

Violence

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- Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills ideas and splendid plans; that the moment one definitely commits oneself, the Providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that would never have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.

(Goethe)

Watching director Robert Wilson in rehearsal, I realized, for the very first time, the necessity for violence in the creative act. It was the spring of 1986, and up till this moment I had never had the opportunity to watch another director rehearse with actors.

The production was Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* performed by undergraduate acting students at New York University. The rehearsal was scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. I arrived early to find a buoyant atmosphere. In the back row of the theatre, PhD students and scholars waited expectantly, pens poised, for Wilson's entrance. On the stage young actors warmed up. A stage management team sat behind a battalion of long tables at the edge of the stage. Wilson arrived at 7.15. He sat down in the middle of the audience risers amidst the bustle and noise and proceeded to gaze intently at the stage. Gradually everyone in the theatre quietened down until the silence was penetrating. After about five excruciating minutes of utter stillness, Wilson stood up, walked towards a chair on the stage and stared at it. After what felt to me an eternity, he reached down, touched the chair and moved it less than an inch. As he stepped back to look at the chair again, I noticed that I was having trouble breathing. The tension in the room was palpable, almost unbearable. Next, Wilson motioned an actress towards him in order to show her what he wanted her to do. He demonstrated by sitting on the chair, tilting forward, and moving his fingers slightly. Then she took his place and precisely copied his tilt and hand gestures. I realized that I was leaning forward on my own chair, deeply distressed. Never having experienced another director at work, I felt like I was watching other people in a private, intimate act. And I recognized that night the necessary cruelty of decision.

The decisive act of setting an object at a precise angle on the stage, or an actor's hand gesture, seemed to me almost

an act of violation. And I found this upsetting. And yet, deep down, I knew that this violent act is a necessary condition for all artists.

Art is violent. To be decisive is violent. Antonin Artaud defined cruelty as 'unrelenting decisiveness, diligence, strictness'. To place a chair at a particular angle on the stage destroys every other possible choice, every other option. When an actor achieves a spontaneous, intuitive, or passionate moment in rehearsal, the director utters the fateful words 'keep it', eliminating all other potential solutions. These two cruel words, 'keep it', plunge a knife into the heart of the actor who knows that the next attempt to re-create that result will be false, affected and lifeless. But, deep down, the actor also knows that improvisation is not yet art. Only when something has been decided can the work really begin. The decisiveness, the cruelty, which has extinguished the spontaneity of the moment, demands that the actor begin an extraordinary work: to resurrect the dead. The actor must now find a new, deeper spontaneity within this set form. And this, to me, is why actors are heroes. They accept this violence and work with it, bringing skill and imagination to the art of repetition.

It is significant that the French word for rehearsal is *repetition*. Certainly it can be argued that the art of the theatre is the art of repetition. (The English *rehearsal* proposes to re-hear. The German *Probe*, suggests an investigation. In Japanese, *keiko* translates to practice. And so on. A study of different languages' words for rehearsal is endlessly

fascinating.) In rehearsal an actor searches for shapes that can be repeated. Actors and directors together are constructing a framework that will allow for endlessly new currents of vital life-force, emotional vicissitudes and connection with other actors. I like to think of staging, or blocking, as a vehicle in which the actors can move and grow. Paradoxically, it is the restrictions, the precision, the exactitude, that allows for the possibility of freedom. The form becomes a container in which the actor can find endless variations and interpretive freedom.

For the actor, this necessary violence in creating a role for the theatre is distinctly different from the violence necessary in acting for the camera. In film acting, the actor can afford to do something impulsively without any concern for repeating it endlessly. What is vital for the camera is that the moment be spontaneous and photogenic. In the theatre it must be repeatable.

Great performances exude both exactness and a powerful sense of freedom. This freedom can only be found within certain chosen limitations. The limitations serve as a lens to focus and magnify the event for the audience as well as to give the actors something to measure themselves against. A limitation can be as simple as staying in the appropriate light and speaking the text exactly as written or as difficult as performing complex choreography while singing an aria. These limitations invite the actor to meet them, disturb them, transcend them. An audience experiences the actor testing his or her limits; expressing beyond the ordinary despite the limitations.

