

CONTRADICTORY CHARACTERS

An Interpretation of
the Modern Theatre

Albert Bermel

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**For Neil and Derek
and, with any luck, their theatre**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would take up too much room here to defend my choice of translations. When alternative versions are in print, I have tried to pick out the one that consists of the most dramatic dialogue in English and does not give the impression that the characters compose their lines before they speak them. This is not necessarily the most “natural-sounding” version. Naturalness, an abundance of colloquial phrases, and interposed transitions do not always make for interesting speech patterns, and they may not be true to the original. As an occasional translator I am particularly grateful to the translators named below, and to their publishers, as well as the living authors, for permission to quote from the plays.

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- When We Dead Wake* by Henrik Ibsen, translated by Peter Watts, in *Ghosts and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.). Copyright © 1964 by Peter Watts.

I thank Erika Munk, Edward L. Kamarek, and Paul Kurt Ackermann, editors respectively of *Performance*, *Arts in Society*, and *Boston University Journal*, in which chapters from the book, slightly modified, have appeared.

For some years Myron Kolatch has given me the hospitality of *The New Leader's* theatre column; in that time more inspired actresses, actors, directors, designers, and playwrights than I can now name caused a number of these chapters to begin to take shape.

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Alfred Levinson, playwright, poet, novelist, man of letters,

and prince of manners, went through a late draft and proposed relatively few deletions but every one irresistible.

Eric Bentley, who read the manuscript, offered advice and encouragement that was all the more valued for coming from the man I look on as being the supreme theatre critic: anybody who writes about the modern theatre has to reckon with the wit, the heart, and the forensic skill with which he has championed the work of Ibsen, Strindberg, Wedekind, Chekhov, Shaw, Pirandello, and Brecht.

To my two small sons, who endured a lot of absentminded replies, and to Joyce, my wife, who typed, read, edited, listened, counseled, and waited with me, I can only say that I hope it was all worth it.

A.B.

New York, 1973

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PREMISES

MICHEL DE GHELDERODE: *"There are peculiar affinities between the character and his author which, after all, mean nothing."*

SAMUEL BECKETT: *"I am not a philosopher."*

GEORG BÜCHNER: *"The poet is not a teacher of morals; he invents and creates characters; he brings past epochs back to life; and people may then learn from these as they learn from the study of history and their observations of what one ought not to be."*

VIOLA: *"Save thee, friend, and thy music."* (TWELFTH NIGHT, III, I.)

This book began in an endeavor to reclaim the theatre as an art in its own right. With a few exceptions, recent dramatic critics have been taken captive by biography and philosophy. When they write biography they comb through a playwright's past for situations that prefigure, however faintly, the situations in his plays; discovering these, as anybody who looks hard enough is bound to do, they go on to "prove" that the playwright dramatized his own life.¹ When they move into philosophy (ethics, metaphysics, political theory, aesthetics) they then assume that at least one character in the play is the author's *raisonneur*, the

¹ Thus, in *Christopher Marlowe, His Life and Works* (New York, 1964) A. L. Rowse writes that, "in a very real sense, Faustus is Marlowe" (p. 150). In an even more real sense, Faustus is Faustus and Marlowe was Marlowe.

mouthpiece for his seasoned reflections on Morals, the History of Thought, Power, or Nature-and-Art. If these distillations fascinate a critic—and they usually do, since he has paraphrased or reformulated them himself—he delivers a favorable verdict on the play. When he considers them to be secondhand or self-evident it is a sign that he set out for some private reason to do a hatchet job on the playwright.

In either case, such doctrinal criticism treats plays, at their best and worst alike, as if they were leaflets; and it has spawned a horrible but extensive vocabulary.² The closest it usually comes to examining a play as a work of art is in its one- or two-paragraph synopsis of the action. But the synopsis rarely tells us what makes a play theatre; it does not differ from a synopsis of a novel, a short story, a poem, film, opera, programmatic dance, or sometimes a recipe.

How do we talk about the theatrical nature of a play? As one ideal we might describe and assess productions that have already taken place. We would try to reckon with not only the texts but the directors' interpretations ("concepts"), the lighting and darkness, the scenery or lack of scenery in a bounded space, makeup, costumes, and acting. Retrospective criticism of this sort is, strictly speaking, the review, the looking-back-on. Reviewing, commonly regarded as hackwork, is in practice a demanding craft, although the demands are seldom fulfilled. If there were plenty of reviews in detail available from the nineteenth century

² Most of this leaflet vocabulary consists of conveniently vague words of approval and disapproval, elementary taste-mongering, the word *taste*, like the word *opinion*, being an insulation against other tastes and opinions. This vocabulary has grown chipped and worn to the point where it serves no critical purpose, though it probably never did. It blindly accepts or dismisses. I mean words on the disapproval side like *superficial*, *unoriginal*, *simplistic*, *flawed*, *minor*, *pretentious*, *failure*. And, on the approval side, *profound*, *moving*, *touching*, *brilliant*, *masterpiece*, *meaningful*, *definitive*, *basic*, *crucial*, *central*, *fundamental*, and *major*. This jargon has started to bury us. It is the critic's bureaucratese. I have gone out of my way to avoid these words in a probably hopeless attempt to hamper their further propagation. While we are at it, there are other leaflet words it would be a joy to kill off: *problem*, *solution*, *values*, *levels*, *dimensions*, *indicate*, *epiphany*, *sensibility*, *locus*, *hieratic*, *in terms of*, *in the context of*, *completely*, *totally* and *somewhat*.

and earlier, theatre history would feed more effectively than it now does into dramatic criticism.

