4.
The Play's the Thing

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> Unity in diversity must be our social ideal, and it is this that drama in its very nature does expound and, through the sympathetic power of impersonation, interpret. This is the drama's secret.
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> —Harley Granville-Barker, *The Exemplary Theatre*

Should I or shouldn't I? The opportunity to lead another seminar for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute had thrown me into some uncertainty. I couldn't deny that my seminar of the previous year, on the teaching of writing, had been on balance fairly satisfactory. But it had brought home to me the tremendous disparity between the usual educational and social assumptions of a university classroom and those necessarily made by secondary- and middle-school teachers in New Haven. And it had reminded me that any group of such teachers would turn out to be surprisingly diverse in background, ability, and educational interests. I hadn't found it easy to keep a single conversation going that would include the teachers' college graduate in her sixties who wanted to enliven her seventh-grade class in remedial reading, the Stanford graduate in her early thirties now working with imaginative but unruly adolescents in an "alternative" high school, and that intense young man who hoped to prepare his more talented seniors for advanced placement at his alma mater, the University of Connecticut.

That seminar had worked, I thought, only because our concern for improving writing was multiform or protean enough to bring together, at least momentarily, our various levels of preparation and our various educational missions. Our shared concern had allowed me to serve as a mediator and resource person while the Fellows proceeded to develop their curriculum units, each directed toward some aspect of our larger "writing problem" in a manner suited to a specific classroom. But how could I cope with such diversity in another seminar, which would have to deal with a more literary subject? What connections could we find between

the college teaching of a "period" or "genre" and the evident needs of these teachers? What could be our unifying focus?

On reflection, it seemed to me that the seminar's Fellows and its leader might all stand a chance of learning something useful if we took "drama" as our subject and "performance" as our point of attack. That might pose some questions and provide some opportunities that would be new for all of us, regardless of our previous experience as teachers of English or foreign language. It might provide us, therefore, with some common ground for exploration. Not that such a foray in the direction of "performance" would be utterly novel. During the past few decades there has been a rapid expansion in the field of educational drama. Role-taking and role-playing have entered many kinds of classrooms. Secondary schools and colleges have introduced not only courses but often whole departments devoted to drama. And at every level many teachers of English or foreign language are asking their students to do some reading of plays aloud, if only as an aid to overcoming the barriers separating them from a written language that seems difficult or alien. Nevertheless, we are still far from realizing the vision of Harley Granville-Barker, that remarkable actor-director-dramatist-and-scholar, who argued in 1922 that a "theatre as school" should be a central model for education in a democratic society. What would happen if our seminar tried afresh to move toward Granville-Barker's vision of the possible?

The professional school that Granville-Barker had proposed would focus on the "co-operative reading" of scripts, in seminars requiring that every student assume by turns the roles of interpreter, actor, director, and critic. It would be the task of those teaching such seminars to lead a heterogeneous group toward a fresh and creative reconciliation of their emerging views about the play in question—a reconciliation not just formulated in words but tested and partly discovered through enactment. The learning involved in this process would be at once intellectual, emotional, visual, and kinesthetic. Its social dynamics, Granville-Barker argued, would constitute the best possible preparation for life in a democratic society. Indeed, its final aim would be the continual rediscovery of the truth that a creative consensus can emerge only as each individual in a group begins to learn the art of seeing and experiencing oneself as "other," and the other as "oneself."

Even in our colleges and universities, experiments in this direction have been isolated and sporadic. They have been discouraged by our departmentalization of subject matter, our all-too-frequent emphasis on passive reception of the oral and written word, and our recognition of the already heavy burdens upon every teacher. But there have also been more specific obstacles. On the one hand, departments of theatre often combine courses

in theatre history and dramatic literature with "practical" courses that, in their emphasis upon production, tend to require the same uneasy mixture of authoritarian control and egocentric talent that feeds the commercial theatre. (Work with a genuine ensemble company no doubt constitutes an important exception to this generalization.) On the other hand, departments of English and foreign language often treat a play as if it were a fiction that just happens to have been written in dialogue. Not that we ever say as much. Richard David's wry reflection in *Shakespeare in the Theatre* might easily be echoed with respect to other playwrights: "That Shakespeare's plays were written for the theatre, and only in the theatre develop their full impact, has become the commonplace of criticism. . . . Nevertheless I suspect that much of this is no more than lip-service." Though J. L. Styan and others have long argued that we should read scripts as "scores" for performance, and though many teachers may agree with the directors and playwrights who have declared that the "play" is what goes on among actors and between actors and audience, our classroom activities usually remain insulated from such recognitions.

