a director prepares

seven essays on art and theatre

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Stereotype

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> The problem with clichés is not that they contain false ideas, but rather that they are superficial articulations of very good ones. They insulate us from expressing our real emotions. As Proust himself put it, we are all in the habit of 'giving to what we feel a form of expression which differs so much from, and which we nevertheless after a little time take to be reality itself'. This leads to the substitution of conventional feelings for real ones.
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> (Christopher Lehman-Haupt)

In this chapter, I examine our assumptions about the meaning and uses of stereotype, cliché and inherited cultural memory. I am interested in these issues both from the point of view of the artist's interaction with them and the audience's reception of them.

In conversation with the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in a living room in San Diego, I started to suspect my deeply ingrained assumptions about stereotypes and

clichés. We were discussing actors and acting when he mentioned the dread word, 'stereotype'. Suzuki is renowned for his iconoclastic productions of Western classics done in a distinctly Japanese fashion. For many years he worked with the extraordinary world-class performer Kayoko Shiraishi. Some claim that she is the best actor in the world. With Suzuki, she created the central roles around which he built many landmark productions. In 1990 she left his company to pursue an independent career.

Through a translator, Suzuki intimated his chagrin that Shiraishi had been invited by Mark Lamos, then Artistic Director of Hartford Stage in Connecticut, to play Medea in a production at his theatre. Unhappy about the prospect of Shiraishi appearing in Lamos's production, Suzuki complained that the results would be unfortunate. At first I protested. What a wonderful idea for an actor of her skill and calibre to appear in a play at an American regional theatre. Suzuki still looked unhappy and I assumed a kind of *hubris* on his part; I thought that he was troubled by the notion of another director having a success with 'his' actor. Finally I began to understand that the reason was far more complex and fascinating.

Hartford audiences, Suzuki explained, would be charmed by Shiraishi's distinctly Japanese approach to acting because to them it would seem exotic. They would be enchanted with the Kabuki and Noh influences and by the remarkable way she spoke and moved. But, he continued, Lamos would not see the necessity of driving Shiraishi through these Japanese stereotypes towards genuine expression.

Audiences would be satisfied with the exoticism but would go home without the real goods.

Intrigued by Suzuki's mention of stereotype and by the dilemma that international exchange presents in the light of codified cultural behaviour, I wanted to pursue the subject.

In rehearsal, Suzuki went on, Shiraishi always started out as the weakest actor in the room. Everything she did was an unfocused cliché. While all the other actors managed to rehearse well, she would struggle crudely with the material. Eventually, 'fuelled by the fire he lit under her', as Suzuki described it, the clichés and stereotypes would transform into authentic, personal, expressive moments and finally, with the proper prodding, she would ignite and eclipse everyone around her with her brilliance and size.

The notion of putting a fire under a stereotype stopped me in my tracks. I started to wonder about the negative connotations around the word stereotype and about my persistent efforts to avoid them.

In my own rehearsals, I had always mistrusted clichés and stereotypes. I was afraid of settling on any solution that wasn't completely unique and original. I thought that the point of a rehearsal was to find the most inventive and novel staging possible. Suzuki's dilemma started me wondering about the meaning of the word stereotype and about how we handle the many cultural stereotypes we inherit. Should we assume that our task is to avoid them in the service of creating something brand-new, or do we embrace the stereotypes; push through them, put a fire under them until, in the heat of the interaction, they transform?

Perhaps stereotype might be considered an ally rather than an enemy. Perhaps the obsession with novelty and innovation is misguided. I decided to study this phenomenon and my assumptions around innovation and inherited tradition.

In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', T. S. Eliot suggests that an artist's work should be judged not by its novelty or newness, but rather by how the artist handles the tradition he or she inherits. Historically, he wrote, the concept of originality referred to the transformation of tradition through an interaction with it as opposed to the creation of something brand-new. More recently, the art world became obsessed with innovation.

Actually, the word stereotype stems from the Greek *stere*, solid or solid body; having or dealing with three dimensions of space. *Type* comes from the word pressure or pounding, such as the action of typing on a typewriter. In the original French, stereotypes were the first printing machines. A stereotype was a plate cast from a printing surface. The French verb *stereotype* means to print from stereotyped plates. The word cliché came from the sound of metal jumping when the ink dye is struck during the printing process.