Early in his career, Chuck Close, the American photo-realist painter specializing in close-up portraits and self-portraits, decided that he wanted to be more than a technician. He began to set himself intense limitations in his manner of painting in order to transcend craftsmanship. He felt that these limitations, either structural or material, tested his creativity and magnified his achievements. The ultimate limitation occurred in 1988 when he suffered a stroke and was paralysed due to a blood clot in his spinal column. He regained partial use of his arms, and was able to return to painting after developing techniques which allowed him to work from a wheelchair. He was forced to relearn painting from his wheelchair with brushes tied to his hands. These strict limitations, quite beyond any he could dream up for himself, encouraged him to make a remarkable transition in his approach and resulted in what might be the most significant work of his lifetime.

To be articulate in the face of limitations is where the violence sets in. This act of necessary violence, which at first seems to limit freedom and close down options, in turn opens up many more options and asks for a deeper sense of freedom from the artist.

Yo Yo Ma, the virtuoso cellist, goes out of his way to work in musical arenas outside of his classical experience. He has made several recordings of Appalachian music with ace fiddler Mark O'Connor. In order to adapt his classical training to meet the demands of O'Connor and Appalachian music, Ma purposefully changed the way he held his bow. He positioned his hand at the bottom of the bow rather than

the customary classical placement. Suddenly, the virtuoso cellist, Ma, felt totally out of his element with this new limitation. But eventually this unfamiliar way of playing opened up new possibilities and a new kind of eloquence.

- I ended up using a way of playing that Baroque players use. Baroque players have less of a need to fill large spaces. You have infinitely more opportunity to create another layer of rhythm. In fact, it changed how I play Bach now. You can actually develop a tremendous variety of inflection without losing rhythmic clarity.

Yo Yo Ma risked failure. Risk is a key ingredient in the act of violence and articulation. Without embracing the risk, there can be no progress and no adventure. To attempt to perform articulately from a state of imbalance and risk imbues the action with extraordinary energy.

We tremble before the violence of articulation. And yet, without the necessary violence, there is no fluent expression. When in doubt, I look for the courage, in that moment, to take a leap: articulate a thing, even if I'm not sure it is right or even appropriate. Armed with only a hunch, I try to take the plunge and in the midst of the plunge I strive to be as articulate as I can be. 'If you cannot say it,' wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'point to it.' In the midst of frightening uncertainty, I try to lean into the moment and point clearly. Even if I don't know at what angle a chair should be on the stage, I try to act decisively anyway. I do the best I can. I make decisions before I'm ready. It is the attempt to articulate that is both heroic and necessary.



One day, unable to attend rehearsal for the remount of a play I had directed with my company, the SITI Company, I invited one of my graduate directing students from Columbia University to cover for me. The next day I asked company member Ellen Lauren how the young man had performed as substitute director. 'Not very well,' she said. 'Why not?' I asked. 'Well, he didn't say anything.' She explained that, from her point of view, it doesn't really matter how erudite or naive the observation, but, as an actor, she needs the person responsible for watching, the director, to say *something* around which she can organize her next attempt. To try to say something in a state of flux even if you do not know the right thing to say is the point. Make an observation. To be silent, to avoid the violence of articulation alleviates the risk of failure but at the same time there is also no possibility of advancement.

He either fears his fate too much
Or his deserts are small
Who dares not put it to the torch
To win or lose it all.

I learned about the Japanese word *irimi* while studying Aikido, a Japanese martial art. Simply translated, *irimi* means, 'to enter' but it can also be translated 'choose death'. When attacked, you always have two options: to enter, *irimi*, or to go around, *ura*. Both, when accomplished in the right

manner, are creative. To enter or 'to choose death' means to enter fully with the acceptance, if necessary, of death. The only way to win is to risk everything and be fully willing to die. If this is an extreme notion to occidental sensibilities, it does make sense in creative practice. To achieve the violence of decisiveness, one has to 'choose death' in the moment by acting fully and intuitively without pausing for reflection about whether it is the right decision or if it is going to provide the winning solution.

