

American Avant-Garde in the 60's 1

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What I would like to discuss today is the great period of the American avant-garde in the 60s. It's a very interesting period, and it is slightly difficult to suggest what it was all about, since there are few traces left, because it was mostly images, it was mostly performances and interventions, but there are few plays left that you can read now, for the very good reason that this kind of theatre turns back precisely to a written play by an author, and preferred different techniques such as improvisation. And what happened then was an experience which the spectators had, but we cannot share this experience as readers years later.

Still, I think I'll try to give you an idea not only of what they did, what these performers did, but an idea also of the influence it may have had, it had rather, on even contemporary theatre. And before I do that, I'd like to make a connection between the past and the present. We discussed Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

In a way, they represent the past, they represent a traditional way of writing for the theatre, with a director directing their plays and actors acting them, but the past is not totally dead. And there's a very recent article in the *New York Times*, it's the *Sunday Times* of February the 9th, 1986, so it's very recent, and it is in the arts section, a roundtable by five playwrights who still write today, some of them famous, some of them not so famous, and the title which was given is "What Forces Drive the Modern Playwright?" An alternate title is "Why Write for the Theatre?" This is a good question indeed. And in the currently active playwrights, Arthur Miller is one of them, so I thought you might be interested.

The others are Athol Fugard, who originally came from South Africa, David Mamet, and Wallace Shawn. And they all agreed, the newspaper says, that although there is no strong public demand for players dealing with political and social issues, they still think that this is

their primary calling. So, they all have this in common, that they feel they must deal with political and social issues. Of course, social issues may be very general, you are not necessarily red or radical because you deal with social issues. And they had a common concern, which was, and this is an economic factor, the escalating cost of theatrical production. Broadway is becoming more and more expensive. And this was summarized by Arthur Miller as “the heart of the beast”. Alright, so the thing that we can remember about this roundtable is, for one, the motivations for writing, they all also seem to agree about this. And this was summarized as follows. “You've said”, the journalist said, “that a play gets written when the external specifics of a story run parallel to a very private need to make a personal statement.”

And I think this is a good summary of what it is to write for the theatre, because you have a private need to make a statement. If you write a play, you are writing the play, it is something personal. At the same time, you disappear from the story as it is told. The author of the play does not appear as such on stage. He does not speak in the first person, so he disappears, and he has to invent a story which has some objectivity.

This is a job which, Arthur Miller said, and I think it's interesting to have a statement by Arthur Miller as recent as February 1986. He says, “You don't have to be a playwright, I'll quote him, to be a playwright. You not only have to be a writer, you have to be an alligator. It's so tough that you have to fight back. A lot of writers are not alligators. I mean, in my lifetime, he goes on to say, I've known 10 or 12 people who are really talented people, but they couldn't take the abuse. You know, a playwright lives in an occupied country. He's the enemy, and if you can't live that way, you don't stay.”

This is rather a bitter statement on the part of somebody who is one of the most successful playwrights in America. But it is tough. It is well known that it is tough. And Miller says he's got, that is the playwright again, “he's got to be able to take a whack. And he's got to swallow bicycles and digest them.” Well, that's a good image, to swallow bicycles and digest them. There is a repression, I think, finally, as a result of the prevailing taste. And this is a problem which innovative playwrights have always had. It's true. Do you go into the grain of the prevailing taste, or do you go against it? And he says that it is reinforced by critics who voice it.