The negative connotations first arose in the nineteenth century in England when stereotype began to refer to authenticity in art: 'The standardized figurative sense of an image, formula, or phrase cast in a rigid mould'. During the twentieth century, stereotype continued to accrue disparaging

definitions: 'An oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude or uncritical judgement; a set of wide generalizations about the psychological characteristics of a group or class of people; a rigid, biased perception of an object, animal, individual or group; a uniform, inflexible mode of behaviour; a standardized mental picture that's held in common by members of a group; to reproduce or perpetuate in an unchanging or standardized form; cause to conform to a fixed or preconceived type'.

I like that the etymology of stereotype refers to solidity. These inherited solid shapes, images and even prejudices can be entered and embodied, remembered and reawoken. If we think of a stereotype as three-dimensional, as a container, isn't it encouraging to interact with substantial shapes in the hyper-ephemeral art of the theatre? Isn't 'putting a fire' under inherited stereotypes a very clear and specific action in a field which is so much about remembering? The task is suddenly so concrete, so definite. A stereotype is a container of memory. If these culturally transmuted containers are entered, heated up and awakened, perhaps we might, in the heat of the interaction, reaccess the original messages, meanings and histories they embody.

Perhaps we can stop trying so hard to be innovative and original; rather, our charge is to receive tradition and utilize the containers we inherit by filling them with our own wakefulness. The boundaries of these containers, their limits, can serve to magnify the experience of entering them.

Because we can walk and talk, we assume that we can act. But an actor actually has to reinvent walking and talking to be able to perform those actions effectively upon the stage. In fact, the most familiar actions are perhaps the most difficult to inhabit either with fresh life or a straight face. When asked to walk downstage carrying a gun while saying the words 'You've ruined my life for the last time', an actor senses the danger that all of these sounds and movements might be hackneyed and predictable. The concern is real and concrete. If the actor has preconceived assumptions about how to perform the actions and words, the event has no chance to come to life. The actor must 'put a fire' under these clichés in order to bring them to life.

In life and in representations of life, so much has been done before and said before that they have lost their original meanings and have been transmuted into stereotype. Representations of life are containers for meaning which embody the memory of all the other times they have been done.

In 1984 I directed a production of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* with undergraduate acting students at New York University. I wanted to channel the sizzling energy of the original 1949 production, so we set our show in a clinic for war-damaged young people who had undergone stressful experiences in the then-current political crises in Grenada and Beirut. The clinic was a fictional invention which offered a contemporary context

in which the musical could be performed intact. Each actor played a 'client' whose therapy for their particular trauma was to play various roles in *South Pacific* as part of the graduation ceremony from the clinic.

The rehearsals began with an investigation of the underlying sexual and racial tensions inherent in the musical. I asked the actors to create compositions around specific themes. At one rehearsal I asked the men and the women to divide into male/female pairs. Each couple was to compose seven physical 'snapshots' illustrating archetypical patterns found in male/female relationships. The women were to portray men and the men women. I asked the men to guide the women in selecting and portraying the male archetypes, and the women were each to show their male partners how to embody the archetypes of women. I never anticipated the ensuing fireworks. The energy in the room as the actors created the snapshots accelerated until I thought that the roof would lift off the studio. Because of the gender switch, the actors felt the freedom to enter and embody certain taboo stereotypes with pleasure, zeal and intimacy. The interaction between the men and women was so intense that it affected our entire rehearsal process and galvanized the performances. Fire had been placed under the stereotypes of male/female behaviour.

Although sexual and behavioural stereotypes abounded in commercials, songs and movies, it was socially taboo during the 1980s for these young men and women to enact them. Exaggerated macho behaviour and stereotypical expressions of feminine acquiescence were politically

incorrect and the issue was a particularly heated one because it was considered exploitive of women and insensitive to men. But in the context of the rehearsal where the roles were reversed, the permission to recreate the clichés, to put the fire under the stereotypes, released a volatile and priceless energy within the stereotypical snapshots. The staging became a container for released energy. The result was sexy, vital and powerful performances by the young actors. The stereotypes became meaningful because they were presented to the audience outside a commercial context. We were not trying to sell goods; rather, within the context of theatre, audiences and actors alike dealt in a fresh and critical way with the sexual stereotypes we live with daily.