John Russell Brown's recent *Discovering Shakespeare* provides a striking indication of this state of affairs. It proposes a "revolution" in the classroom study of Shakespeare. Students should first engage the plays, Brown argues, not as interpreters of literature but as potential actors, directors, and members of an audience—and he provides a useful variety of pedagogical exercises along these lines. But the fact that he can propose such a revolution in 1981, after some two decades of work in this direction by himself and other writers and teachers, suggests how completely we have ignored the challenge of Granville-Barker's "exemplary theatre." Certainly we are far from experiencing what Granville-Barker himself thought would be the influence of his "theatre as school" upon secondary education. "We may also suppose," he had said, "that when the effect of the school's work has filtered down into general education the co-operative study of plays will be finding, in a simple form, a place in most classes for boys and girls of fourteen to sixteen."

Of course, since 1922 both the theatrical and the educational scenes have become much more complicated. Any attempt to approach Granville-Barker's vision today must reckon with a multitude of developments beyond his imagining—in the themes and styles of modern drama, in the various disciplines of acting, in psychological theory and practice, in pedagogy and educational drama, and in our social contexts. But those developments might offer our seminar, I began to think, a useful range of opportunities—even if we had to approach them by the limited routes available to classroom teachers of literature or language. Working together, but with individual emphases that would accord with our various

preparations, temperaments, and institutional contexts, we might set ourselves the task of introducing drama itself more fully into courses that had hitherto been dealing only with "dramatic literature" or with language skills. In doing so, we might begin to engage motivations and elicit perceptions of which we hadn't thought our students capable. We might stumble on some new areas for interdisciplinary teaching. In any case, we would move ourselves somewhat closer to the demonstrable—which is to say, the *actable*—meanings of the dramatic texts we read and teach.

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The library resources for a seminar of the kind I began to imagine certainly seemed ample enough. For a survey of the disciplines informing dramatic activities in the classroom we might turn to Richard Courtney's *Play, Drama and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Drama in Education.* Those interested in a somewhat narrower but more fully developed argument for the central role of aesthetic activity in education, stressing the visual and the psychological, might find it in Herbert Read's *Education Through Art.* (Were I to try another version of the seminar, I would also want to direct people to Robert J. Landy's recent *Handbook of Educational Drama and Theatre,* which reports on the great variety of dramatic activities now used in the educational process.)

More immediately useful for the Fellows of the seminar, I suspected, would be J. L. Styan's *The Elements of Drama,* which sets forth with admirable clarity the notion of the script as a "dramatic score." Some of Styan's later books—*Chekhov in Performance, Shakespeare's Stagecraft,* and *Drama, Stage and Audience*—develop more fully the implications of a "performance-oriented" pedagogy and criticism. Important, too, might be books by John Russell Brown—not only *Discovering Shakespeare* but also the earlier *Free Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance.* And three books by Peter Arnott—*An Introduction to Greek Theatre, An Introduction to French Theatre,* and *The Theater in Its Time*—might help to open up the history of theatre in a complementary way.

If we became intrigued by the opportunities and responsibilities of directorial interpretation, we could turn to a few books that suggest much of the major activity in that field during the past century: *The Seagull Produced by Stanislavsky,* Bernard Dukore's *Bernard Shaw, Director,* Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy's *Directors on Directing,* John Fernald's *Sense of Direction,* Harold Clurman's *On Directing,* and Peter Brook's *The Empty Space.* If we wanted to consider Constantin Stanislavsky's approach to acting, which has inspired the dominant methods in American schools of drama, we might sample it in *An Actor Prepares, Building a Character,*

and *Stanislavsky's Legacy.* Perhaps, however, we would find Richard Boleslavski's *Acting: The First Six Lessons* and Michael Chekhov's *To the Actor* more easily accessible introductions to Stanislavsky's insights. In any case, we might find ourselves then turning to Pamela Price Walker's *Seven Steps to Creative Children's Dramatics,* which felicitously adapts the rudiments of that approach to the needs of elementary or secondary education.