It is also valuable to know when to use *ura*, or going around. Patience and flexibility is an art. There is a time for *ura*, going around, and there is a time for *irimi*, entering. And these times can never be known in advance. You must sense the situation and act immediately. In the heat of creation, there is no time for reflection; there is only connection to what is happening. The analysis, the reflection and the criticism belong before and after, never during, the creative act.

As a young director I was better at *ura*, going around, than at *irimi*, entering. In rehearsal I felt timid about interrupting the actors at work. Afraid to be decisive about any specific blocking or staging, anxious that my intervention would destroy the fresh, spontaneous life that seemed to be happening so naturally without my contribution, I kept quiet. Then, of course, opening night approached and panic would ensue. Suddenly the lack of anything solid or tangible for the actors to push against was painfully obvious to me. 'What have we been doing all this time?' I would ask myself in the light of no agreements, no staging, no trampoline with

which the actors might tempt the heights. Suddenly, forced by pressure and circumstance, I would spring into high gear and negotiate with the actors to find moments, actions and patterns to repeat and depend upon. Finally these agreements became the springboards for the actors which would allow them to meet one another with assurance and stability and would, at the same time, encourage them to take the essential risks and intuitive leaps within the framework of the actions and words. After a while, I found the necessary courage to make these agreements earlier and earlier in the rehearsal process. I learned how to enter.

Athol Fugard, the South African playwright, described censorship as hesitation. For him censorship is not necessarily the proximity of government inspectors or a threat of imprisonment but, rather, on the physical hesitation of his hand while writing. Censorship is his own private vacillation provoked by whatever doubts are out to ambush him. Censorship is a physical hesitation in the light of a fleeting thought or doubt about how his peers might receive what he is writing, whether or not they will like it or if it will get published. In the light of our hesitations, we must be deeply connected to the act. We must be decisive and intuitive simultaneously.

Richard Foreman, perhaps the most intellectual of American directors, said that, for him, creation is one hundred per cent intuitive. I have learned that he is right. This is not to say that one must not think analytically, theoretically, practically and critically. There is a time and a place for this kind of left-brain activity, but not in the heat of

discovery in rehearsal and not in front of an audience. As soon as the door closes in rehearsal or as soon as the curtain goes up in performance, there is no time to think or reflect. In these moments of exquisite pressure there is only the intuitive act of articulation within the crisis of action. No more than a painter can pause in the moment of interaction with paint and canvas should a rehearsal process get bogged down in theory. I think of a good rehearsal as being like the experience of playing the Ouija board. You place your hands on the pulse and listen. You feel. You follow. You act in the moment before the analysis, not after. This is the only way.



Distortion is a partial destruction and it is a necessary ingredient in making the vague visible. It too is violent. Agnes DeMille described the use of distortion, or turning, in dance:

- Distortion is the very essence of art and all dancing. Distortion is what saves ordinary rhythmic movement from being bland paddling in the air. Distortion is the extension of effort, the prolongation or stress beyond the norm. It can be arresting or remarkable, and it can help fix the gesture in memory – yes, and in meaning, because it spells difficulty overcome, human dominance, and triumph.

To be awake on the stage, to distort something – a movement, a gesture, a word, a sentence – requires an act of

necessary violence: the violence of undefining. Undefining means removing the comfortable assumptions about an object, a person, words, sentences or narrative by putting it all back in question. What is instantly definable is often instantly forgettable. Anything onstage can be asleep when it is overly defined.

Victor Schklovsky, the Russian Formalist who undoubtedly influenced Bertolt Brecht with his *Four Essays on Formalism* written in the 1920s, developed significant theories on the function of art. Everything around us, he wrote, is asleep. The function of art is to awaken what is asleep. How do you awaken what is asleep? According to Schklovsky, you turn it slightly until it awakens.

