The Theatre Is for Listening

William Packard

It seems almost incredible that audiences should need to be adjured, even commanded, to listen carefully when they are in the theatre. Yet William Packard, poet, translator, author of poetic dramas finds thai modern audiences, beguiled chiefly by actions on the stage, do not listen as they did when poetry was the conventional language of the theatre. He exhorts them to listen well on those occasions when poetic drama is produced. One such occasion was the series of performances given during November by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts of Mr. Packard's new translation of Racine's Phidre, *in which the alexandrine line, common in the French theatre of the seventeenth century, was used with great skill.*

The Greek audiences were as attuned to the music of their spoken language as the poets who wrote for the theatre. The audiences knew when a Chorus went into a complicated verse form known as a strophe, that it was going to be followed by another, equally complicated verse form known as the antistrophe—and heaven help any actor in the Chorus who missed a beat or misplaced a stress, because the Greek audience would know it immediately, and sometimes it would take the actor offstage and punish him by giving him a good punch in the stomach.

Other audiences have also had outbursts of dissatisfaction with the spoken word. In 1830, when Victor Hugo's *Hernani* was produced at the Comédie Française, the text broke almost all the conventions of the classical alexandrine line: there was no absolute caesura, and sometimes the sense of a sentence spilled over from one line to the next. Unforgivable! The audience hooted, booed, and hissed this outrageous insult to the French theatre. But there were others in the audience who were delighted to hear poetry freed from all its artificial strictures; and men such as Gautier, Balzac, Delacroix, and Berlioz rose to cheer the new play.

Now, what is interesting to me is that these audiences were not reacting to *what* was being said in the theatre, but to *how* it was being said.

And I have always been fascinated by how poetry tests a theatre audience. The Japanese Noh theatre is extreme in its demands: the audience can never relax, it must keep on listening and imagining, in order to grasp the excellence of a performance. The poetry is incredibly subtle; here is an example from *Ikkaku Sennin*, a classical Noh play by Komparu Zemō Motoyasu. The Japanese phonetic text reads as follows:

byō ni wa kokuren itteki no mizu
o osame
kanae ni wa shōzan suhen no kumo
0 senzu
kyoku oete
hito miezu
kōshyō subō ao karishi
kozue mo ima wa kurenai no
aki no keshiki wa omoshiro ya

It is translated as follows:

1 scoop water from deep streams with my magic gourd,
I call forth all my art,
I lift up clouds that have folded over forests
and I make them boil swiftly,
then I play music.
But I play alone.
The mountains rise up high above the river banks.
Green leaves suddenly become the color of blood.
I play music and I play alone in autumn.

See what has been said in these nine lines: it is autumn, and therefore melancholy and nostalgic; a wizard is describing his magic art, then he begins to describe the beautiful countryside — but he is shut away in a cave, and so he is actually describing what he sees in his own mind. He tells us that he is alone, and we sense the poignance of a great man, someone like Prospero who has a magic wand and is able to do all sorts of things, yet he is shipwrecked on a lonely island, and no one comes to see him. All of this, in only nine lines. The audience must listen very carefully!

Or take the seventeenth-century French theatre of Racine. Here is a passage from the second act of *Phèdre,* in which Hippolyte is confessing his love to Aricie:

Moi, vous hair, Madame?
Avec quelques couleurs qu'on ait peint ma fierté,
Croit-on que couleurs qu'on ait peint ma fierté,
Quelles sauvages moeurs, quelle haine endurcie
Pourrait, en vous voyant, n'être point adoucie?
Ai-je pu résister au charme décevant...

It is translated as follows:

Madam, could I hate you?
No matter what they say or how they paint my pride,
do they suppose some beast once carried me inside?

What mind that is unkind, what heart that may be hard,
in viewing you, would not grow soft in its regard?
Could any man resist the charm of what you are ...

These are the alexandrines of the seventeenth-century French theatre; they have a more sweeping and mathematical rhythm than the pentameter lines of blank verse; and they have the nobility of style that is the essence of Racine. The French text is characterized by lucidity; by that I mean the diction has a crystal clarity, a controlled simplicity of vocabulary and image, and an elemental, heightened awareness of the word as a unit of speech. The language itself seems to have a polished surface, a "politesse" which belies a subtext of violent repression, incest, and alienation. Voltaire called the play the masterpiece of the human mind; and Jean-Louis Barrault describes the style as luminous, crystalline, complicated, circular, and symmetrical. Here, also, the audience must be prepared to listen very carefully.

But I think this faculty of listening is quite appropriate and natural. Drama is action, but it is not only the action of characters on the stage, it is also the action of language itself. Christopher Fry once said: "Poetry in the theatre is the action of listening." And T. S. Eliot, in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," wrote:

> The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythm are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse.

I think it is interesting to go through the prologues of Shakespeare's *Henry V,* and see how often the poet urges the audience to listen and imagine. He insists on it: the audience is not supposed to sit there like so much dead weight, it has to work to supply the dynamics of drama, all by itself. Listen, as the poet urges us to listen:

On your imaginary forces work.

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts . ..

And make imaginary puissance;
Think when we talk of horses that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass: for the which supply...

Linger your patience on; and well digest
The abuse of distance while we force a play.

Thus with imagin'd wing our swift scene flies
In motion of no less celerity
Than that of thought. Suppose that you have seen ...

Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege ...

Still be kind,
And eke out our performance with your mind.

Now entertain conjecture of a time ...

Yet sit and see;
Minding true things by what their mockeries be.

But now behold,
In the quick forge and working-house of thought...

your eyes advance,
After your thoughts ...

In your fair minds let this acceptance take.

It seems to me that in all of these magnificent prologues, Shakespeare is saying to his audience: listen, listen, listen, listen, listen. Our greatest poet can only do so much towards creating the plays on the printed page; when we confront them on the stage, we must be prepared to listen very carefully.

To be sure, we may have lost this faculty of concentrating on the language of a play, of becoming attuned to the music of the spoken word, of letting ourselves receive the rhythm and meter of poetry in the theatre. I prefer to think we have simply been lulled into a situation of nonlistening. But we can still arouse ourselves to this experience of hearing.