It is natural to want to avoid stereotypes because they can be oppressive and dangerous to certain people. For example, racial stereotypes make fun of and degrade people in a way that is hurtful and insulting. Stereotypes *can* be oppressive if they are blindly accepted rather than challenged. They *can* be dangerous because without 'putting the fire under them', they will reduce rather than expand. They can be negative because historically people have been reduced to the bias of stereotype.

The decision to position a minstrel show at the very heart of my production *American Vaudeville* required that everyone involved in it confront history and stereotype in a very personal and immediate way. Performed by the entire

cast of eighteen actors, the minstrel show was to be the centrepiece of our production.

American Vaudeville was one of a trilogy of plays I created about the roots of American popular entertainment. I wrote the play with Tina Landau and directed it at the Alley Theater in Houston, Texas, in 1991. A composite of rich American performance traditions, vaudeville flourished in the United States between 1870 and 1930. Within this populist entertainment empire, many cultures performed under the same roof with audiences from numerous immigrant backgrounds who gathered to enjoy the display of wit and spectacle. The acts, chock-full of stereotypes, were highly entertaining to a country of immigrants getting to know one another. Irish and German humour, family acts and minstrel shows were featured alongside Shakespeare, operatic renditions and new dance forms.

Handling ethnic stereotype in contemporary society presents certain ethical problems. For example, it would have been a misrepresentation not to include a minstrel show in our production because it was one of vaudeville's most popular components. But today, minstrelsy is rightly considered abhorrent; an insult to the African American community. And yet it represents a significant part of our cultural history. Minstrel shows were not only performed all over the United States but also as the first exported American entertainment, they toured the capitals of Europe to great acclaim. In minstrelsy it was common for white performers to put on blackface and enact the stereotypical behaviour of lazy black slaves. Black performers, in separate companies,

also put on black make-up with white lips and performed the exaggerated stereotypes to enthusiastic houses worldwide.

This historical paradox provided us with a very specific challenge. We did not want to comment upon the material, or put a spin on it, or put quotation marks around the event. But we did want to light a fire under the enactment of the minstrel show with our own wakefulness and empathy. We encountered and channelled the issues by performing the stereotypes.

The most traumatic and emotional moments happened the first time the actors put on blackface make-up. This action was particularly macabre for the three African Americans in the cast. In front of long mirrors we watched each actor transform into a black-face/white-mouth archetype. To apply the make-up, wear the costumes and enact the jokes, songs and dances, we faced and felt a piece of history. The audiences encountered a documentary embodiment, shapes of history filled with the reverberation of our actual engagement, sorrow and freedom. The result was powerful and reminded us in a living way of our own history. Through the embodiment of severe stereotypes, a small exorcism was performed.

Another approach to stereotype requires a purer use of the body as a conduit to the past. Certain traditions around the world developed prescribed physical techniques to channel authentic experience through time. These formulas must

be enacted without attempting to interpret them. The interaction with these forms is purer than the distortion necessary with culturally abused stereotypes and the result is a feeling of rapture as emotions are channelled.

Lisa Wolford's remarkable book *Grotowski's Objective Drama Research*, about the work Polish director Jerzy Grotowski conducted at the University of California at Irvine, describes Grotowski's investigation of the American Shaker tradition. If the indigenous songs and dances of the Shakers are embodied properly, he proposed, the performers would channel authentic experience from the elusive tradition of the Shaker community. The relatively simple Shaker movements and tunes had to be performed without embellishment or interpretation, simply concentrating on the steps and melodies in order to allow the actor access to authentic Shaker experience.

The Japanese use the word *kata* to describe a prescribed set of movements that are repeatable. *Katas* can be found in acting, in cooking, in martial arts as well as in flower arranging. The translation for the word *kata* in English is 'stamp', 'pattern' or 'mould'. In executing a *kata*, it is essential never to question its meaning but through the endless repetition the meaning starts to vibrate and acquire substance.