I suspected that we might find in "improvisation" many potential applications to our work in the classroom. The richest and most influential book of theatre exercises and games is no doubt Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater.* Some teachers might rightly feel, however, that it has all the daunting compendiousness of a book of recipes when the real question is: What will exactly suit my five guests this Friday evening? Joseph Chaikin's *The Presence of the Actor* and Robert Pasolli's *A Book on the Open Theatre* might be more helpful at first, in suggesting how improvisational work can be integrated into the on-going experience of an ensemble company. For the teacher of any subject on any level, I thought, Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* would be an admirably wide-ranging and unsettling book. One might also wrestle with Clive Barker's provocative *Theatre Games.* And more directly applicable to the usual secondary-school curriculum would be such books as Louis John Deszeran's *The Student Actor's Handbook,* Jack Preston Held's *Improvisational Acting,* and Milton Polsky's *Let's Improvise.*

Surely some of the seminar's Fellows might be interested in relating drama to the teaching of writing. Granville-Barker's idea of "co-operative reading" rather easily correlates with at least some aspects of what Edwin Mason writes of in *Collaborative Learning* and Kenneth A. Bruffee has been applying in English courses at Brooklyn College. Though they have rather different philosophical bearings, Granville-Barker and Bruffee both assume that the mind is inherently social, that knowledge is consensual, and that how we learn is therefore inseparable from what we learn. Bruffee's suggestions for classroom procedures might be sampled in *A Short Course in Writing;* his theoretical grounding might be observed in his recent articles in *Liberal Education.* For hints about ways of relating playscripts to the practice of writing, however, we might turn first to Bernard Grebanier's *Playwriting* and Sam Smiley's *Playwriting: The Structure of Action.* Geraldine Brain Siks' *Children's Literature for Dramatization* might provide another way into this subject. And Keith Johnstone's *Impro* would again be useful, this time for its lively demonstrations that absolutely anyone can be led to discover and unleash his or her inhibited powers of verbal creativity.

Indeed, my list of initial resources had swiftly become rather unwieldy.

No matter how far the individual Fellows might want to range in developing their own curriculum units, we would need to focus our scheduled ten meetings on a few areas that could provide us with some quite specific common ground. But how could I begin to shape such a seminar?

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From here on, my present narrative will be more coherent and perhaps more useful if it manages to blend the autobiographical and the hypothetical. For me the process of discovery continued past the early stages of planning and well on into the give-and-take of the seminar actually offered. The following sketch is therefore based on that first attempt with the Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, but it is modified and amplified in directions that I would now think valuable to explore on some other suitable occasion.

First a few ground rules: The Institute assumes that by and large the seminar leaders drawn from the University faculty will provide the major competence and initiatives in the area of "subject matter," and that the Fellows drawn from the faculties of New Haven middle schools and secondary schools will provide the major competence and initiatives in the area of pedagogy. This understanding is a primary support for the "collegiality" without which the seminars would rapidly deteriorate into fairly conventional classes. The Institute further assumes that the seminars will engage in some common reading, from a list drawn up by the seminar leader in consultation with the Fellows; and that each Fellow will also prepare a curriculum unit on a related subject for use in his or her own classroom. Since the stages of the units in preparation also provide part of the agenda for seminar discussions, the double aim of "subject matter" and "pedagogical application" is clearly located at the very center of the process.

Any seminar on ways of approaching, interpreting, and using drama in the classroom—or, for that matter, on the teaching of writing—will necessarily blur the dualism of these convenient assumptions. Indeed, it is probably true that, at bottom, no "subject matter" is ever really separable from the procedures that have established it or the pedagogy through which it is transmitted. In any case, what we needed for our seminar was both a body of common reading and some common immersion in practical activities. It seemed to me that, insofar as possible, the seminar should incorporate on an adult level a direct experiencing of the co-operative reading and learning that the Fellows might then begin to introduce in appropriate ways into their own classrooms. There would be, of course,

some necessary limitations. Because the writing of the curriculum units would proceed in specified stages concurrently with the seminar activities, any additional writing assignments would have to be quite brief. And the seminar sessions themselves should make ample room for presentations by the Fellows of material or activities relating to their own on-going projects.

The aim of the seminar could be stated simply: to lead adults toward an understanding of scripts as "scores" for performance, and to facilitate their preparation of units designed either to lead their own students toward fuller understanding of drama or to employ drama as a means toward some other curricular goal. The group ought to be organized as far as practicable, I thought, both as a seminar in "cooperative reading" and as a beginning ensemble company. Sessions might include some lecture, but more reading and discussion, and a fairly steady involvement in theatre games and exercises, as well as regular presentations or pedagogical initiatives by the Fellows themselves. The main work together ought to provide a variety of bases for the most likely spinoffs that the Fellows would be interested in developing.

