

ON METATHEATRICALS

There is a fashionable school of American theatre that can be called Metatheatrics. It is the youngest child of the unhappy marriage of grad school theory and real world naïveté and it is at best an interesting diversion and at worst a malicious waste of everyone's time.

Its most characteristic feature is the confusion or removal of the traditionally understood audience/player relationship, the "mimetic threshold" in the words of Jackson Lears. Metatheatrics works most effectively outside of a theater and is most successful when it best disguises the occurrence of a theatrical event. The closest real world transactions that most resemble a metatheatrical occurrence are con games and hoaxes. Like con games and hoaxes, the ignorance of the individual audience member is an essential element in Metatheater. Large-scale and ambitious metatheater can operate along the lines of a pyramid scheme or an Amway convention, with initially unwitting audience members being let in on the operation and in turn recruiting more audience.

I had the singular misfortune of being surrounded and embroiled in a metatheatrical event in the spring of 1997 here in New York City. An internet theatre chatroom was the initial and central "site" of the event, but in true metatheatrical fashion the stage shifted to wherever the players or their characters appeared. I unknowingly played out entire scenes in the lobbies of theaters and even in my own home. This event turned out ugly, by design or accident I'll never know, and charges of harassment were filed and angry and threatening letters were exchanged and published. The result of this "play" or "narrative" or "event" was a heightened distrust and dispiritedness within the already guarded and beaten down New York alternative theatre ranks. Whether this was the intent of the Metatheatrical producers of the event or even if there was an intended result, again, I'll never know, that uncertainty being part and parcel of the event. I mention this to acknowledge that I have a personal dislike and animosity towards Metatheater and its practitioners. But beyond the personal, I believe there are formal and philosophical reasons to disavow Metatheatrics.

Theater, as I understand and practice it, is in its highest achievements the most democratic art. It depends on live people gathered together in one place to witness other people. There is a rough and ready-made agreement implicit in any theatrical event: we'll sit here for a while while you jump around in front of or around us. When one thinks of historically "great" theater, the Greeks, Shakespeare's Globe, one imagines the mingling of the classes, the groundlings and the royalty seeing the premier of Richard the Third together. Metatheater, on the contrary, depends entirely on a strict elitism, with those in the know enjoying and appreciating the event while those that take the event "seriously", those from whom the context of the event has been hidden, are kept out of and even unaware of the existence of the "inner circle". This is not a financial or cultural elitism at play, which traditional theater can and has fallen prey to, but an informational elitism, appropriate to our Information Age. Where knowledge is power, those in the know rule. In traditional theater the power of knowledge is shared with the audience, everyone knows the rules and is playing the same game. Taken a step farther, one of the

central points of traditional theater is the attempt to speak truth to power. In a democratic society, I place the power in the hands of the citizens and I believe that by speaking of and showing people truthful situations, one theater event at a time, we fulfill the dictum. Metatheater has passed beyond this dictum and aims rather to speak deceit to power and powerlessness alike.

Another aspect of metatheater that distresses me is its emphasis on theory over craft. American theater in general suffers from a historical degradation of the practice and maintenance of craft. Our actors are not trained to move or speak; they are taken through classes and entire programs that focus almost exclusively on their emotional and psychological make-up. This training prepares them well for film work but leaves them helpless in front of an audience of over two hundred and literally crippled when confronted with the Greeks, Shakespeare, Moliere or anything written before 1940. Metatheater, of course, has no interest or concern with the craft of the theater, with acting, writing, directing or design. It is primarily concerned with the theory of performance, not the practice. I believe we need to focus as much on the theory of what we do as on the practice of doing it, but any theory which takes us farther away and not directly to the living and breathing center of what we do should be left, respectfully, in the graduate school lecture hall.

The largest qualm I have about Metatheatrics is an ethical one, I suppose. Not precisely ethical, but an essential disagreement with the practitioners of Metatheatrics over the function or purpose or nature of art as it relates to everything else. There is a sense in Metatheatrics and in many theories or understandings of art that the artists and the act of art should exist in a state of natural opposition to society. This sense of art as a critical and reflective force seems right and certainly the artist must maintain a distance from society in order to express a reflection or critique of it. But this distance is only a formal and provisional one, a distance that is created during the act of creation only. I disavow the vague contemporary notion of the artist as some kind of intellectual outlaw and think more in terms of the artists of a society forming a loyal opposition to the prevailing majority's views and attitudes. What gives the artist's work strength and immediacy is her understanding of her society and her involvement in it.

The clearest, albeit most over-generalized way of stating this disagreement is that the Metatheatrics crowd, those that I know, anyway, think and speak of art in terms of crime, where I try to think and speak of art in terms of work. Rather than imagining an ignorant multitude that I will dupe in some way, I think of an essentially perceptive group of strangers that it is my job to engage in dialogue. More than just work, I think of art as a civic work, an essential public service that the artists provide for his society. I'm not advocating a return to Social Realism or the W.P.A., I have no particular content or form or style that I am championing, I'm speaking of an underlying attitude or understanding that the artist has towards the nature of art and it's relationship to the world. The fact is we are engaged in the making of things and as theater artists, those things, be they plays, stage designs or performances, are only truly complete when others see them. Our art depends directly on and in a very real way exists only in the physical and actual

relationship with an audience. We should pay closer attention to the relationship and speak honestly about our understanding of it.