Americans are obsessed with freedom and often resent restrictions. I wonder if we have thought enough about the meaning of freedom? Do we mean the freedom to do or the freedom to be? Is it better to have the freedom to do anything we want any time we want, or to experience freedom as an internal liberty? Can you have both at the same time?

Perhaps we spend too much time concentrating on having the freedom to *do* what we want and proving that it is worthwhile. Perhaps we spend too much time avoiding *katas*, containers, clichés and stereotypes. If it is true that creativity occurs in the heat of spontaneous interaction with set forms, perhaps what is interesting is the quality of the heat you put under inherited containers, codes, and patterns of behaviour.

Many American actors are obsessed with the freedom to do whatever occurs to them in the moment. The notion of *kata* is abhorrent because, at first glance, it limits freedom. But everyone knows that in rehearsal you have to set *something*; you can either set *what* you are going to do or you can set *how* you will do it. To predetermine both *how* and *what* is tyranny and allows the actor no freedom. To fix neither makes it nearly impossible to intensify moments onstage through repetition. In other words, if you set too much, the results are lifeless. If you set too little, the results are unfocused.

So – if it is necessary to set something and also to leave something open, then the question arises, Do you set *what* is done or *how* it is done? Do you set the form or the content? Do you set the action or the emotion? Due to the pervasive American misunderstanding of the Stanislavsky system, rehearsals often become about eliciting strong emotions and then fixing those emotions. But human emotion is evanescent and ephemeral and setting the emotions cheapens the emotions. Therefore I believe that it is better to set the exterior (the form, the action) and allow the

interior (the quality of being, the ever-altering emotional landscape) freedom to move and change in every repetition.

If you allow the emotions free rein to respond to the heat of the moment, then what you set is the form, the container, the *kata*. You work this way, not because you are ultimately most interested in form but, paradoxically, because you are most interested in the human experience. You move away from something in order to come closer to it. To allow for emotional freedom, you pay attention to form. If you embrace the notion of containers or *katas*, then your task is to set a fire, a human fire, inside these containers and start to burn.

Is it possible to meet one another fresh within the constraints of set form? Is it possible to burn through the inherited meanings of stereotype and unleash something fresh and share that with others?

A friend once described an incident in a crowded bus in San Francisco. She noticed two wildly disparate individuals pushed up close to each other on a narrow seat across from her: one a fragile elderly lady, and the second a flashy transvestite. Suddenly the bus lurched and the elderly lady's hair-net caught on to a ring on the transvestite's hand.

The moment the elderly lady's hair-net caught on to the transvestite's ring, the two were caught up in an exquisite mutual crisis. Forced by circumstances to deal with each other, the boundaries that normally defined and separated

them dissolved instantly. Suddenly the potential for something new and fresh sprang into being. Perhaps one might express outrage, or possibly they would both burst out laughing. The boundaries evaporated and they found themselves without the cushion of definitions that had formerly sufficed to keep them separate.

When I heard this story, I jumped. It embodies an unmistakable lesson about what is possible between actors onstage and between actors and audience in a theatre.

The Japanese have a word to describe the quality of space and time between people: *ma'ai*. In the martial arts, the *ma'ai* is vital because of the danger of mortal attack. On the stage, the space between actors should also be continually endowed with quality, attention, potential and even danger. The *ma'ai* must be cultivated, respected and sharpened. The lines between actors on the stage should never go slack.

I spoke once with an actor who played Nick in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with Glenda Jackson as Martha. He said that she never, ever, let the line between her and the other three actors go slack. The tendency with a lesser actor, playing a dissipated alcoholic character sliding into entropy, would be to loosen the tension and sink into the sofa. But with Jackson, the lines between her and the others had to be taut in every moment. Only when she left the stage did those lines loosen.

When approaching stereotype as an ally, you do not embrace a stereotype in order to hold it rigid; rather, you burn through it, undefining it and allowing human

experience to perform its alchemy. You meet one another in an arena of potential transcendence of customary definitions. You awaken opposition and disagreement. If the character you are playing is dissipated and alcoholic you intensify the outward-directed energy. When you walk downstage you do not think about walking downstage; rather you think about not walking upstage. You wake up what is not. You mistrust assumed boundaries and definitions. You take care of the quality of space and time between youself and others. And you keep the channels open in order to embody the living history of inherited stereotypes.

