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OTHER
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Austin E. Quigley

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The Modern Stage and Other Worlds

For Patricia, Laura and Rebecca

Two cultures or technologies can, like astronomical galaxies, pass through one another without collision; but not without change of configuration. In modern physics there is, similarly, the concept of 'interface' or the meeting and metamorphosis of two structures.

(Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*,
London, 1967, p. 149)

Introduction

The modern period has been one of the most innovative and productive in the history of the theatre. A steadily growing stock of first-rate plays has encouraged, and been encouraged by, widespread building of new theatres. At the same time, there has been extensive reconsideration of the appropriate nature and structure of the performance arena, with the result that renewal of theatre structures has proceeded in close conjunction with renewal of drama structures. Though theatres depend on economic as well as artistic factors and consequently alternate rapidly between periods of hardship and periods of prosperity, the overall importance of the theatre in European and American society has remained markedly high throughout the last one hundred years.

The successes of the theatre in this period have attracted not only large audiences, but also a steadily increasing collection of critical work. Like criticism in most fields, criticism of modern theatre has been somewhat mixed in quality, but there now exist solid and sometimes inspired introductions to the work of individual dramatists and directors, and several helpful summaries of movements in local parts of the field. Books about the field at large, however, have been less frequently produced and, with one or two notable exceptions, less impressive in their achievements. Scholars have frequently preferred to focus on the local rather than the larger domain, on single dramatists and single movements (naturalism, expressionism, etc.), or on such intermediate domains as the Theatre of the Absurd, the Theatre of Commitment, the Theatre of Protest and Paradox, the Theatre of the Marvellous, and so on. The notion of a Theatre of the Whole has seemed more problematic, in part because the field is still developing, in part because the 'theatre' metaphor acquires an uncertain status in this larger context, and in part because the field seems to be characterized more by its variety than by

any underlying, overarching, or emerging consistency. Those who have attempted to deal with the field at large have often found themselves forced into selective and reductive generalization if they focus on the field's putative unity, and into piecemeal criticism if they focus on its manifest changes.

The problems inevitably attendant upon attempts to write in general terms about still evolving patterns are made particularly acute when modern playwrights participate so energetically in the widespread modern movement to 'make it new'. Playwrights, it seems, are just as determined as novelists and poets to make their work significantly different from that of their predecessors. There is thus, we must recognize at the outset, an incipient conflict between the desires of the playwrights, who usually wish to emphasize the novelty of their individual contributions, and the desires of those critics who wish to generalize about the shared achievements of a large group of playwrights. The necessary response to this difficulty is not to try to circumvent or ignore it, but to establish appropriate ways of dealing with it—not least because the problem introduced here as a critics' problem has its counterpart in problems confronted by those in theatre audiences who likewise find the diversity of the modern theatre rather daunting.

It is quite understandable that playwrights seeking to establish their place in a competitive profession should insist on the originality and even uniqueness of their own work. There is nothing more likely to make a modern writer bristle than a suggestion that his latest creative efforts resemble someone else's. But the danger, for audiences, readers and critics alike, is that an excessive concern for the novelty of a work can be as misleading as an excessive concern for the common features it shares with other works. There is, of course, the obvious point that anything entirely new would be incomprehensible, but more important is the recurring tendency to see the new as a massive rejection of the old. The playwright's desire to direct attention to the novelty of his work rather than to its accompanying conventionality thus tends to produce an uncertain response to that novelty. A sense of what is being rejected frequently looms larger than a sense of what is being gained. Novelty following upon novelty is thus often dealt with in terms of 'the shock of the new', or in terms of things falling apart, order giving way to anarchy, or disorientation and *Angst* awaiting audiences bold enough to confront the latest products of the *avant-garde*.

Such emphasis on novelty at the expense of continuity has its contemporary place, but it provides the critic with something of a dilemma when he tries to move beyond a rightful recognition of each writer's novelty towards some larger sense of how the various novelties are related. The trouble is that related novelties threaten to forfeit their status as novelties, and generalizations that invite us to focus on common ground tend to lose contact with the very diversity they seek to illuminate. It is, of course, possible to try another tack and attempt to generalize locally about plays in terms of what they

commonly question, attack or reject. But criticism needs to move beyond initial concerns about Theatres of Protest, Revolt and the Absurd, towards a recognition not only of the continuities involved in the field as a whole, but also of the positive implications of creativity and change. Change, though frequently appearing initially as a threat, is often also an opportunity, and criticism needs to keep pace with the speed at which playwrights and audiences adapt to and make use of successive changes. Today's experimental goal quickly becomes tomorrow's starting-point; today's invention is tomorrow's convention. Recognition of the diversity of modern theatre is thus as important as, but no more important than, recognition of its principles of continuity; recognition of its role in challenging what preceded it is as important as, but no more important than, recognition of what its novelties make newly possible.