The chapters of this book make no attempt to trace stage histories. Instead, they "review" forward. I wanted to keep in mind hypothetical stagings for the future. But the theatre's future resources may be astoundingly more expansive than ours. I have therefore focused on one theatrical resource, characterization.³ This deliberate narrowing of sights is not as much of a handicap as it may seem. Characters govern a play's action. They reveal its time sequences and time lapses. They populate its settings and move through its lighting. They articulate its ideas, and the ideas remain theirs, not necessarily the author's.⁴ I would go so far as to say that characters determine content. A playwright may start out with something to say. He may pursue researches and take notes; if he becomes famous the notes will make their own way into print. But he has not addressed himself to his art until he creates incipient characters and goes on to conceive of the dramatic events, structure, and language in which those characters can survive. As finished, the whole play and nothing less is the "something he said," even if it does not correspond to his notes or confirm letters he sent friends.

Just as we look behind literal content to find meanings, so we look beyond the individual characters in order to discern relationships. The meanings will be unraveled, if at all, from the shifting interplay between humanlike beings in their net of "given circumstances." We do not apprehend the meanings of, say, *Hedda Gabler* until we think about how our view of Hedda

³ Characterization is admittedly affected by the play's date and place of birth, which are often said to attach it to its contemporaries as part of a certain style of playwriting or a movement such as Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism. In cutting across criticism by styles and movements, my own criticism by means of characterization is intended to supplement the others, not supplant them. It explores one unifying feature of the modern theatre.

⁴ An "idea" in a play, far from being a restatement of a speech or line at its face value, can be appreciated only when the critic takes into account who exactly said it, to whom, in what circumstances, at what point in the drama, and what the character is probably thinking at that moment (whether his words have an ironic cast).

alters in the course of four acts. At first she appears to be a threat or scourge. By the end of the play we must see her as some sort of victim. Her relationships with the other characters—and theirs with each other—have made all of them look different at different times. And it is the differences, dynamic and personal, that will guide us toward artistic meanings. Each play, then, has its own sequence of meanings. The playwright invents a particular world and peoples it with relationships, not just characters. Ibsen's middle plays show a remarkable congruity in their relationships, as well as their settings, yet each work, finally, is itself, "a world of its own," as Gregers Werle says of the wild duck's artificial/natural habitat.

As a text a play offers no more than the outline of what may happen in performance. The leap from literature into enactment takes its force from the actors. Whether the playwright wants his characters portrayed as plausible psychological studies or as puppets or stock figures or archetypes, they will be incarnated by human beings. The actors constitute the life of the performance, its vitality. Even when a character does not understand his own thoughts and feelings, the sources of his speech and behavior, the actor must try to understand them or he cannot embody them. Hence the stress I put upon characterization. It is the mainspring of action on the stage.

Relationships in the drama presuppose conflicts, the thwarting of wills. Conflicts color every relationship, including the affectionate ones like friendship or love. When a father insistently gives a daughter advice she does not want or cannot act upon, he becomes a sort of enemy. He is exerting on her a claim that she has trouble meeting. His enmity is all the more insidious and hard to cope with *because of* the affection. Dramatic conflicts resolve themselves into one of three broadly defined types. Either the characters take sides and oppose each other, protagonist(s) against antagonist(s); or one or more characters find themselves in an intimidating setting or a dangerous plight, the so-called "hostile environment"; or one character has contradictory aims. This third type of conflict might be summed up by the title of Jean Vauthier's play, *The Character Against Himself* (*Le Personnage combattant*). In the chapters that follow I am arguing

that the character-against-himself is not only a type of conflict, but the prototype. It underlies the others. A conflict between characters arises out of a conflict within the principal character. He is at odds with himself. He cannot reconcile the contending forces in his own soul. He plays the protagonist and the antagonist, hero and villain at once. Sometimes he is aware of the inner struggle, sometimes not. In neither case does he know what to do about it; if he did there would be no drama. Caught up in passions he does not understand, he damages others and spites himself. He cannot meet his own best interests. He takes part in useless fights. He strives to remain in settings that discomfit him. He would like to get into the good graces of other characters, but they despise him. At the same time, he repels friends and ditches allies. He suffers over his personal shortcomings; he has misgivings about his misgivings. Time oppresses him; so do his times. He thinks back to his youth; it added up to years of powerlessness, of ambitions scotched and promises forfeited, but now it has left him behind he yearns for it.

