

## THE GOLDEN FISH

Peter Stephen Paul Brook

Each time I speak in public, it is an experiment in theater. I try to draw the audience's attention to the fact that we are here and now in a theatrical situation. If you and I can observe in detail the process we are involved in at this very moment, then it will be possible for us to consider the meaning of theater in a much less theoretical way. But today the experiment is much more complicated. For the very first time, instead of improvising I have accepted to write a speech, because a text is needed for publication. My aim is to make sure that this will not harm the process, rather to use it to help make our experiment together all the more rich.

As I write these words, the author, “myself, number one,” is sitting on a hot summer's day in the South of France, trying to imagine the unknown, a Japanese audience in Kyoto—in what sort of hall, how many people, in what relationship—I can't tell. And whatever words I carefully choose, some of you will hear them through a translator in another language. Now, for you at this moment, “myself, number one” the author, has disappeared, he has been replaced by “myself, number two,” the speaker. If the speaker reads these words, his head bent over his paper, delivering the contents in a monotonous, pedantic tone of voice, the very words that seem lively as I put them down on paper, (and I hope will stay lively for a reader alone at home with this text) will sink in unbearable monotony, demonstrating once again what so often gives academic lectures a bad name. So “myself, number one” is like a playwright; he has to have confidence that “myself, number two” will bring a new energy and a new detail into the event. For those who understand English, it is the changes in the sound of the voice, the sudden changes of pitch, the crescendos, the fortissimos, the piano-pianos, the pauses, the silence—the immediate vocal music that carries with it the human dimension that can make you wish to listen and this human dimension is just the vehicle of what we—and our computers—least understand in a precise, scientific way. It is the vehicle of feeling, feeling leading to passion, passion carrying conviction, conviction being the only spiritual instrument that makes one man concerned with another. Even those of you who hear this at this moment in translation are not isolated from a certain energy

that begins gradually to link our attentions, for this energy reaches out into the room through sound and also through gesture; every movement the speaker makes, with the hand, with the body, whether conscious or unconscious is a form of transmitter—like an actor, I have to be aware of this, it's my responsibility—and you too play an active part, for within your silence is hidden an intensifier that sends your own private emotion back across our space, subtly encouraging me, amending my way of speech.

What has all this to do with theater? Everything.

Let us together be very clear about our starting point. Theater as a word is so vague that it is either meaningless or creates confusion because one person speaks about one aspect, another about something quite different. It is like speaking about life. The word is too big to carry meaning. Theater is not to do with buildings, nor with texts, actors, styles or forms. The essence of theater is within a mystery called “the present moment.”

“The present moment” is astonishing. Like the fragment broken off a hologram, its transparency is deceptive, when this stem of time is split open, the whole of the universe is contained within its infinite smallness. Here, at this moment, on the surface, nothing in particular is happening, I am speaking, you are listening. But is this surface image a true reflection of our present reality? Of course not. None of us has suddenly shaken off his entire living fabric: even if they are momentarily document, our preoccupation, our relationships, our minor comedies, our deep tragedies are all present, like actors waiting in the wings. Not only the casts of our personal dramas are here, but like the chorus in an opera, crowds of minor characters are also lined up ready to enter, linking our private story with the outside world, with society as a whole. And within us at every moment, like a giant musical instrument ready to be played, are strings whose tones and harmonies are our capacity to respond to vibrations from the invisible spiritual world which we often ignore and yet we contact with every new breath.

Were it possible suddenly to release into the open, into the arena of this hall all our hidden imageries and motions, it would resemble a nuclear explosion, and the chaotic whirlpool of impressions would be too powerful for any of us to absorb. So we can see why an act of theater in the present which releases the hidden collective potential of thought, image, feeling, myth and trauma is so powerful, and can be so dangerous.

Political oppression has always paid theater its greatest compliment. In

countries under the rule of fear the theater is the form the dictators watch closely and dread the most. For this reason, the greater our freedom, the more every act of theater must be understood and disciplined: to have meaning, it must obey very precise rules.