It is true that the press has a tremendous importance, and that playwrights are waiting for reviews as if they were young kids waiting for the results of an exam, even if they are famous. "There has been, this is Miller again, there has been a kind of an automatic admiration of the parodistic idea". And this is a new trend which certainly Miller does not share. He is not on the humorous side, and he has no sense of parody. He is somebody who takes his business seriously. "In other words, it is better that the emotion not be directly expressed. The theatre has eliminated a lot of pain. I remember a time", and this is the time of the plays we were mentioning last time, the time of *After the Bridge*, for instance, or *Death of a Salesman*. "I remember a time when it was directly the opposite. Namely, that important work was thought to be work that never let them off the hook." Never let them, that is the audience, of course. "Can you quote an example?", the other writer asks. Well, says Miller, "all the plays that I was trying to write, all the plays that playwrights like O'Neill were trying to write, that Tennessee was writing, these were plays that would grab an audience by the throat and not release them. Rather than presenting an emotion which you could observe and walk away from." And you know that this is the Brecht theory of alienation, that you have to be able to watch your own emotion instead of being submerged by it. Because if you want to raise your consciousness of an event, you have to understand the mechanism. And if you are submerged by emotion, you are in no position to judge. So this is, I would say, an anti-Brechtian statement by Miller, except that he is describing the situation. He is not saying this is fine or this is not fine.

"I know very responsible people who say, that's him, I don't want to go to the theatre and experience pain. I want two hours to go by where I have quote-unquote pleasure." So this is not Brecht again. This is the idea that emotion is necessarily painful emotion and people want to escape from this. So, it is theatre again as escapism or theatre as entertainment. And we can understand that Miller is not in that position.

Miller says that, "I don't really think, he says, that Blanche Dubois or Willy Loman, Blanche Dubois is the heroine that you are studying of *The Streetcar Named Desire*. And Willy Loman is also the hero that you are studying of *The Death of a Salesman*. I don't think they would be forthcoming today. Certainly, the critical fraternity, and I think when he says fraternity, it's a little sarcastic here. The critical fraternity would say, well, it's a little too lush emotionally. Its coloration would be too romantic. So, we'll stop on this, on this idea that

romanticism is not the trend today. But romanticism was not the trend of the avant-garde, which I'm going to talk about now.

And this avant-garde is not centered around playwrights or writers. It is not even centered around directors. It is centered around artists, certainly. And the one who started the whole thing, as you will see, were not necessarily theatre people. Some of them were musicians. Some of them were painters or sculptors. All the arts communicated and merged in a way, blended, in order to create the new performance, which in some examples was called happenings. And this is what we are going to discuss today. It was not centered around a director, but it was very much centered around companies. Companies were created, and some of them almost amounted to being real communities. People did not only make theatre together, but they made love together. They lived together. They shared food and lodgings. And they experimented not only with the theatre, but with a new way of life. And while it lasted, it was a very exhilarating experience, a very exciting one, even for those who were not inside the performance groups, but who only shared this experience as spectators.

So, among the main companies which you will have to keep in mind, and which really left their mark on the American theatre, there is the Living Theatre with two figureheads, two charismatic persons, people. One man, one woman, Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Julian Beck just died very recently. And maybe I'll read an extract of the obituary.

Then, as a branch which came out of the Living Theatre, created by Joe Chaikin, C-H-A-I-K-I-N, that's the way his name is spelled, and who is an extraordinary actor. He's still alive, but very sick. And he has had what, I'm not going to deal with the sicknesses or health of the various artists, but in his case, it's very pathetic, because he cannot speak anymore, or can hardly speak. So, for an actor, for somebody who's devoted his life to communication, I think that the very fact of being deprived of his instrument is something which, well, all his friends say that he is totally aware of the situation, perfectly conscious of it, and he's trying to deal with it as best he can. So, he created the Open Theatre, which was very important for about ten years.

And then, we will also mention popular types of theatre with very strong political impact on minorities. The Bread and Puppet Theatre is one, and the Teatro Campesino is

another one. And then, since we have a play by Leroy Jones, I'll make a chapter, if I can call it, or a little sequence, on black theatre.

Then, I'd like to mention the "theatre of images", and here, two or three people emerge. There will be more than that, but if I mention too many, you will only get confused. So, one of them is Robert Wilson, who is perhaps the best known in Europe, and another one is Richard Foreman, who is more aggressive, and who has also a very strong personality. And if we have any time left, I'll say a few words about somebody like Meredith Monk.

