LIES LIKE TRUTH

BY HAROLD CLURMAN

"Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."
PICASSO

"I . . . begin to doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth."
Macbeth, V, v.

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GROVE PRESS, INC. NEW YORK
EVERGREEN BOOKS LTD. LONDON

This edition is published by arrangement with The Macmillan Company, New York.

First Evergreen Edition 1960

Grove Press Books and Evergreen Books are published by Barney Rosset at Grove Press, Inc., 64 University Place, New York 3, N.Y.

Distributed in Canada by McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 25 Hollinger Road, Toronto 16

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

The Beginning and the End

I wrote most of the short pieces which compose this book as theatre reviews from 1946–1957 for *Tomorrow Magazine*, *The New Republic* and, most recently, *The Nation*. To these periodicals I offer my thanks for permitting republication in their present form.

These reviews and essays were not written especially to air my opinions on particular plays and productions, for I have scant respect for opinions as such. A reviewer's opinion is something like the plot of a play. Its value lies not so much in itself as in what is made of it. As for the art of criticism itself, I am inclined to agree with the Frenchman who said that writing about one's contemporaries is more akin to conversation than to criticism.

These reviews were written to exemplify an approach to the theatre. I may have changed my views in several instances as to individual plays discussed here—I am sometimes fickle in this respect—but my feeling about the theatre in general has remained stable. These introductory pages are intended as a survey of the elements which inform that feeling.

"It is not quite the thing to take language and make it yield beautiful results," Walt Whitman said at Camden. "I don't want beautiful results—I want results: honest results: expression, expression." What I feel about the theatre resembles this, though it is not precisely the same. I am rather doubtful of the distinction between "beauty" and "expression." For me they are virtually one. And for purposes of our subject, I would replace the word "beauty" by the word "entertainment." The word "entertainment," moreover, needs to be extended to suggest something beside the tickling sensation it is usually meant to convey.

The basic premise of my reviews is that all theatre—from bur-

lesque, ballet, farce and musical comedy to high tragedy—has human significance. The job of the theatre critic is first of all to determine what the human significance of a particular play or performance is. In doing this he evaluates it. Every play or performance has a certain quality or "weight" of life in it. The critic must try to define its essence and place it in some personal or traditional scale of values which the reader in his turn is permitted to judge.

This premise serves not only in criticism but in the practical work of the theatre itself. As I am a stage director as well as a critic, I should add that my demands on dramatic criticism apply to my work as a director in this way: as a director I hope to create with the means at my disposal—script, actors, scenic design, costumes, music, and so on—an exhilaratingly usable sum of life. The degree of entertainment produced depends on the scope and quality of life which the work contains.

It is dangerous in the context of the American theatre—which, alas, only means Broadway—to speak of "significance." Owing to the special connotations the word acquired in the thirties, many people assume that significance implies a "message." (We all know the gag, "If you want to send a message, call Western Union.") "Message," moreover, is associated with a political doctrine, an ethical thesis, a preachment that can be paraphrased in a number of blunt words.

I do not necessarily despise such messages in the theatre, nor does the prospect of propaganda alarm me: the theatre can contain and express everything, but I must make it utterly clear that when I speak of human significance I mean something beyond the sense which has unfortunately been foisted upon it.

It is well known by now in painting—to turn for purposes of illustration to another medium—that human significance may be found not only in images which depict a human situation or event —Virgin and Child, Lunch on the Lawn, Liberty Leading the People—but in landscape and in still life, and even in canvases where the connection between what we see and a specific object is obscure. We know too that a religious subject may be employed to express sentiments by no means sacred, and that the

representation of a chair or a pair of shoes may be endowed with an intensity and fervor akin to religious feeling. Certain paintings deny expressiveness in the ordinary sense or seem to defy emotion, but these too may have meaning.

The art critic does not identify the human significance of paintings by the ostensible "message" associated with their subject matter but by the particular quality he senses in their color, composition, rhythm, form. The critic seeks to establish what the painting is *doing*, therefore what it means. The same holds true for the theatre.

I used to be a great admirer of the old *Ziegfeld Follies*. Needless to say they were "great entertainment." But they were that not simply because they presented brilliant comics, lovely girls, rich costumes, and so on. Other shows offered similar attractions. The *Follies* possessed a special fragrance, a creative touch significant of a man, a state of mind, a social milieu, a historical moment.

To "criticize" the *Follies* would entail a more specific definition of that touch and state of mind as well as the role they played in our experience of life. Even to assert that that role was "good" or "bad" would not be necessary. The particularity of the description itself is what counts. From it a reader might gather not only the critics' estimate of the show but the reader's own possible interest in it. It would also lead the reader to some evaluation of the critic himself.