First of all, the chaos that could come from each individual releasing his own secret world must be unified into a shared experience. In other words, the aspect of reality that the performer is evoking must call up a response within the same area in each spectator so that for an instant the audience lives one collective impression. Thus, the basic material presented, the story or the theme, is above all there to provide this common ground, this potential field in which each member of the audience, whatever his age or his background can find himself united with his neighbour in a shared experience.

Of course, it is very easy to find a common ground that is merely trivial, superficial, and therefore of no great interest. Obviously, the basis that links everyone together must be interesting. But what in fact does “interesting” really mean? There is a test. In the millisecond of an instant when actor and audience interrelate, as in a physical embrace, it is the density, the thickness, the multilayeredness, the richness—in other words the quality of the moment that counts. Thus, any single moment can be thin, without great interest—or on the contrary, deep in quality. Let me stress that this level of quality within the instant is the unique reference with which an act of theater can be judged.

Now we must study more closely what we mean by a moment. Certainly if we could penetrate to the very core of a moment, we would find that there is no motion, each moment is the whole of all possible moments and what we call time will have disappeared. But as we proceed outwards into the areas in which we normally exist, we see that each moment in time is related to the moment before and the moment following, in an ever-unfolding chain. So in a theatrical performance we are in the presence of an ineluctable law. A performance is a flow, which has a rising and falling curve. To reach a moment of deep meaning, we need a chain of moments which start on a simple natural level, lead us towards intensity, then carry us away again. Time which is so often an enemy in life can also become our ally if we see how a pale moment can lead to a glowing moment and then in turn to a moment of perfect transparency, before dropping again to a moment of everyday simplicity.

We can follow this better if we think of a fisherman making a net. As he

works, care and meaning are present in every flick of the finger. He draws his thread, he ties the knots, enclosing emptiness with forms whose exact shape corresponds to an exact function. Then the net is thrown into the water, it is dragged to and fro, with the tide, against the tide, in many complex rhythms. A fish is caught, an uneatable fish, or a common fish good for stewing, maybe a fish of many colours, or a rare fish, or a poisonous fish or at moments of grace a golden fish. There is however a subtle distinction between theater and fishing that must be underlined. In the case of the well-made net, it is the fisherman's luck whether a good or a bad fish is caught. In the theater, those who tie the knots are also responsible for the quality of the moment that is ultimately caught in their net. It is amazing—the fisherman in his action influences the quality of the fish that lands in his net!

The first step is all-important—and this is far more difficult than it seems. Surprisingly, this preliminary step is not given the respect it deserves. An audience may sit waiting for a performance to begin, wanting to be interested, hoping to be interested, persuading itself that it ought to be interested. It will only be irresistibly interested if the very first words, sounds or actions of the performance release deep within each spectator a first murmur related to the hidden themes that gradually appear. This cannot be an intellectual, least of all a rational process. The theater is in no way a discussion between cultivated people. The theater, through energy, through the energy of sound, word, colour and movement, touches an emotional button that in turn sends tremors through the intellect. Once the performer is linked with the audience, the event can go in many ways. There are theaters that aim simply at producing a good ordinary fish that can be eaten without indigestion. There are pornographic theaters that aim willfully at serving fish whose guts are clogged with poison. But let's assume we have the highest ambition, we only wish in performance to try to catch the golden fish.

Where does the golden fish come from? We don't know. From somewhere, we guess, in that collective mythic unconscious, that vast ocean whose limits have never been discovered, whose depths never sufficiently explored. And where are we, the common man in the audience? We are where we are as we enter the theater, in ourselves, in our ordinary life. Thus, the making of the net is the building of a bridge between ourselves as we usually are, in our normal condition, carrying our everyday world with us—and an invisible world that can only reveal itself to us when the normal inadequacy of perception is replaced by an infinitely more acute quality of awareness. But is this net

made of holes or of knots? This question is like a koan and to make theater we must live with it all the time.