But first, I'd like to go back historically to what started it all, and what started it all can be assembled under the name of happenings. Happenings means a different thing to different people, and in Europe, happenings, well, crossed the Atlantic and came over, and for a time, anything which was a little aggressive, violent, disorderly, or shocking, was called a happening. For instance, an artist who cuts his, not his throat, but at least his wrists in front of an audience, and you see his blood bleeding, and he puts his own blood all over his skin, this has happened. This is called a happening, but this is not the whole story. Happenings have one thing in common, even though the term covers a whole series of different events. Events was another name for them, or environments was still another name. They have in common that they are experimental. It can only last for a while. The shock of it can only last for a while. After that, as we shall see, it becomes a new convention. It becomes academic again. But for a while, the adventure was a very sincere one, and inventive artists gave happenings their strength. Maybe not their beauty, because beauty was not what they were looking for.

And there is a statement by John Cage, the musician John Cage, which I think sums this up very well. He says, art begins where beauty ends. This is something to be remembered and to, well, it's a good occasion for reflection. Art begins where beauty ends. John Cage, I mentioned this musician, and it all goes back, the happenings, to the experiments, which took place in North Carolina in the early 50s, as far back as that, in a place called Black Mountain College. You could say it was a sort of Royaumont sort of place, secluded place, where artists gathered, met, and did things together. There was, for instance, the painter Bob Rauschenberg. He was not as well-known as he is today, but he was experimenting with these big white paintings, just white canvas, painted white, and nothing on it, nothing on it except paint. And by looking at them, you became conscious of the grain of the cloth, of the canvas, and of the

brush. You had to see the material more. And then you were looking at white space, and this is a place where you could dream up things. Anyway, this is what he was doing.

Then there was the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. There were poets such as Charles Olson or M.C. Richards, and there was a pianist called David Tudor. And what he did was not exactly music, but what was called pianisms. And John Cage, who is the author of a book called *Silence*, is very much interested not only in music and the composition of music, but in sounds, and sounds as opposed to silence, and in the sounds which are included in what is called silence. He says about sounds, I quote him, a single sound by itself is neither musical nor not musical. It is simply a sound. And no matter what kind of a sound it is, it can become musical by taking its place in a piece of music. So logically, what did he do? In one of these activities, they were called activities, you will please notice, that is to say they were not called performances. And there is an importance there, a difference which I'll maybe explain. In one of these activities, the spectator was placed in the centre. Why was that? Because, this was one of his theories, that way the experience of each spectator is unique. When you have the "scène à l'italienne", or "picture frame stage", everybody is facing the same thing, and if you are a little to the left, or a little to the right, it is immaterial, you still see the same thing, you are meant to see the same thing. If you are in the centre, and what takes place is around you, it's either in your back, or to your left, to your right, no two spectators see the same thing at the same time.

And the musical activity which took place in this surrounding has remained famous, and you cannot, well, copy it perhaps, but it is a good example of what could be done. It's called "4'33". "4'33", it could be inches, but it's probably 4 minutes and 33 seconds, because this is how long it lasted, so there was a grand piano in the room where the spectators were assembled, and David Tudor opened the lid of the piano, and he did it three times, because it was a piece in three movements, but it was a totally silent piece.

It was not a gag, a Woody Allen type of gag, it was meant to attract the attention of spectators to what they heard when they were listening. They were given an occasion to listen, they were told something was going to happen for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, and during that period of time, they were attentive to every crack of chairs, or people coughing, or embarrassment, all the little things that you hear when people are assembled. And this piece

has remained, well, it was shocking, so people were outraged and reacted, and others understood what it was all about.

