

# The Rhetoric of Theatre

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This article could just as easily be titled *The Theatre of Rhetoric*. For the most part it is an exercise in synonyms. During the early twentieth century years, scholars of the emerging field of speech attempted to distinguish rhetorical from literary studies as they labored to justify themselves as separate academic departments. They built a field upon a set of antimonies, of the "rhetoric is to be heard, poetry overheard" kind. Such distinctions tend to waver and collapse toward a common center as soon as they are closely examined. There are, surely, rhetorics and poetics, formal differences between the sonnet and the docu-drama, the policy speech and the elegy, and these differences do affect the kinds of meanings that can prism through the forms. But beyond the surface differences, as soon as we attempt to adduce a set of generic distinctions, we find ourselves rediscovering instead the still largely uncharted forests of the human soul, glimpsed at those moments in our artistic communications with others and with ourselves, whether in forms typically regarded as poetic or rhetorical.

This rediscovery, I have suggested, is wholesome, for to try to separate and classify the many products of human expressiveness can be to diminish them and the entirety they comprise. Such, I argue, was the fate of poetic stripped of its public function in the art-for-art's sake doctrine, and of rhetoric released from its ethical and esthetic obligation by the separation of the poet from the persuader.

One summer many years ago, I spent two miserable and exhilarating weeks helping a long-time friend run for Congress in South Carolina. During those steamy June days, we would do battle with a dragon, the presumption commonly and accurately held that he was going to lose. We pumped indifferent hands, begged money from people who didn't like to make bad investments, and blitzed a somewhat hostile press with daily news releases proclaiming our significance. Late in the evening we would finally rest on his screened porch, listen to the night, and sip gin drinks. I remember that he talked often of Camus and of the absurdist element in our lives (a singularly appropriate theme) and of such matters as existential necessity. And from him, who was not schooled in the academic distinctions between rhetoric and poetic, I first heard—or first heard strikingly—the concept that the two arts may be finally inseparable. "I feel that I am an artist," he said, "and that this is all theatre." When I smiled at what I thought to be his metaphor, he said, quite earnestly, "No, I mean really," and went on to talk about the players and the plot, and the different acts of the drama we were enacting.

That moment was quite extraordinary for me, and the memory of it drifted back as I was writing this essay. What it announced in such a graphic context was what Staub, Bormann, and Kenneth Burke have since confirmed for me. Staub called the rhetorician a "poet-plot-maker" who seeks to induce in his or her listeners the sense of critical choice and the necessity of commitment.<sup>1</sup> The speaker forces us to confront ourselves and the forces that impinge upon us. Bormann spoke of the fantasies in which we immerse ourselves, and which provide our motives and the promise of denouement.<sup>2</sup> And Burke has insisted of late that his dramatism is not a figure, for no actor can stand outside the play that provides his or her identity.<sup>3</sup> Where there is no tension between tenor and vehicle, there can be no metaphor, and illusion and reality become one together.

Others have pushed along this growing consciousness of a significant unity among the arts of discourse. Richard Weaver has talked about a power structure submerged in language, sets of symbols indigenous to each culture which express its secret and public dreams and loathings.<sup>4</sup> To these "culturetypes," as I have called them,<sup>5</sup> I have added the notion of archetypal metaphor in rhetoric, of symbols in public persuasion which hold constant across cultures, and which join humanity in a certain ritual consciousness and a sense of enactment.<sup>6</sup> I don't intend here to call the role of the new scholarship in rhetoric, but what I wish to suggest is that the divergence of expressive forms, of the interpenetration of rhetoric and theatre.

Wayne Booth has described the private and intimate bond between writer and reader in the successful communication of irony.<sup>7</sup> The reader is assumed to be superior to the characters described—the experience is distinctly elitist. Similarly, theatre places its audience in a position superior to the action it describes. Both in comedy and tragedy, that experience is distinctly Olympian—in Restoration comedy, for example, we are made superior for the esthetic moment to the fools who present to us the various forms of our own real or potential foolishness. Laughter becomes an act of transcendence. Similarly, in Greek tragedy we contemplate the transience and doom of our destiny in a moment that is lifted out of time and set upon a stage as upon a moving urn. We experience both the recognition of our fate and the rush of seeing our lives stretching out complete to their final horizons.