Bertolt Brecht, probably influenced by Schklovsky's writings, developed theories about making the strange familiar and the familiar strange in the articulation of the alienation (*Verfremdung*) effect. He must have used the notion of turning something, distorting it making it unfamiliar, until it awakens in order to see it anew in his approach to acting for the stage.

An example of this Schklovsky-ian notion of distortion or 'turning' can be found in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Suspicion*. In one sequence, a husband (Cary Grant) climbs a staircase carrying a glass of milk on a tray to his wife (Ingrid Bergman) who lies ill in bed in a room at the top of the stairs. At this particular moment, the suspense lies in wondering whether or not the husband has poisoned the milk. Is he a loving husband or a villain and an assassin? What is not obvious but certainly affects the way we experience the scene, is the

quality of the milk. Hitchcock placed a tiny light bulb, invisible to the audience, into the glass of milk so that it would glow just a little. Although the audience is not sure why, the milk seems somehow alive, awake, undismissible and in a state of dangerous potential.



- Creativity is first of all an act of destruction.

(Pablo Picasso)

Violence for a painter is the very first brush stroke on a canvas. Everything after that in the work on the painting, as Picasso indicated, is about correcting that initial action.

- When you begin a picture, you often make some pretty discoveries. You must be on guard against these. Destroy the thing, do it several times. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery, the artist does not really suppress it, but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of the discarded finds. Otherwise, you become your own connoisseur. I sell myself nothing.

(Pablo Picasso)

An audience in the theatre should be engaged by the events but also slightly distressed about what is happening. The interactions, the words and the actions onstage have

to be fresh and untamed and undismissible. Actors are confronted with the enormous task of awakening sleeping clichés. For example, the words 'I love you', because they have been said so often, have no meaning unless they are undefined, distorted, turned and offered up anew. Only then might they be fresh and hearable. Picking up a teacup has been done so many times that it is often defined and categorized before the action has begun. When an action is defined by the actor before it is executed, the action will be asleep. It will not 'glow'. An artist enters into a relationship with the materials at hand in order to wake them, untame them. To release the potential in a word or action requires the actor to perform in such a way that does not describe its meaning but rather turns it slightly so that the multiplicity of its potential meanings are evident and awake.

- If a phenomenon can be defined as 'it is that, and only that,' that means it exists only in our heads. But if it has a real life existence, we can never hope to define it completely. Its frontiers are always moving, while exceptions and analogies keep opening up.

(Jerzy Grotowski)



Another kind of violence is the violence of disagreement. I believe that it is in disagreement that certain truths about the human condition are revealed. It is when images, ideas or people disagree that one senses the truth. These disagreements can be found everywhere in art.

Towards the end of Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Last Tango in Paris*, two lovers, played by Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider, sit at a small table in a tango palace. Schneider, in close-up, brutally informs Brando, with whom she has shared an intense sexual relationship, that she is finished with him. She declares that she's going to get up and leave him there and insists that she doesn't ever want to see him again. As she speaks, the camera pans back and you see that she is also jerking him off under the table. In that moment, the audience is confronted with two polar opposites: attraction and desire for escape. Within these two opposites lies the untamed and complex truth about being alive.

Truth, which is an *experience* and not something easily defined, mostly exists in the space between opposites. It exists in the disagreement of ideas or imagery. In the example from *Last Tango in Paris*, the truth about that complex relationship could not exist in the space of one idea. It is expressed in the tension between opposites, the opposition of physical attraction and desire for escape. Opposition, or dialectic, sets up alternative systems of perceiving. It creates shock spaces where insight might occur.

In the film of the musical *Cabaret* is a scene in which a handsome blonde boy stands up in a beer garden in pre-war Germany and sings 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me'. It is a beautiful, sunny day and, one by one, other people in the garden stand with him and sing along. After a while, the blonde boy lifts his arm, upon which is affixed a swastika.

At that moment, the modern-day audience is confronted with two extremes: (1) the song is catchy, the boy is attractive, and if you had been there that day, you might have joined in prior to the revelation of the swastika, and (2) a knowledge of the historical consequences of Nazism. These two opposing associations set up an *experience*, not an answer. Truth is in the tension between opposites.