The Fellows in our Institute seminar rather strenuously resisted some of my suggestions for common reading and my initial overtures in the direction of ensemble work. They wanted to spend much more of the time on their own presentations. It seems to me now that the seminar requires somewhat stronger leadership than I chose to exercise on that occasion—and a fuller commitment to group work. I would still, however, want the Fellows themselves to be responsible for introducing a fairly large proportion of the seminar's activity. One possible outline for the ten sessions would incorporate elements of story theatre, theatre games, drama concerned with ethnic and family themes, Shakespeare, and modern responses to Shakespeare. My experience with Fellows of the Institute certainly suggested that exploration in all these directions would be likely. The sequence might be plotted out as follows:

Session 1: Organizational meeting. Introduction of the seminar's aims. Negotiation of a list of readings and activities.

Session 2: Finding the action. Approaches to Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story.* Preliminary discussion of the shape and meaning of the play, bringing out opposed views and moving toward at least a partial consensus. Then a testing of the value of that consensus, and an inevitable re-opening of the questions it had provisionally answered, through attempts to approach that shape and meaning in group readings, with roles assumed by various Fellows. (Granville-Barker provides a fairly detailed description of the dialectical stages in this process.) Introduction here of the notion of

the script as "score": subtext, non-verbal action, cues for performance. (J.L. Styan's introductory approach would be very helpful.)

Session 3. Theatre games and improvisational theatre. Exercises as ways of approaching the dramatic, as distinct from the merely verbal, substance of a play. Work with some parts of Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre.* Consideration of Paul Sills' *Story Theater.*

In sessions 4-9, the seminar would regularly include some work with theatre exercises, and also presentations or pedagogical initiatives by one or two Fellows. Beyond that, the attention would be on different kinds of drama and different ways of approaching or using the plays in the English or foreign-language classroom.

Session 4. Leroi Jones' *Dutchman.* Theatre games and exercises as a way of approaching a dramatic situation. Because Lila in *Dutchman* is playing a version of "Who Game," and because radical transformations in dramatic mode and character behavior are central to that play, one might lead up to it through such exercises (described by Spolin and Pasolli) as "Passing and Receiving," "Imaginary Objects," "Who Game," and "Transformation and Relationship."

Session 5. Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge.* The issues engaged by plays that focus on family relationships and ethnic groups. Fictive autobiographies written by the students—and by the Fellows here, if possible—as a way of approaching their assigned roles.

Session 6. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.* The issues engaged by black drama. Helene Keyssar's *The Curtain and the Veil: Strategies in Black Drama* might provide several ways into this subject. Improvised scenes as a way of approaching a play's subtexts.

Session 7. Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* Exercises for use in the English class: approaches to the reading of dramatic poetry; in-class rehearsal techniques; improvisation and translation as means of finding the action; written exercises that expand the script toward an imagined performance—from brief amplifications of "intention" and "subtext" to full "staging papers," as Miriam Gilbert of the University of Iowa taught me to call them.

Session 8. Ionesco's *Macbett.* Modern responses to Shakespeare. Tragedy transformed into parodic and satirical farce. Finding a "playable style" for a script. Ways of employing drama in the foreign-language class.

Session 9. Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth.* Theatre games and "gibberish" exercises as the basis for a play. Possible digression on the wide-ranging theatrical, educational, and community activities of Ed Berman's Inter-Action in London, for which Stoppard wrote this play. Further uses of parody and pastiche. Shakespeare and political topicality.

Session 10. Final discussion of the Fellows' drafts for curriculum units.

Any such plan, I continue to believe, should be negotiated at the outset in order to accommodate as many of the Fellows' special needs and interests as possible. One could easily imagine substitutions for the plays listed. *The Zoo Story* and *Dutchman* are useful at early points because of their focus on two characters and their transformation of the realistic mode in which they seem to begin. But any two-character play might work here, and an adequately prepared group might be encouraged to engage Pinter's *The Dumbwaiter* or Strindberg's *Miss Julie* or Genet's *The Maids*. Questions of family relationships might be broached through Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, or—at another level—Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. Ethnic issues might be engaged through a series of short plays by Hispanic authors for high school students, as collected in Octavio Romano's *Chicano Drama*, or through Alice Childress' collection of individual scenes from modern black theatre, *Black Scenes*. The session on black drama might go on to engage Ed Bullins' *In the Wine Time* or Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The sequence on Shakespeare and his descendants could just as easily begin with *Hamlet*, move to Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, and culminate in Pavel Kohout's *Poor Murderer*, or Charles Marowitz's collage *Hamlet*, or Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Of course, with each substitution—and many others would be possible—a somewhat different range of issues would come into focus. Some substitutions would raise special problems of dramatic interpretation: choreographed poetry in *For Colored Girls*, Pirandellian ambiguity and expressionistic form in *Poor Murderer*, collage in the Marowitz. And no doubt each could provide suggestions for a somewhat different curricular emphasis in the middle or secondary school.