All of this is obvious. I am afraid that most of this introduction, as much else in this book, must dwell on the obvious because in matters of theatre it is the obvious which is most frequently overlooked. For this reason I must take up another aspect of our discussion whenever the term "significance" is employed.

What part of a play that we see on the stage is the significant part? Is it the text—plot and dialogue—or the production—acting, scenic investiture, and so on? If we look to the origins of the theatre we see that it is an outgrowth of two forces which at a certain point mingle and become unified.

To begin with, there was the impulse which produced simple play, games, superstitious rites, festivals, the everyday ceremony or customs of primitive folk. We find them in the fields, on the

streets, at inns and even less reputable places expressed through dance and song, tumbling, acrobatics, clowning, conjuring, street hawking, circuses and the like. This is the raw material.

Out of these spontaneous expressions, thoughtful men, poets, priestly interpreters, university chaps, the book-learned, began to compose structures of action with more or less set words which might organize, intensify and make conscious to the masses themselves the underlying sense of their free play. From this formulation of folk habit arises what we have come to designate as dramatic literature. Almost every stage "show" betrays the duality of these origins.

It is historically true that action precedes the word, and that the theatre's "body" was present before it learned to speak. It is still true that without the "body"—the physical dimension, the presence of the actor—there is no theatre. Yet a dispute today as to whether the written text (generally called "the play") or the performance (except for the possibility of semantic confusion I should prefer to call *this* the Play) would probably prove more useless than to debate the question of the chicken and the egg. What is certain is that when the two forces of the theatre are separated or made to conflict, both tend to grow sick. The only value in looking back to the theatre's genesis is the light it throws on certain matters of theatre appreciation and theatre practice.

Since text and performance must be viewed as an organic whole—for that is the way they are actually perceived—it follows that a play's content or significance is not to be sought in its words or plot alone. We have discovered anew (Gordon Craig was the forerunner in this) that the significance of a play inheres in all its parts, that is, in its acting, setting, sound and movement—the production—and not exclusively in the writer's work.

It is true that in many productions we are more aware of the writer's contribution than in any other of its aspects, either because it is so overwhelmingly powerful or, as more frequently happens, because the stage folk engaged in these productions are not up to their task. This explains why Shakespeare on the stage may prove absorbing even in a feeble performance or may

be rendered duller and less significant than an infinitely inferior dramatist.

To be clear, let us say then that the producing unit in the theatre—director, actors, designer, and so on—should, ideally speaking, match the creative capacity of the most gifted dramatist. It is a fact that this is rarely achieved, but it is also a fact that at certain times the work of a producing unit, through a great actor, a great director or a great ensemble, may equal or excel the significance of a fine playwright. In any case, though it may be proper for us to distinguish among the various contributions as we do when we speak separately of the color, composition, drawing of a painting even though we actually see them as a whole, it is one Play we see as we sit in the theatre and it is of the significance of the whole that we must judge.

Has it not often been our experience to see a play that has made a deep impression on us, which on reflection we have found to have been caused not by its writing or characters but by a great piece of acting or a group performance? In such cases, some critics haughtily refuse to be "taken in" or, having been taken in, speak of the experience as somehow fraudulent or, at best, superficial. Of such critics and like-minded theatregoers I would say that they have neither taste for nor understanding of the theatre. They are tone deaf and color blind in regard to the stage.

What very often confuses theatre discussion is the fact that our formal education tends to emphasize the word as supreme in value and dignity. The flash of an eye, the tone of a voice, the eloquence of a gesture, the color of a costume, the atmosphere of an environment, the magnetism of a personality, the grace or force of a movement—these minutiae, crucial to theatrical experience, are the ephemerae of the theatre. They disappear as they occur. But just these ephemerae are the theatre's very heartbeat—momentous because they shape our memory, stir our blood, fire our mind, penetrate our very souls. That is why the theatre has nearly always played a greater role in the anatomy of cultures than the "triviality" of its fleeing moments would lead us to believe. Cleopatra's nose (though not immortal), Pascal pointed out, probably altered the course of history.

Every component element of the theatre, including the buildings, sites and stages where theatre takes place, has a meaning, each of which may enhance, modify or nullify its total significance. When an epoch does not produce great dramatic texts, the theatre may still remain significant, though it will undoubtedly suffer from lack of them.

