

International Theatre Institute ITI

World Organization for the Performing Arts

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Jean Cocteau 1962

It is the nature of the theatre to breed this paradox: that history, which as time goes on, becomes deformed, and mythology, which, as time goes on, becomes established, have their only true moment of reality upon the stage.

Doubtless it would do us all good if a magician could hypnotize a theatre full of people and convince them that they had witnessed a sublime performance. But, alas, such a magician does not exist and it is up to the playwright to provoke, with the modest means at his disposal, a collective hypnotism, and to be able to share his dream with his audience; for sleep and dreams do bring a sort of miraculous magical power within the reach of all purses.

The theatre, imitating this phenomenon, demands of the audience an almost childlike credulity: the best audience is still the one which watches a puppet show, and our own would be as good as if only it could cast off the stubborn resistance and could be in a state to cry out, for example to Oedipus: "Don't marry Jocasta! She is your mother!"

But, without going quite so far, the thing happens, and a block of spectators defrosts itself at the warmth of an idea quite foreign to it, which is brought to the point of adopting as its own and with which it works in harmony. This block becomes a single person, an almost childlike soul, leaving its beliefs and opinions in the cloakroom, ready to pick them up again after the performance.

Real admiration is not engendered by the communication of commonly held ideas or opinions; but by the sharing of ideas which are not our own, and the sharing of them to such a degree that we come to believe we could even have been their author.

So it is a form of love: because, in love antagonisms marry each other; and is not the function of the theatre the best example of OSMOSIS-that natural process of vital absorption? For after all, the greatest interpreter is the one who gives the impression of making it all up as he goes along, inventing and improvising his part to suit each individual in the audience.

Even France-where people are very restless at the thought of allowing themselves to be put to sleep; where people are so powerfully individualistic that they resist with all their might the hypnotism exerted in the theatre- even France has just proved, at the Theatre of the Nations, how hungry and thirsty it is to be entertained, but by things which are not trivialities. First class companies have brought here the masterpieces of their country's language, and by the intensity alone of the actors' interpretation, have managed to charm audiences who, one would imagine were incapable of forgetting their own idiom and their own intrigues in order to be interested in those of other people.

World Theatre Day marks the occasion when the astonishing marriage of the singular and the plural, the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious will show the world the extraordinary creatures it has produced. Many of the discords in the world result from the estrangement of minds by the barrier of language: it is these discords and this barrier, which the huge and intricate mechanism of the theatre has set itself to overcome.

Nations, thanks to these World Theatre Days, will at last become aware of each other's treasures, and will work together in the high enterprise of peace.

Nietzsche said: ideas which change the face of the world come to us on the feet of doies. Perhaps it may be through a means, too often hitherto limited to the simple pretext of giving pleasure, that the young ones of the world will benefit by attendance at a brilliant and living University, where the lectures are in flesh and blood, and where the masterpieces of all languages are shown in all their original violence, and not watered down by the fatigue of solitary study. I must add: it is said that the Machine has dealt the death blow to the Theatre. I do not believe it for a moment, and since the International Theatre Institute has asked me to speak in its name, I declare, as used once to be done for our Kings only slightly altering the formula: If the Theatre is dead, Long Live the Theatre.

Jean Cocteau