Nothing in theater history has so fully expressed this paradox as the structures we find in Shakespeare. In essence, his theater is religious, it brings the invisible spiritual world into the concrete world of recognizable shapes and actions. Shakespeare makes no concessions at either end of the human scale. His theater does not vulgarize the spiritual to make it easier for the common man to assimilate. It does not reject the dirt, the ugliness, the violence, the absurdity and the laughter of base existence. It slides effortlessly between the two, moment by moment, while in its grand forward thrust it intensifies the developing experience until all resistance explodes and the audience is awakened to an instant of deep insight into the fabric of reality. This moment can not last, truth can never be defined, nor grasped, but the theater is a machine which enables all its participants to taste an aspect of truth within a moment; theater is a machine for climbing and descending the scales of meaning.

Now we can face the real difficulty. Catching a moment of truth needs all the finest efforts of actor, director, author, designer to be united; no one can do it alone. Within one performance, there cannot be different aesthetics, conflicting aims. All techniques of art and craft have to serve what the English poet Ted Hughes calls a “negotiation” between our ordinary level and the hidden level of myth. This negotiation takes the form of bringing what is changless together with the ever-changing everyday world, which is precisely where each performance is taking place. We are in contact with this world every second of our waking life, through the reactions of our brain cells to the information recorded in the past and reactivated in the present through our senses. The other world which is permanently there, is invisible, because our senses have no access to it, although it can be apprehended in many ways and at many times through our intuitions. All spiritual practices bring us towards the invisible world by helping us to withdraw from the world of impressions into stillness and silence. However, theater is not the same as a spiritual discipline. Theater is an external ally of the spiritual way and it exists to offer glimpses inevitably of short duration, of an invisible world that interpenetrates the daily world and is normally ignored by our senses.

The invisible world has no form, it does not change; or at least not in our terms. The visible world is always in movement, its characteristic is flux. Its forms live and die. The most complex form, the human being, lives and dies, cells live and

die—and in exactly the same way, languages, patterns, attitudes, ideas, structures have birth, decline and disappearance. At certain rare moments in human history, it has been possible for artists to effect marriages so true between the visible and the invisible that their forms, temples, sculptures, paintings, stories, music seem to last eternally, though even here we must be prudent and recognize that for us even eternity is relative.

A practical worker in the theater, wherever he is in the world, has every reason to approach great traditional forms, especially those belonging to the East, with humility and respect. They can carry him far beyond himself—way beyond the inadequate capacity for understanding and creativity that the 20th century artists must recognize as his true condition. A great ritual, a fundamental myth is a door, a door that is not there to be observed, but to be experienced, and he who can experience the door within himself passes through it most intensely. So the past is not to be arrogantly ignored. But we must not cheat. If we steal its rituals and its symbols and try to exploit them for our own purposes, we must not be surprised if they lose their virtue and become no more than glittering and empty decorations. We are constantly challenged to discriminate. In some cases, a traditional form is still living, in another, tradition is the dead hand that strangles the vital experience. We can neither—from laziness nor from naivety—accept to do something the “accepted way,” nor can we—from another form of aggressive naivety—change for the sake of changing.

The central question, then, is one of form, the precise form, the apt form. We cannot do without it, life cannot do without it. But what does form mean? In Indian classical philosophy, they speak of “sphota,” a word whose meaning is in its sound—a ripple that suddenly appears on the surface of still waters, a cloud that emerges from a clear sky. A form is the virtual becoming manifest, the spirit taking body, the first sound, the Big Bang.

In India, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Japan, artists who work in the theater are asking the same question: what is our form today? Where must we look to find it? The situation is confused, the question is confused, the answers are confused. They tend to fall into two categories. On the one hand, there is the belief that the great cultural powerhouses of the West, London, Paris, and New York, have solved the problem and all that is needed to use their form—in the way that underdeveloped countries acquire industrial processes and technologies. The other attitude is the reverse—we have lost our roots, we are caught up in the wave of the 20th century, with

the desire to imitate foreign models—we must rediscover our heritage, return to our own cultural traditions, revive our ancient forms. We see that this is a reflection of the two great contradictory thrusts of our time, outwards towards unity, inwards towards fragmentation.