One cannot look directly at the truly big human issues any more than one can look directly at the sun. In order to see the sun you look slightly to the side. Between the sun and where you are looking is the perception of the sun. In art and in the theatre we use metaphor as the thing to the side. Through metaphor we see the truth about our condition. The word metaphor comes from the Greek *meta* (above) and *pherein* (to carry). Metaphor is that which is carried above the literalness of life. Art is metaphor and metaphor is transformation.



Violence begins with decision, with commitment to something. The word commit derives from Latin, *committere*, which means 'to ignite action, to bring together, join, entrust, and do'. Committing to a choice feels violent. It is the sensation of leaping off a high diving-board. It feels violent because the decision is an aggression against nature and inertia. Even as seemingly small a choice as deciding the precise angle of a chair feels like a violation of the free flux and flow of life.

But most artists would agree that their work does not proceed from an idea of what the finished product will be; rather it emerges out of a passionate excitement about the subject matter.

- The poet's poem is wrung from him by the subject which excites him.

(Samuel Alexander)

To generate the indispensable excitement there must be something at stake, at risk, something momentous and uncertain. A sure thing does not arouse us emotionally.

There is no disgrace in not knowing what you are doing and not having all the answers. But your passion and excitement about something will take you the distance through uncertainty. If you are insecure and do not really know what you are doing, it's fine. Just try to work with an interest in exactitude. Be exact with what you do not know. Realism on the stage is generated, not by a general feeling for reality or truth, but, rather, it emerges in the act of exactitude and decisiveness with something that excites you.

While I was the Artistic Director of Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, a young undergraduate directing student at Brown University invited me to watch a run-through of her production. When I arrived in the rehearsal hall she indicated that it would take a few minutes before the cast was ready to begin. Naturally she was nervous about the run-through and about me being

there. I sat down to wait and watched the young director make a fatal flaw. An actor approached her and asked what he should do with a particular chair. In her haste and nervousness, she said these words: 'It doesn't matter.'

Something matters to an audience only if you make it matter. If you attend to it, if only for a moment, the commitment of your attention will create the tension of attention. If something is not attended to decisively by the actor and the director, then it will not be attended to by the audience. It will be invisible. The act of decision gives presence to the subject. The young director could have taken just an instant to commit her attention to the problem. She could have turned the actor's question around and asked him where he thought the chair might go. She might have looked puzzled for a moment and then, from her real state of insecurity, been decisive.

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Robert Wilson's rehearsal of *Hamletmachine* brought home to me the legitimacy and necessity of violence in the creative act. To decide is an act of violence, yet decisiveness and cruelty are part of the collaborative process that the theatre offers. Decisions give birth to limitations which in turn ask for a creative use of the imagination.

I work with a company, the SITI Company, because it is a group of artists who have learned to disagree with one another with generosity. We developed a way to use violence with compassion and kindness. I find this approach

essential to my way of working. To be cruel is ultimately an act of generosity in the collaborative process. 'Ideas are cheap' we always say in the heat of a rehearsal. Ideas come and go but what is important is the commitment to a choice and to its clarity and communicativeness. It's not about the right idea or even the right decision, rather it is about the quality of decisiveness. We try to work intuitively with one another, our collective hands on the Ouija board, and then, in the right moment, we enter. We 'choose death'.

eroticism

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● THREE

- There is a tension that goes all the way through a piece of music and never lets up. A long silver cord that one pulls on. Sometimes there's a little kink in the cord, but it never sags. There's always a force irresistibly pulling it from the first note to the last. You've got to get the audience from the first note.

(Alfred Brendel)

The role of attraction and eroticism in the theatre is rarely discussed and yet both are vital ingredients in the creative act and in the dynamics between audiences and the actors. In order to investigate the issues of attraction and eroticism, this chapter follows the archetypical pattern of a passionate relationship.

- 1 Something or someone stops you in your tracks.
- 2 You feel 'drawn' to it.
- 3 You sense its energy and power.