The early nineteenth century in England was poor in dramatic literature, but its theatre nonetheless revealed through the acting of such a man as Edmund Kean some of the traits which characterized the romantic poetry of the time. How many of our "best plays" would we consider first-class reading matter set beside our best novels? Would such plays exercise as much fascination—or prove as lucrative to their authors—without that which certain folk are inclined to regard as the plays' outward trappings? Is not a good part of the value attributed to such plays due to the purely theatrical elements which, though evanescent, are deeply significant?

The theatre speaks through its mouth, its limbs, its apparel, its physical posture and structure—all of which are the tangible forms of its heart and mind. These are related to the audience which give it birth, hence to the society of its day. Very little of what we see, hear and feel in the theatre is altogether accidental or entirely inconsiderable in any epoch, even when it is intellectually poor or shallow as literature.

The theatre is often in trouble, more frequently so than any of the other arts. In France, for example, during the early years of the twentieth century very few serious writers and only a small part of the intelligentsia deigned to enter the theatre, though these people had been bred on Corneille, Racine, Molière.

The theatre is the most vulnerable of the arts, the most corruptible. This is not solely due to its "physicality," but also to the fact that it is a social art. It depends more than any other art—except possibly architecture—on factors beyond the will of any single individual or small group of individuals. It depends on audiences, immediate audiences, and all that entails of economic considerations, social ideologies and on the homogeneity and health of particular communities.

This is a study in itself, rarely undertaken. This is not the place for it. The focus of my writing is the American theatre, although I have made excursions into the theatre of other countries partly because they relate to our world and more particularly to contrast it with our own.

The question to be put then is: What troubles the American theatre? I don't mean that it is dying; the theatre everywhere always appears to be dying and is never dead. Nor shall ours die (unless we all do), but it has a way of getting awfully sick.

Ours is a very young theatre. In the sense that intellectuals speak of it, ours may be said not to have been born till the twentieth century. There were signs of conception in the late nineteenth, but not until the piercing cries of Eugene O'Neill first sounded between 1916 and 1920 were most of us convinced that such a theatre had actually been born.

In the twenties a complete American theatre burst into bloom. I use the word "complete" to indicate the difference between the era of Edwin Forrest (1806–1872) or Edwin Booth (1833–1893), when our theatre was notable chiefly for its actors, and the later period when a body of earnest playwrights began to round out the picture. In volume of production and in the ambition of its effort the period between 1920–1930 was the richest in American theatre history.

Today there is a serious falling off in theatre activity all over the country. And if we give evidence of vitality despite what the theatre has suffered from the effects of motion pictures, radio and television, it is because the roots are deep in the spiritual need of our advancing civilization. Yet there is disquiet.

Harrison Salisbury in the *New York Times* may proclaim in a page-long spread in the July 8, 1957, issue of that journal, that the season of 1956–1957 marks a boom, in fact, a "renaissance" because 158 new productions were seen in New York during that time—72 of them off Broadway. He is careful to add that statistics are not the best way to estimate artistic progress. A wise admission, since he also notes that in the season of 1927–1928 there were 264 new productions—all of them, I presume, on Broadway.

There is nowadays some inner discouragement among us,

because aside from the numerical shrinkage of production—disastrous outside New York—there is little continuity in our efforts. Hardly any of the new playwrights—those who came into prominence in the thirties and forties—have yet reached the age of fifty, and some observers fear that many of them will fade from the scene and turn to other enterprises before they have reached the years when an artist is expected to be at his ripest. (Shaw wrote his first plays at forty, Ibsen most of his epoch-making prose plays after he was fifty.) Many of the actors who showed promise in the thirties and forties are mainly visitors to the theatre, dropping in for an occasional holiday from Hollywood.

The economic anarchy and perilousness of our theatre organization was for a long time considered the main reason for the choppy course of production among us. The apartness from any artistic concern, the selfishness of stage technicians, the indifference to the theatre except as a source of revenue of the real-estate interests—are pointed to with sorrow or scorn as the theatre's gravediggers. But we are really dealing here with symptoms of some trouble more widespread than the iniquity of a few individuals who have only a secondary connection with the theatre.

I believe that many dramatists, directors, actors, reviewers and a large part of their audience have willy-nilly succumbed to a rarely uttered but firm conviction that success and excellence in the theatre are synonymous. For my part, I must state categorically that if this remains a basic creed there can be little progr[illegible] either in our appreciation or in our practice of the theatre.

The converse—that everything good must fail—is equ[illegible] false. The fact is that good plays have been successful, an[illegible] might even go so far as to say that this has been increasingly [illegible] for the past thirty-five years. What must be sharply emph[illegible] however, is that excellence and success, and by this, of c[illegible] I mean box-office success or profit, are separate things, and never be equated or interrelated in our thoughts.