However, neither method produces good results. In many underdeveloped countries, theater groups tackle plays by European authors, such as Brecht or Sartre. Often they fail to recognize that these authors worked through a complex system of communication that belonged to their own time and place. In a completely different context, the resonance is no longer there. Imitations of the avant-garde experimental theater of the sixties encounter the same difficulty. So sincere workers in underdeveloped countries, in a natural state of pride and despair, dig into the past and attempt the modernizing of myths, rituals and folklore, but this often results in a poor mixture that is “neither fish nor fowl.”

How then can one be true to the present? Recently, I made a journey that took me to Portugal, Czechoslovakia and Roumania. In Portugal, the poorest of the West European countries, I was told “people don't go to the theater nor to the cinema any more.” “Ah” I said understandingly “With all your economic difficulties, people haven't the money.” “Not at all,” was the surprising answer. “It is just the opposite. The economy is slowly improving. Before, when money was scarce, life was very grey and an outing, whether to the theater or the cinema, was a necessity, so of course one saved up for it. Today, people are beginning to have a little more to spend and the entire range of 20th century consumer possibilities is within their grasp. There is video, video cassettes, compact discs and to satisfy the eternal need to be with other people there are restaurants, charter flights, package tours. Then clothes, shoes, haircuts...” Cinema and theater are still there, but they have sunk very low in the order of priorities. From the market-orientated West, I proceeded to Prague and Bucarest. Here again, as indeed in Poland, in Russia, in almost all the ex-Communist countries, there is the same cry of despair. A few years ago, people fought to have seats in the theaters: now they play often to no more than 25% of their capacity. Again, in a totally different social context, the same phenomenon, the theater no longer appeals.

In the days of totalitarian oppression, a theater was one of the rare places where for a short period one could feel free, one could either escape into a more romantic, more poetic existence or else be hidden and protected by the anonymity of an

audience, one could join by laughter or applause into acts of defiance of the authority. Line after line of a respectable classic could give the actor, by the slightest stress on a word or an imperceptible gesture, the opportunity to enter into a secret complicity with the spectator, thus expressing what otherwise was too dangerous to express. Now the need has gone and the theater is forced to confront an unpalatable fact—the gloriously full houses of the past were packed for reasons that in relation to a true theater experience were often illegitimate—otherwise, why should the theater not be continuing to attract people as before?

Let us look again at the situation in Europe. From Germany, all the way to the East, including the vast Russian continent, and also westwards through Italy to Portugal and Spain, there has been an unbroken series of dictatorships. The characteristic of all forms of totalitarian governments is that culture is frozen. No matter what the forms, they have no longer the possibility to live, die, and replace one another according to natural laws. A certain range of cultural forms is recognized as safe, respectable and is institutionalized—all other forms are considered suspect and are either driven underground or stamped out of existence. Now the period of the twenties and the thirties was for the European theater a time of extraordinary animation and fertility. The major technical explorations—revolving stages, open stages, lighting effects, projections, abstract scenery, functional constructions—were all achieved during this period. Certain styles of acting, certain relations with audiences, certain hierarchies—the place of the director, the importance of the designer—became established. They were in tune with their times. Then followed enormous social upheavals, wars, massacres, revolution and counter-revolution, disillusion, refusal of old ideas, hunger for new stimuli, and hypnotic attraction of all that is new and different. Today the lid has been lifted. But the theater, rigidly confident in its old structures has not changed. It is no longer part of its time. As a result, for so many reasons, all through the world the theater is in crisis. This is good, this is necessary.

It is of vital importance to make a clear distinction. “Theater” is one thing; “the theaters” is something quite different. “The theaters” are boxes and all the forms that seem so important are just the envelopes that carry the letters we wish to receive; we choose our envelopes according to the size and length of our communication. This creates a practical social problem. It is easy to throw an envelope into the fire, it is far more difficult to throw away a building, especially a beautiful building, even when we

feel instinctively that it has outlived its purpose. Harder still to discard are the cultural habits printed in our minds in terms of aesthetics, artistic practices and traditions. Yet “theater” is a fundamental human need, while “theaters” and their forms and styles are only temporary replaceable crutches.