My aim has thus been not to reject the claims of those critics who have emphasized the novelty of individual writers or local movements in the modern theatre, but to place those claims in a larger context, one which can embrace not only novelty and diversity, but also conventionality and continuity, and at the same time demonstrate the varied connections among them. This is not simply a matter of correcting a critical imbalance but of establishing for readers and audiences alike an enabling mode of access to highly experimental and less experimental modern plays. It is important to overcome a tendency to regard innovation as a deliberate and disturbing choice on the part of the dramatist, and imitation as an unthinking, ill-considered, or unrelated accompanying action. We may misunderstand the nature of the novelty if we ignore as 'derivative' elements of plays that are indispensable if their novelty is to function successfully. And we may likewise be misled if our attempts to generalize direct excessive attention to shared rather than singular features. We might do well to regard both innovative *and* conventional aspects of a drama as necessary and deliberate choices – choices made, each in the context of the other, for particular purposes. Whether this is true or not biographically will vary from case to case, but if adopted as a critical attitude, as a working hypothesis, such an approach will help us locate those elements of conventionality that make invention both possible and accessible.

Though novelty and diversity, along with convention and continuity, thus have their places in the field, the difficulty remains of establishing a general mode of discourse that can locate and exploit their appropriate relationships. What is needed is not the excavation of the hidden common ground of modern plays, but the establishment of a mode of discourse within which generalizations can function as instruments of investigation rather than as summations of common underlying truths. Such a mode of discourse will enable audiences and critics to deal with diversity in a way that neither reduces it to an underlying uniformity nor confronts it as an alarming aggregate of unique and unrelated events. An approach less rigid than that of

structuralism and more illuminating than that of merely tracing unrelated trends will allow us to generalize, without limiting us to what the generalizations themselves can readily embrace. Unless we establish such a mode of inquiry, one that allows generalizations to operate as a means of renewing rather than terminating our investigations, we run the risk of being seriously misled by premature and unwarranted conclusions.

I have thus sought to establish an investigative context within which generalizations can function without implying the existence of an underlying unity (which is unavailable) or an emerging closure (which is unjustifiable). In establishing the appropriate mode of discourse, I have sought to replace the search for unity with a search for principles of continuity, and the desire for closure with a respect for principles of generative coherence. These steps are necessary because I have wished to avoid writing two kinds of book, both of which offer inviting, but finally disappointing, possibilities – the kind that addresses itself accurately to the field but deals with only a cross-section of it, and the kind that determinedly seeks to deal with the whole field but addresses only a few lines to each of several hundred plays. The former purchases unity and closure at the cost of comprehensiveness, the latter achieves comprehensiveness at the cost of explanatory power. But if we reject misplaced desires for unity, closure and encyclopaedic comprehensiveness, where do we turn, if we wish to deal with the field at large? Comprehensive in principle is, I would argue, preferable to comprehensiveness in demonstrated practice, because the latter, no matter how detailed, must always fall short of the task it sets itself. Comprehensiveness in principle is justified if it can demonstrate explanatory applicability by addressing a wide range and a considerable variety of important cases, rather than by seeking to deal explicitly with all extant plays. The selected plays, if sufficiently varied, can substantiate the explanatory power of principles of coherence not by exhausting their application, but by supporting the possibility of their further application.

This book thus has two major sections. Part I seeks to investigate the nature of the field and the difficulties of generalizing about it. From this investigation, there emerges an appropriate mode of discourse and an appropriate means of generalizing about a field characterized by diversity. The series of plays discussed and the patterns of similarity and diversity located suggest, in turn, certain useful principles of continuity in modern drama and certain lines of their potential extension. Part II seeks to demonstrate the comprehensiveness and explanatory power of these modes of continuity and coherence by exploring, in considerable detail, a small number of diverse plays by important modern playwrights. Generalizations established in the first part of the book are tested out in the light of their ability to take us to the heart, and not just to the periphery, of important and varied plays. The plays given detailed scrutiny are selected to exemplify the diversity of modern theatre, but not to exhaust it.

Arguments over the selection of particular plays could, of course, be raised no matter which plays and playwrights were chosen. I wish only to emphasize that there is no implied judgement that these playwrights and these plays are the most important in the period or that they set a limit to the possibilities of the field; my point is simply that they are diverse and important and that discussion of them helps to clarify the importance of others. As I have not sought to establish an encyclopaedic comprehensiveness, nor to establish local patterns of influence, I have not felt constrained, in selecting plays for detailed study, by geographical distribution, chronological sequence or chronological spacing. The continuity of the field is not so much chronological and uni-directional, but methodological and multi-directional. I have thus not hesitated to explore Pinero's work before Ibsen's or to discuss playwrights whose work is contemporary with that of others. In exploring these particular plays, I have simply sought to demonstrate principles in action; if these studies suggest further cases, more obvious examples, and more complex questions, that is all to the good. I have not wished to close off thought about the field or about particular plays, but to open up both to further consideration by others. The interpretations in the second part of the book serve only as examples, not as the final word about the plays or the principles of coherence located in them.

