leaned back in his seat and began to lecture the company at length; how he had seen Brecht performed in Berlin, how it hadn't worked there (!) and wouldn't work here, that the actors were only "playing at their roles"… whether or not this man had misunderstood the nature of representation as we, and Brecht, were trying to demonstrate it, if this was an accurate representative of our audience the production was in serious trouble. Ranin then placed it in immediate jeopardy. He concurred with the businessman's opinions, and we were given two days to clarify and simplify staging elements of the play. This included a reduction in what he referred to as the "violence" of the opening scene – meaning the hungry capitalism of the homeless people as they drive their bargain with the television verité crew. At midnight the harangue was finished. The actors, sanguine to it all, retreated to their corners and nooks in the theatre, and I stumbled to my flat, raging inwardly and at a loss as to what possible "clarifications" and "simplifications" would suffice to allow the play to go on. Awake, lying on my bed, I writhed with the struggle between artistic ego and transference of authorship.

The charge of intellectualization especially rankled. The suggestion that the production was too complex for the spectator was one I could not answer. I was the outsider, the Artistic Director the expert. The efficacy of this criticism could not be denied whether it was accurate or not. Remedies would have to be supplied, or the play would not go on. The ideas of the play must hit people in the stomach as well as the head. My ego quickly subordinated itself to the idea that staging solutions must be found.

In the morning we worked on several tentative solutions. Name patches, like those on sports teams, were added to the business jackets and tuxedos of the characters, designating "Packer" from "Speculator" and "Stockbreeder". The overpowering nature of non-stop images projected on the cyclorama had been noted the night before. Acknowledging this, we became more specific and more selective in the type and number of screen images to which the spectator would be subjected. The camera and cyclorama were turned off at various selected periods in the play, allowing the live images to predominate and underlining the force of the commentary whenever the cyclorama images reappeared. The interviewer would now create a sense of breathing space between scenes (Ranin had found the pace "breathless") by announcing the beginning of each scene, using some of Brecht's titles from the text.

In these actions lay an implicit admission that my involvement had been too subjective to create a sufficiently clear objectivity in the mind of the spectator. I had been too close to the action, too involved in the making of it, too taken up with the myriad distractions and obstructions we had all encountered and surmounted, to step back. A greater alienation from my own values and patterns had to be achieved if the production was to free itself from them.

The newly revised version was judged by Ranin and accepted. Opening night arrived. To my surprise, local and national television crews greeted me in the lobby before the show. It was an intriguing echo of the content and the methods employed within the theatre.

Every centimeter of the theatre space came into play as another element of our attempt to take the spectator away from the proscenium arch and a pictorial appreciation of the material. Joan's Black

Straw hats marched from the back of the audience to the aisles in between, while the TV crew followed the crowd itself into the theatre through the lobby door. The structure of the performance left little room for ambiguity of response. An effective production of Brecht is rousing, and arousal is not always welcomed. Brecht is not history, or a good book read quietly at night before bed. Of course the show was not to be about Brecht at all, but about what the spectator could find relevant to their life experience in this tale of the Chicago cattle yards.

Pacing in a back aisle, it became clear to me as I watched the response of the spectators that authorial transference had indeed taken place at its third stage, from artists to spectators. It had been Brecht's play, then, through the proposal and concept-building phase, it had been mine. The actors, artistic staff and technicians had taken it over, negotiated it with the theatre's Artistic Director and, through a proxy, with the community of the city, and finally, in performing it, they had taken it from me. In the moments I could quell my anxiety I observed them in the process of giving it to the audience. The show was by no means flawless, but this is in part the nature of the theatre. What it offers to the spectator is not the polished diamond but the diamond in the rough, a reflection upon experience and the human condition, that can be taken by the departing spectator and polished until it reflects the spectator herself. Audience members leaned forward to the stage at points, engaged, then forcibly disengaged, leaned away from the actors churning down the aisles or the commentary of the cyclorama images. The act of implication was taking place, not through illusion, deception, and passive reception, but through the force of ideas enacted and then offered, a gift without wrapping.

It is always difficult to judge something like implication, or especially active engagement, enfranchisement even more so; I'm certain there were audience members bemused, even offended

by this departure from the fare they had come to expect. To these people I would apologize unhesitatingly. It is never an artist's intention to drive people away from the theatre. However, awaking from a nervous reverie I found the audience standing and applauding. European audiences of which I have been a part have often stood and applauded a mediocre production. This was not the sign we, as a company, had been seeking, though it was welcome. The ovation went on. The actors seemed startled by the prolonged response, gleeful, relieved and grateful. They pulled me on stage for a bow and wrapped a huge Romanian flag around my shoulders.

In the lobby a crew from a national television channel pulled me aside for an interview. This produced a final sense of estrangement: a woman asked me questions in Romanian, the camera remained fixed on me, I responded in English. My mouth moved, but my remarks were being translated at speed by an unseen interpreter. I was marvelling at this when one of the sun-burned theatre workers caught my eye. The workers had been allowed in to see the show, at the last moment. This man was rocking back and forth, holding himself in his arms, a huge smile creasing his face and tears in his eyes. He saw me notice him, and without waiting for the crew to cut the tape he walked into the frame and took my hand, wringing it repeatedly. Our eyes met. The play hadn't produced an easier work-day or a bigger paycheck for him. About such things we must have no illusions: the theatre at its very best may be a force for internal revelation, and perhaps this too is only temporary. Like Beckettian characters, though, it is what we do, it is all we can do. We go on when we can't go on, we invest ourselves and hope for a return. The camera was attempting to take possession of the story, but the theatre tradesman knew who the author was. He took the gift from my hands, smiling, and walked away, out of the camera frame.

Michael Devine
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End Notes

[1] The extensive and detailed stage directions of *Major Barbara* and *Long Day's Journey Into night* may be used as examples of this retrograde tendency.
[2] As John Willett says in his notes to the translation of "A Short Organum for the Theatre", the translation of *verfremdung* into English is problematic at best.
[3] I am, of course, making a play on words using Brecht's famous term *lehrstück*, often translated as a learning, or "witness" play".
[4] I also wrote several articles on different aspects of Romanian life I had observed; as Brecht surely knew, once an active state of observation has been engaged, it's a difficult process to halt.

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