What I am saying has come to be regarded as arty and [illegible] democratic not only among theatrical producers—nowadays [illegible] are usually liberal and literate gentlemen—but among some

our ablest writers, actors, directors. Elia Kazan, whose admirable contributions to our theatre in the past fifteen years are universally acknowledged, is quoted in the *New York Times* article I have just mentioned as saying, "I equate good plays with successful plays."

If this is taken literally, we are preparing for the burial of our theatre as an institution devoted to significant expression. Contrary to common legend, the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov were not immediately successful in their own countries in their own day. It took some time for any of these dramatists to become "commercial." In fact, I doubt whether, except for certain off-Broadway productions, Chekhov has even actually made money in America. Is he therefore a bad playwright?

Box-office success, which nobody in the theatre of any country at any time has ever been averse to, is contingent on a number of factors of which only a few are related to the intrinsic merit of the plays presented. Kazan, who directed the original production of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, must have certainly thought it a good play: it was well received by the reviewers and many people liked it. But it was not actually profitable, perhaps only because the production's running costs were too high. Did it become a bad play because it proved a disappointing investment?

Most of us admired Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (also directed by Kazan), but its profits were not nearly so great as those of *Tea and Sympathy* (Kazan's too) or *The Bad Seed*. Are success and excellence then commensurate?

Let us not ask ourselves what would have happened to the ...ds and work of Chekhov, Shaw, Synge, O'Casey if they ...pted the thesis that merit and success were equivalent. Let ...stick to the facts," since in our rather mad world we like ...int to our practicality. What is one of the most significant th... to have come out of postwar France? Sartre's *No Exit*. s... it a success? It ran for two years in Paris at a theatre with w... ting capacity of three hundred seats—as compared to *The ... Hut*, a sex farce, which ran for over four years at a theatre ...ing five hundred.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we hear, was a huge

success in Paris. What specifically does this mean? It means that for two seasons it pleased a certain audience—the theatre it played in had a capacity of less than 250 seats—that it was highly esteemed by some critics, while others thought it nonsense. The play, moreover, has been produced with varying degrees of success all over Europe. Still, the box-office success of *Godot* in Paris is trifling compared to a play like André Roussin's *Nina* (in the vein of *The Little Hut*). But none of the respected dramatic critics of Paris would suggest that they believed Roussin the equal of Beckett.

It is my contention that had *Godot* been first produced in New York in a small off-Broadway house at moderate prices, it might easily have run a year, and would therefore have been accounted a success. Would that signify that it was one hundredth as good as *No Time for Sergeants*? Is *The Three Penny Opera*, a dismal flop in New York in the early thirties, less valuable a musical than *Happy Hunting* because fewer people can see the German piece in Greenwich Village in three years than will see Ethel Merman's vehicle on west Forty-fifth Street in one?

I consider Lillian Hellman's box-office failure *The Autumn Garden* a far better play than her box-office success *The Children's Hour*. To defend this judgment I would have to confirm certain standards. To prove that a play is valuable simply because it is a success is only a matter of bookkeeping.

To make my denial of the accepted attitude quite plain, I must make what may strike the reader as a shocking avowal: to me *Waiting for Godot* is a more significant play than *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Unless one is able to make distinctions of this kind for oneself, one is likely to remain forever ignorant in matters of the theatre.

As a director I am not unconcerned with the commercial possibilities of a script. Like everyone else, I loathe having a flop. Need I explain why? If *Godot* had been presented to me as a director I would have first advised that the play be presented with less expensive actors and, as I have already suggested, I would have insisted that it be produced off Broadway. Furthermore, I would have had to decide whether I could afford to undertake the job in terms of my economic requirements. But

this would be a consideration entirely distinct from the play's artistic merit.

A play is a success when it reaches and entertains the audience to which it is initially addressed. When as managing director of the Group Theatre I produced Saroyan's *My Heart's in the Highlands*, I announced the play for an engagement limited to five performances. When I was asked by the Group Council to abandon the production because no "outside money" could be raised for it, I replied: "We shall go ahead and use our own money. The Group is a theatre, not a bank."

When the play because of its favorable press reception managed to run six weeks instead of the scheduled five performances, I considered it a triumph. I was irritated rather than pleased when friends said to me, "Too bad it wasn't a hit." People also said this on the closing of *Tiger at the Gates*, which ran profitably for six months. I did not expect this play to run that long, and I certainly considered it a finer play than the "successful" *The Middle of the Night*.