Another thing which John Cage does, and I don't think this is not related to the theatre, because it has had a tremendous influence on what has been done in the theatre later by people like Bob Wilson, for instance, even though the music he uses is not John Cage's music, but the repetitive music of people like Philip Glass. Still, it has been an influence. So, he wanted to turn the piano into a percussive instrument, and of course, this is all paradoxical, since there are so many other instruments which are percussive, but he wanted to distort the sound of the piano. So, he invented the prepared piano by inserting a bolt, or a large wood screw, between two strings, and soon he had a whole gamut of sounds. He says about this, "the piano had become a percussion orchestra under the control of a single player". Another thing which he has brought to music, and which has had an influence on the theatre, a certain type of theatre, is indetermination. And this is under the influence of Zen, the *I Ching* book, for instance, the *Book of Chance*, which was also used in another context by the Living Theatre. John Cage composed the *Music of Changes*, in which a lot is aleatory, that is to say, there is the intervention of chance. I said it had an influence on the theatre. Here I would like to quote Julian Beck, whom I mentioned before, the director of the Living Theatre. And in a sort of preface he wrote in 1967, called "Storming the Barricades", and "Storming the Barricades" shows how radical and political or revolutionary the Living Theatre considered itself, and he pays an homage to John Cage as the first innovator. This is what he says, "the first concern, the first special event ever presented by the Living Theatre was arranged by John Cage at the Cherry Lane Theatre. We presented the premiere of his *Music of Changes*. By using methods of chance and indeterminacy to construct his work, he was saying to us all", and here Beck is quoting Cage, "get rid of all this misdirected conscious dominion. Let the wind blow through. See what can happen without the government of sweet reason."

So I repeat this statement, because it's important, "see what can happen without the government of sweet reason". And there is a sense of freedom, the term freedom is something which could come over and over again to describe all the experiments which were to follow. There was a sense that you did not want to be constricted by rules anymore, you did not want to obey orders, you wanted to please yourself and let the wind blow to take the same image.

The effect of chance has been tried on painting also, and Julian Beck mentions, for instance, the painter Arp with his pieces of paper arranged according to the laws of chance, and the accidental drips and splashes used by Kandinsky, Picasso and Pollock to take a few examples.

The same thing, the same method applied to the theatre means improvisation. In *The Connection*, one of the early plays by the Living Theatre, Judith Malina had arranged an atmosphere in which the actors could improvise lines, the lines they were saying, and actions, even actions on stage. In the context of the play, though, never straying too far, but given the general context, they could put some improvisation. And Beck says, "often terrific moments emerged. An atmosphere of freedom, as I was saying, in the performance was established, and this seemed to promote a truthfulness, startling in performance, which we had not produced before. "

So why this atmosphere of improvisation and liberty? "To obtain, I quote again, a truthfulness." The theatre is artificial. The theatre lies, which does not mean that they are not going back at times to artificial devices. For instance, they performed *Les Bonnes*, *The Maids*, by Genet, and this is purely a piling up of artifice on artifice. But, even though lying and pretending and putting on masks and playing a part is exactly what it's all about, even in that context, you can attain a truthfulness, and that's what they were after. And we cannot be surprised that they added to their repertory at one point the play by Pirandello, *Ce soir on improvise*, in English, *Tonight We Improvise*. They were naturally interested in Pirandello.

You may wonder where the term happening actually comes from, if it has been used by the artists themselves, or if it is a term which has been used by critics as a convenient label. Well, it has been used. It has a historical beginning. It was invented, if I may say invented, by Allan Kaprow at the Rubin Gallery in New York in 1959. And what he did then was called *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. And the subtitle was *Something to Take Place, a Happening*. The initial idea for him was an action collage, and you may wonder what an action collage is. This is how he describes his experiment. I quote him, I developed a kind of action collage technique, following my interest in Pollock. These action collages, unlike my constructions, were done as rapidly as possible by grasping up great hunks of varied matter.

Tin foil, straw, canvas, photos, newspaper, etc. The straw, the tin foil, occasional food, whatever it was, each of these had increasingly a meaning that was better embodied in the various non-painterly materials than in paint. Their placement in the ritual of my own rapid action was an acting out of the drama of tin soldiers, stories and musical structures that I once had tried to embody in paint alone. So, he's not interested in painting anymore, but in acting out a drama, and this is where it comes close to the theatre, and this is what we will have to discuss next.