In the sense of superiority given its audience lies a special power of theatre as rhetoric. Augmenting the kind of superiority Booth describes is the powerful reinforcer of group experience. Theatre can make us arrogant, and can confirm us in our arrogance. For Plato, the flattery potential of theatre as rhetoric must have been enormous. In the *Gorgias* he strikes out at the public message makers that gratify and exploit the people.

Clearly, however, the messages presented by that kind of communication called theatrical are given special urgency by the ego gratification provided within the form itself. We can be induced to assign such messages an importance and validity which they may not in themselves merit.

Live theatre is limited as a mass medium by the usual size of its audience. Even with that limitation theatre can generate powerful rhetoric, and most revolutionary movements make use of it at vital moments in their coming to consciousness. Its power lies in its combination of two rhetorical advantages not normally found together: the **immediacy** of a live audience situation, in which the play addresses and is addressed by those who come to it, and the **indirection** of a fiction, which can make the audience especially vulnerable to its message.

A live audience offers the opportunity for ritual participation in the action poised upon the stage. Fiction by its nature invites our vicarious participation, and so is fraught with rhetorical possibility. In role-playing we have a tendency to become that which we enact, and theatre can induce us into rehearsing roles rhetoric would provide for us in real life. After all, it's only make-believe! The risk seems low, the commitment asked from us only momentary and superficial. Why not, just for the moment, identify with these revolutionaries and their sentiments, so that we can share the excitement of their cause? Augmenting the possible rhetorical advantage of such vicarious participation is the unique possibility afforded by theatre for ritual participation, sharing such enactments with a group. Each theatre audience can be a collectivity waiting to be shaped into a rhetorical community, which shares values and a sense of mission. Ritual sharing, for beings who are imprinted by nature toward group experience, can be a powerful reinforcer toward the acceptance of the message in the action mimed upon the stage.

To this unique advantage of theatre as rhetorical medium, add the consideration that theatre deals with primary rhetorical functions. One of the worst distinctions ever entertained about the rhetorical and poetic arts is that the one deals with argument, the other with image. Images, as any mass media huckster would quickly inform us, are the very protoplasm of rhetoric. Rhetoricians strive to control us at the level of our perceptual encounters with self and the world about us. The images they offer predispose these encounters by creating certain anticipations. If we can be made to see subjects in the same or similar ways, our tendency will be to feel and act together as well, and harmonious feeling and action is the condition for any successful social existence. Therefore the impulse of a rhetorical community, for the sake of its own self-preservation, will be to create stereotyped or shared images which actually project, embody, and manifest its most important values. Thus we have images of the ideal citizen in peace and war, of the enemy without and within, of sex roles that regulate the procreative impulse and harness it to the ends of social stability and continuity. Each social order will develop an entire vocabulary of such vital images, which it becomes the duty of any conservative rhetoric to preserve and protect. It follows that revolutionary rhetoric is best defined not by physical violence against the state, but by its iconoclastic intent. It aims to totter the sacred images that support social identity. Such images are the warrants, the major premises, that authorize public argument. To destroy them is to paralyze the other basic rhetorical functions of deliberation and judgment, and ultimately to destroy community.

Theatre's role in performing such basic rhetorical functions can be obvious or delicate, and can range across the ideological spectrum. As in the work of Aeschylus, it can celebrate the **polis** and its civic virtues. Or as we discover in Sophocles it can raise questions about the conflict of civil law and divine imperatives, reminding us through the tragic example of Antigone that civic values may not be ultimate. The emergence of such questions can be the harbinger of revolutionary consciousness. Theatre's attack on the sacred images can be crude and direct, as it poses alternative images and enacts scenes which in effect dramatize arguments. Or the attack can be oblique, and by innuendo so subtle that the playwright might well claim innocence. When the facade of social order is contradicted by the internal writhings and agonizings of the characters revealed upon the stage, just as we see in Euripides' plays, we may leave the theatre with an afterimage of a society in trouble, ready for revolutionary events. As theatre affirms new and transcendent images rising from the ruins of a discredited social order, it invites us to join again in ritual celebration of community transformed around the new vision. Revolution thus comes to us, not through the derivative modes of forensic or deliberative rhetoric, but rather through the epideictic mode, often theatrical, which as Aristotle noted, enacts the conflict of vice and virtue through the imagery of praise and blame.