The book is thus, I believe, susceptible to a variety of uses. Those with a major interest in a particular play or a particular dramatist might well prefer to read selected chapters in Part II before reading selectively in Part I. Those more concerned with the field at large might well prefer to read Part I before reading selectively in Part II. Those who read the whole text sequentially, however, will encounter a relatedness in the emerging patterns of continuity that exemplifies certain larger principles of ordering that are widely dispersed throughout the field. They will also recognize that, for reasons already touched on above and elaborated later, the several chapters in Part II are not mere illustrations of points made in Part I. Every application of the principles established in Part I is both a selective replication and a selective extension of what they seem initially to subsume. The mode of inquiry exemplified in Part I is a means of enabling audiences and readers to construct from a variety of traditional and less traditional sources of information a series of interpretative contexts – contexts that facilitate appropriate access to and appropriate participation in the dramatic experience particular plays have to offer. But each construction of an interpretative context is itself a model for further context-creation – context-creation of related but different kinds for related but different plays.

Such context-creation necessarily involves linking the mode of discourse exemplified in this book to those offered elsewhere. Though my book has its own claims to novelty, this novelty, like others, is grounded in the valuable work of predecessors. I have sought, from time to time, to link my arguments to those of other writers in the field, though there can be no question of

comprehensiveness here. I have merely sought to provide informative links to other work and occasional suggestions of the usefulness or otherwise of established lines of argument. Such links are provided not simply because it is appropriate to acknowledge one's debts, but because the drama and the theatre exist as community property and it is important that criticism exhibit its appropriate status as one component of an ongoing community interaction with drama and theatre. There should be no radical discontinuity between (a) conversations among audience members leaving a theatre, and (b) conversations among audience members by way of books and articles. Coming to know a play is partly a process that takes place in the theatre and partly a process that precedes and succeeds what occurs in the theatre. Though its opposite ends may be widely separated, the chain of implication that links audience response to interpretative activity and to theoretical discussion is one that should not readily be severed. When these components are radically separated it is usually to the detriment of each stage in the investigative process. It is important in this respect not to overlook how often playwrights and directors become, intermittently at least, practising theorists. They are much more willing than are many journalists and critics to believe that theatre audiences can deal with intellectual challenge. Learning about the theatre is part of the process of learning about ourselves, our society and our individual and collective pasts.

The critic, then, like the playwright and the audience, relies on appropriate response to the continuities that help provide intriguing novelties with their initial importance and their persisting significance. We do well to remember that in the modern theatre, as in any other field of creative endeavour, discovery is often, in part at least, a matter of rediscovery, and innovation a matter of renovation. I have thus sought in the several chapters of this book to investigate the nature of certain problems that arise for audiences and critics in the modern theatre, to confront the difficulties involved in generalizing locally or at large about the diversified domain of modern theatre, to demonstrate important links between invention and convention, and to suggest a way of thinking about the modern theatre that registers appropriate respect for, and facilitates appropriate participation in, the challenges and opportunities so frequently generated by widespread commitments to variety and change. It will, I suspect, be evident to all who take the time to digest what this argument has to offer that it has implications for our understanding not only of modern drama, but also of other genres in the modern era and of plays in eras before our own. I have pursued these implications only as far as this particular study requires. I hope, however, in the formulation of this argument, not only to have shed some light on modern theatre in general, but also to have made available a means by which others may make further discoveries for themselves.

Acknowledgements

My interest in the theatre goes back as far as my earliest memories. As the child of a village schoolmaster, I found myself at an early age behind the scenes of the school's drama productions; as a youth in the north of England, I was quickly introduced to the boisterous worlds of music hall and community theatre; as a university student and subsequently a university teacher, I exchanged the regional theatres of Newcastle, Leeds and Nottingham for the major theatre centres of London, Europe and North America. It has been a varied but fascinating progression in which I have encountered many, too numerous to record here, whose enthusiasm for and ideas about the theatre have served as catalysts to my own.

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Contents

Introduction	ix
Acknowledgements	xv
Part I A critical framework	
1 Theatres and worlds	3
2 Marking and merging horizons	22
3 Reconciling worlds	37
4 Generalizing about worlds	55
Part II The plays	
5 Pinero: <i>The Second Mrs. Tanqueray</i>	69
6 Ibsen: <i>A Doll's House</i>	91
7 Strindberg: <i>A Dream Play</i>	115
8 Brecht: <i>Life of Galileo</i>	142
9 Ionesco: <i>The Chairs</i>	172
10 Beckett: <i>Krapp's Last Tape</i>	199
11 Pinter: <i>Betrayal</i>	221
12 Conclusion	253
Notes	264
Selected bibliography	304
Index	315

Part I

A critical framework