The internal conflict, a rift or schism in the soul, appears and reappears in the other arts, too. One thinks of the fiction of Dostoevsky, Babel, Hesse, Kafka, Musil; of Kierkegaard's journals; the films of Von Stroheim, Dreyer, Polanski, Bergman; the canvasses of Bosch, Goya, Fuseli, Munch; the sculptures of Rodin and Giacometti; and countless poems. But theatre *enacts* this self-conflict; it becomes heightened and more telling on a stage where the characters borrow the life of actors in the flesh. It even looks and sounds more "real" than what happens in "real" life because the stage time is compressed. Two months, two years can flit by in two hours, and the audience has the illusion of watching those years erode living people.

Why do we get more caught up in the fate of a "colorful" character than in the doings and sayings of a "normal" character or a type? It may be that the colorful character appears to be unpredictable, ready to spring something on the other characters and on us. He puts us on edge. His passions are private, hard to elucidate. If we had to fasten on to a single word that describes his personality less evasively than *colorful* does, it would probably

be *impulsive*. In his impulses we see the momentary surfacings of his unconscious fears and desires, which clash with each other and with his conscious motives. Those unconscious fears and desires correspond in some measure to our own. Uncannily at times, when the playwright is oracular—as the best playwrights are.

Over the past century the drama has ventured farther into the realms of the unconscious and its impulsive, irrational manifestations. Yet during the same period playwrights have insisted that their work is more “realistic” than that of preceding generations of artists. They evidently mean that their plays try to portray more comprehensively than before the conditions of human experience. These conditions include fantasies and nightmares, which can be frighteningly real. Moderns like Jarry, Apollinaire, and Cocteau, who are thought of as being poets of fantasy, maintain that their theatre is realistic. So do the more experimental directors. Meyerhold calls himself a realist. Vakhtangov says he means to create a “fantastic realism” onstage. Artaud writes about infinitely extending the frontiers of reality. Peter Brook believes in “immediacy.” Clearly the word *realism* needs redefining, or undefining, if theatre artists use it in ways that are stage-worlds away from the convention known as Realism.

Realism persists in the commercial theatre and in most films. It reproduces a battlefield littered with historically researched horses, uniforms, and eighteenth-century smoke and sprinkled with jam that has the very substance of O-group blood. Or it recreates a boudoir with eighteen-carat gold trinkets hidden in a dresser drawer, *but the actress knows they are there and genuine*. It removes nothing but the fourth wing of an airplane or the fourth scupper of a cruiser. The scrupulously observed, literally detailed decor is peopled with stereotypes who are “motivated,” rather than impassioned. Such painstaking fidelity has little to do with the spirit of the original Realism. Today we can see that the deans of Realism—Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Hauptmann, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorki, and Becque—asked for everyday settings in order to make the irrational behavior of their characters look like the norm.

Unconscious desires and fears—these are the engines of the

drama, as they are governing forces in the disheveled dramas of life. In a play, as in life, we glimpse the desires and fears in dreams or accounts of dreams, in unguarded remarks, incomplete images, unfinished gestures and lines. That they tangle with the *conscious* fears and desires of the characters is all the more reason for paying attention to them. A play like *Macbeth* has an action that describes the rising curve of the hero's triumph and later the declining curve of his fall. On the upward curve the hero fulfills his desires; on the downward curve, his fears. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the hero's desires (a crown, a beautiful wife, children) have already been fulfilled when the play opens; from then on the action will slope downhill all the way. The action of Strindberg's *To Damascus* (Part One) begins as a playing-out of the hero's fears, which drive him downward into the pit of madness. Subsequently, the hero recognizes the nature of those fears (brings them into his consciousness) and can name them; the action then marks his painful ascent toward the recovery of his sanity and deposits him at last on the same, nameless street corner where he began.

Sometimes it is not easy to separate a desire from a fear. In three extraordinary plays about misers, *The Pot of Gold* by Plautus, Molière's *The Miser*, and Ghelderode's *Red Magic*, the impulses that drive the hero in each case are—what? An excessive desire to engross gold or an excessive fear of losing it? The rocking back and forth between fear and desire, between hope of gain and terror of loss, results in a paradox: the more a character has, the more he has to lose; the higher he has risen, the more precariously balanced he feels. It is no accident that playwrights used to compose tragedies about the fall of kings and demigods. The losses these supermen incurred were superdestructive, superdramatic. The bigger the hero the harder he fell. Or so it appeared.

Yet during the nineteenth century the middle-class tragedy brought us heroes and heroines of a lower caste who could also fall precipitously. In *Ghosts* Mrs. Alving plunges from a lofty desire or aspiration, rather than from a lofty social position. So do Hedda Gabler and Halvard Solness and Gregers Werle and Miss Julie and Mrs. Warren. They do not have as much at stake,