How does theatre persuade, beyond the presentation of pictures that are inherently arresting and potent with rhetorical meaning? Perhaps the least effective form of such rhetoric is didactic theatre that simply beats us about the head with its message. Such rhetoric places distance between us and the play, in that it makes us conscious of the play as persuader and of ourselves as the targets of persuasion. It may actually work against what is often the most effective rhetorical technique of theatre, the effect of drawing us disarmingly into the dramatic action for the vicarious role-playing experience. What we may often think is the most rhetorical theatre may actually be the least effective, either as theatre or as rhetoric. Certainly if the most effective art disguises itself, and this principle applies as well to the art of rhetoric, then such crude theatre can defeat itself by its own obviousness.

A process of proving does go on in theatre, but it does not take the form of evidence adduced in support of propositions. The process has to do rather with the credibility of the images presented, what in artistic terms is called their **verisimilitude**. The images of life presented in theater must seem **authentic**: we must feel that they

**articulate** reality for us, bringing into clear focus what previously had been only vaguely realized. Such images must seem valid interpretations of our experience. If we are convinced of the authenticity of the images, then our tendency will be to carry our theatre experience over into actual life. For we shall be convinced that we have experienced—not some fiction—but rather a ritual that has carried us to the heart of reality, and which has illuminated life for us.

If images are the very stuff of rhetoric, then argument can provide the drama of theatre. Indeed, theatre can present us with debate perfected, arguments that, released from the constraints and imperfections of immediate rhetorical situations, search into the very nature of being. I shall never forget how moved and stunned I was when first exposed to the argumentation in **Marat-Sade**: such moments are rare in a lifetime, and defy categorization either as esthetic or rhetorical experience. So argumentation is not necessarily rhetorical, just as imagery is not necessarily poetic: we may be convinced finally of nothing but the incredible magnitude of the human spirit in its capacity both for nobility and for cruelty.

All such reflections drive me back to my thesis, that effective rhetoric and effective theatre are often interpenetrating and intertwining forms. Yet there is a sense in which theatre can indeed transcend our rhetorical selves. Theatre can function as meta-rhetoric, as a critique of rhetorical processes. A tired but compact example is Mark Anthony's speech in **Julius Caesar**, in which an effective rhetorical transaction is viewed ironically by an audience possessing superior knowledge. Meta-rhetorical plays may convey no social message beyond reminding us of the evanescence of rhetorical causes themselves. Beyond the purgation of strong feeling, theatre can offer us perspective on our time-bound, rhetoric-ridden existence. So relief from rhetoric, as well as powerfully effective rhetoric, can be the significant contribution of theatre. But in so far as relief from rhetoric renews us for rhetoric, theatre and rhetoric remain profoundly cooperative forms. And remembering how effectively Plato uses rhetoric in his attack upon rhetoric, we may seek a manipulative motive, even in the mask that takes the mask off rhetorical transactions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Staub, August, "Rhetoric and Poetic: The Rhetor as Poet-Plot-Maker," *SSCJ*, 26 (1961), 285-290.

<sup>2</sup>Bormann, Ernest G., "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *QJS*, 58 (1972), 396-407.

<sup>3</sup>Burke, Kenneth, "Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy," in *Rhetoric, Philosophy and Literature*, Don M. Burks, (ed.) West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1978, pp. 15-34.

<sup>4</sup>Weaver, Richard, "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric," in *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953, pp. 211-232.

<sup>5</sup>See the discussion in Chapter 3 of my *Orientations to Rhetorical Style*, Chicago: SRA, 1976.

<sup>6</sup>See the introduction of this idea in "The Metaphor in Public Address," *CM*, 29 (1962), 223-234, and its further development in "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: the Light-Dark Family," *QJS*, 53 (1967), 115-126.

<sup>7</sup>Booth, Wayne C., "The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Irony: Or, Why Don't You Say What You Mean?" in Burks, pp. 1-14.