Nor would I want to preclude a session or two devoted to some other kind of activity that might meet the group's needs. One of our own most valuable sessions arose indirectly from my being invited to Hillhouse High School, where I sat in on the English class taught by one of the Fellows, joined her in an impromptu reading of *Macbeth*, I, vii, and then attended a school program prepared by the high school drama club. The program was excellent, and I was delighted when the Fellow at Hillhouse arranged to have those young black actors repeat it for our seminar. It consisted of the first half of *The Zoo Story* followed by the students' own collective composition—a "rap" version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* choreographed with the help of their drama teacher. That demonstration and our ensuing discussion with the students and their teacher did much to

convince the seminar Fellows of the applicability to their own curricular situations of Albee's play and Spolin's theatre games.

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As might be predicted, the interests of the Fellows in our seminar were quite various, and their curriculum units ranged widely in topic and approach. One, by a Fellow who had prepared a unit on Shakespeare the previous year, dealt with the teaching of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* to high school seniors—a formidable task concerning which I was glad to receive some enlightenment. Another unit focused on images of black women in drama—with scripts by Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Charlie Russell, Ntozake Shange, Ed Bullins, and others, and supplementary material drawn from poetry. Another unit, by a former teacher of German who was now shifting to English, dealt with the uses of improvisation, play-making, and dramatic presentation in the teaching of basic language skills. Yet another dealt with script-writing as a means through which to teach various elements of effective writing. One, by a supervisor of bilingual education, concerned the uses of drama in classes for English as a Second Language. One dealt with ways of leading students into a study of "The Family on Stage." And two units dealt in quite different ways with drama as a means of focusing adolescent problems of personal relationships and self-definition. Despite their variety, all of the units incorporated to an important degree the use of theatre games and exercises, improvisation, and the presenting of cuttings from plays. The aspect of our seminar work that the Fellows most frequently chose to omit, as they translated its concerns into their own curricular settings, was the analytical approach to dramatic form. That fact may reflect some inadequacy in my own presentation of such material; but it's also possible that another group of Fellows might demonstrate a rather different sense of educational priorities.

Because the curriculum units were prepared in stages as the seminar proceeded, with frequent opportunities for conference with the seminar leader and discussions with other Fellows, the process of writing bulked larger in our work than any outline of sessions might suggest. Indeed, some Fellows obviously found the writing of such a unit a rather formidable challenge. That's not surprising, and it has little to do with our specific topic. Consider what may be an extreme case: If one has been educated mainly by way of textbooks and lectures, with achievement determined by multiple-choice or short-answer examinations, and if one's own teaching has proceeded in a similar manner, one may well be a bit daunted by the task of defining a topic, narrowing it to manageable size, giving it

specific development, and translating it into a series of activities or tasks for the classroom. Though the seminar's designated topic was "drama," its centrally agonizing and rewarding activity was often "writing." That fact, inherent in any liberal education worthy of the name, should have its own beneficial secondary effects upon the future teaching done by the seminar's Fellows.

In the early stages of their formulation, these curriculum units benefited greatly from discussion among the Fellows themselves. The professional life of the teacher in a middle or secondary school is often one of acute intellectual isolation. The opportunity to discuss common problems with one's peers may provoke a more valuable kind of learning than any direction provided by the seminar leader. I now think it might be useful to capitalize on that fact more fully than we managed to do in our seminar, by providing some early experiments in collaborative writing as well as some carefully controlled occasions for peer-criticism and editing of late drafts.

To say this, however, is to return by another route to the theme of Granville-Barker's proposal. Essentially the opportunity before us is the improvement of teaching and the enhancement of learning at both the college and pre-college levels through some adventures in collaboration: among institutions, among teachers from different educational settings, and among a diverse group of learners. The collaborative art of drama, threatened elsewhere by economic pressures and by competition from film and television, might find here an appropriately educational role. It would be the role that, two generations ago, Granville-Barker had wanted it to play.