The early Shaw plays had very brief runs in tiny theatres in their original productions. Surely they were as good then as they were later pronounced to be. What would we think of an initially hostile critic who, having seen a successful revival of one of these plays, instead of saying, "I didn't get it then," said, "How did I know then it would turn out to be a hit?"

I do not feel that the Metropolitan Opera House is a flop because it declares a deficit every season. In fact, I believe it ought to spend and (if unavoidable) lose more money if that is the only way of assuring longer and more careful rehearsals for its productions. (Nor do I consider that I have sustained a "loss" when I entertain twenty-five guests at my home!) The theatre may be a business, but, to begin with, and essentially, it is the natural expression of a people's appetite—and as such it is a necessity.

This attitude is often deemed high hat. After all, the theatre is for the people, the "masses." I have already pointed out that the esoteric drama of one generation may become the popular show of the next, just as the abstruse scientific theorem of the specialist eventually winds up as a household gadget.

I leave aside, too, the question as to whether the theatre must

only follow the "masses" instead of occasionally leading them. What amuses me, however, is the simple-mindedness which assumes that the Broadway theatre is a "people's" theatre. The audience which paid one dollar to see T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in the Federal Theatre Project far outnumbered the people who paid regular prices when the play was presented by Gilbert Miller on Broadway. Our managers may be obliged to charge $6.90 for an orchestra seat and $2.90 for a seat in the rear of the balcony at such plays as *Separate Tables,* but I cannot be convinced that these are popular prices.

Why do I pursue this theme in such detail? Not simply because the belief that success bespeaks money and money bespeaks true value leads to the disease which Broadway itself deplores as "hit-itis"—the tendency to think of plays as hits or flops rather than as plays—but because this belief, I repeat, exercises a most baneful effect on every organ of the theatre.

Take actors, for example. The actor today, without his knowing or desiring it, is fast becoming more trader than artist. It is not his fault. He is forced to subscribe to the common creed. Not only does he fear unemployment in a financially doubtful enterprise because this will affect his livelihood—his hesitation in this respect is perfectly normal—but he soon realizes that if he appears in too many flops he will come to be regarded as a less proficient or attractive actor than the actor who has been associated with a number of hits. He learns too that if he makes two or three "good" pictures he will be worth more in the theatre's dollars and cents, in billing, and in general audience recognition than the actor who has played well in a series of unsensational Broadway productions. (Is Ingrid Bergman as talented an actress as Kim Stanley, or Audrey Hepburn more worthy of admiration as an actress than Maureen Stapleton?)

All this, the reader may think, though unfortunate is more or less inevitable. But the corruption goes deeper. Young actors today are eager to "improve" themselves. Many of them attend studio classes even after they have earned some reputation. To what end? To become better actors, of course. Admirable. What is their notion of *better?* They hope to become "another Marlon Brando," as Hollywood agents say. The actor wants to be tops.

Then he will be able to do one picture after another at $150,000 per. He wants to be admired and recompensed in kudos and money on a wholly negotiable basis. But if acting has to do with significant human expression and the theatre with art, the celebration of individual talent and what goes with it should in the final count be a subsidiary issue.

The most talented young screen and stage actor in France, Gérard Philipe, crowns his efforts with appearances in classic plays at popular theatres all over France at practically no salary at all. The most successful film star in England, Jack Hawkins, an able actor, is not considered there the equal of Eric Portman. Nor are the most admired English stage and screen actors—Olivier, Gielgud, Redgrave, Richardson, Guinness—respected because of their success alone, but because of their ambition to essay Shakespearean roles at the Stratford Memorial Theatre and the Old Vic at salaries little better than our Actors Equity minimum. They are respected, in other words, because they put their talents to the uses of the finest artistic task they as English actors can undertake. They have not lost sight of the profound sense in Ibsen's statement, "A man's gifts are not a property: they are a duty."

The success=money=excellence credo debilitates our writers too. A box-office failure is much more than a disappointment to them; it is a sign that the theatre rejects them. It may be the prelude to resignation, artistic shipwreck and demise.

A French playwright said to me, "A great playwright is one who has written not only bad plays." This is more than a professional attitude; it is the attitude of an artist. It is a recognition that if one is a craftsman, one stays at one's job and seeks through all hazards and disabilities to complete it to the best of one's ability.

One may say that a dramatist who feels like quitting because he has suffered several setbacks is probably not an artist. Maybe so. But the disease which infects the writer does not begin with him: it emerges from our theatre environment. We have known playwrights under forty pronounced "finished" after two or three box-office failures.

A certain public is constantly clamoring for *new* or young