So we can return to the problems of the empty theaters and we see the question cannot be one of reform—a word which in English quite precisely means remaking the old forms. As long as the attention is locked onto form, the answer will be purely formal—and disappointing in practice. If I am talking too much about forms, it is to stress that a quest for new forms cannot in itself be an answer. The problem for countries with traditional rituals or traditional theater styles is the same. If modernizing means putting the old wine in new bottles, the formal trap is still tightly closed. If the attempt for the director, the designer, the actor is to take naturalistic reproductions of present day images as a form, again he finds to his disappointment that he can hardly go farther than what television presents hour after hour.

A theater experience which lives in the present must be close to the pulse of the time, just as a great fashion designer, who is never blindly looking for originality, is mysteriously blending his creativity with the ever-changing surface of life. Theater art must have a surface—a human being is above all interested in life, in the life he knows. Theater art must also have a substance and a meaning. This substance is the density of the human experience, the meaning arises through the possibility of contacting the invisible source which gives meaning to meaning. So art is a turning wheel, rotating round the still center.

So what is our aim? A meeting with the fabric of life, no more, no less. Theater can reflect every aspect of human existence, so every living form is valid, every form can have a potential place in dramatic expression. Forms are like words, which only take on meaning when rightly used. Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of any English poet, constantly adding words at his disposal, combining obscure philosophical terms with the crudest of obscenities, until eventually there were 25,000 at his beck and call. In the theater, there are infinitely more languages beyond words through which communication is established and maintained with the audience. There is body language, sound language, rhythm language, object language, colour language, costume language, scenery language, lighting language—all to be added to these 25,000 available words. So, we can recognise that every element of life is like a word in a universal vocabulary.

Images from the past, images from tradition, images from today, rockets to the moon, revolvers, coarse slang, a pile of bricks, a flame, the hand on the heart, the cry from the guts, the infinite musical shades of the voice—these are like nouns and adjectives with which we can make new phrases. Can we use them well? Are they necessary, are they the means that make what they express more vivid, more poignant, more dynamic, more refined—more true?

Today, the world offers us a new possibility. This great human vocabulary can be fed by elements that in the past have never come together. Cultures can feed one another, while mingling cultures, mixing together cultural elements for vaguely fraternal reasons can produce a meaningless hotchpotch. However, when each race, each culture can bring its own word to a phrase which unites mankind, this is something quite different. Nothing is more vital to the theater culture of the world than the working together of artists from different races and backgrounds.

When separate traditions come together, at first there are barriers. When, through intense work, a common aim is discovered, the barriers vanish. The moment when the barriers vanish is the discovery of a new expressive form, it is the moment of truth, it is the moment to which all theater leads. These forms, as we have seen can be old or new, they can be ordinary or exotic, elaborate or simple, sophisticated or naive. They can come from the most unexpected sources, they can seem to be totally contradictory, even to the point of seeming mutually exclusive. In fact, if, in the place of unity of style, they scrape and jangle against one another, this can be healthy, this can be revealing.

The theater must not be dull. It must not be conventional. It must be unexpected. Theater leads us to truth through surprise, through excitement, through games, through joy. It makes the past and the future part of the present, it gives us a distance from what normally envelops us and abolishes the distance between us and what is normally far away. A story from today's newspapers can suddenly seem much less true, less intimate than something from another time, another land. It is the truth of the present moment that counts, the absolute sense of conviction that can only appear when the chemistry of performer and audience is present. There is a proof, a criterion, a reference. Only one. It appears when the temporary forms have served their purpose and have brought us into this single, unrepeatable instant when the door opens and our vision is transformed.

The writer of these words is one person. The reader is someone else. Those who are here in this hall are not those who at some future date may read these words, maybe in translation printed on a page. Yet the act of writing is not futile; the words are doing their best to bring a certain stream of thoughts to life. However, we can see that there is a natural difference. Something that those of us who are here are experiencing at this moment in terms of sound and sight, speech and listening, can not be captured and turned into a phrase. We who are here recognize this now. The future reader will accept this as self-evident as he reads this page, as a description of what was.

The difference between the two defines theater, a living act to make real what cannot normally be seen, to express what can never be put into words.