Stereotypes are containers for memory, history and assumption. I once heard a theory about how culture infiltrates the human imagination. It starts with the notion that the average American's mental pictures of the French Revolution are the images from the musical *Les Miserables*, even for those who have never seen *Les Mis*. Culture is invasive and fluid. It moves through the air and saturates human experience.

To play Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, do you pretend that Marlon Brando never played the character? What do you do with the stereotypes of the T-shirt and posturing? Do you avoid thinking about Brando or do you study his performance and use it? Do you try to arrive at a completely novel Kowalski? What do you do with the audience's memory?

When staging classics such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Oedipus Rex* or *Singin' in the Rain*, how do you handle the public's shared memory? Can you include the baggage of a play's history in the *mise-en-scène*? What is our responsibility to the audience's own shared history of stereotype and cliché? What is supposed to happen on the receiving end?

It is very easy to make me cry. A boy running across a field towards his lost pet collie named Lassie can be a trigger mechanism for me. I'm like Pavlov's dog; I burst into tears. As an audience member, my big emotional triggers are loss and transformation.

It is actually not difficult to make everyone in any audience feel and think the same thing at the same time. It is not difficult to lock down meaning and manipulate response. What is trickier is to generate an event or a moment which will trigger many different possible meanings and associations. It takes craft to set up the circumstances that are simple and yet contain the ambiguities and the incongruity of human experience.

Should the whole audience feel and think the same thing at the same time or should each audience member feel and think something different at a different time? This is the fundamental issue that lies at the heart of the creative act: the artist's intentions vis-à-vis the audience.

Between the towns of Amherst and Northampton in western Massachusetts, two malls are situated right next to each other. Locally they are labelled the 'dead' mall and the 'live' mall. Both huge, one mall functions successfully,

always full of activity and crowded stores, and the other, right next door, the dead one, is mostly empty and ghostlike, a visible failure. Both malls do have functioning multi-screen cineplexes, and film-goers are pretty much the only traffic the dead mall sees.

One summer afternoon during the summer that Stephen Spielberg released both *E.T.* and *Poltergeist*, I went to see *E.T.* at the dead mall. Because of the wild popularity of Spielberg's two films, it seemed that both malls, both cineplexes were showing either *E.T.* or *Poltergeist* in all their mini-theatres. As I watched the film I dutifully cried at the moments I was supposed to cry and walked out of the theatre at the end of the movie feeling small and insignificant and used. As I walked towards the parking lot, I could see thousands of other people exiting the theatres in both the dead mall and the live mall, all making a procession to their cars. The sun was setting, and as far as I could see there were cars full of Spielberg audiences making their way out towards the main highway. As I got into my car it was beginning to rain so I turned on the windshield wipers and headlights and saw thousands of other cars turning on their windshield wipers and headlights. Suddenly, watching this spectacle through the batting of the windshield wipers, I had the appalling sensation that each one of us, isolated in our separate cars and just having seen a Spielberg film, were feeling the same thing – not in a glorious communal sense that raises our hearts and spirits but rather, I felt, the film had made us smaller. We had been treated as mass consumers. We had been manipulated.

It is not difficult to trigger the same emotion in everyone. What is difficult is to trigger complex associations so that everyone has a different experience. Umberto Eco in his seminal book *The Open Text*, analyses the difference between closed and open text. In a closed text, there is one possible interpretation. In an open text, there can be many.

In the theatre we can choose to create moments in which everyone watching has a similar experience or moments which trigger different associations in everyone. Is our intention to impress the audience or to creatively empower them?

Susan Sontag, in her essay 'Fascinating Fascism', explores the aesthetics of fascism through the life and work of Hitler's filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. She proposes that fascist aesthetics flow from a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, the manipulation of emotions and the repudiation of the intellect. Fascist art glorifies surrender and exalts mindlessness.

Several years ago I visited two places in Germany during the course of one week and experienced two completely different kinds of architecture. Both were built for masses of people but the intentions motivating the design were so different as to be revelatory when thinking about the audience's experience of an artist's work. One was the site of the Nuremberg rallies where Hitler held forth to the masses and the other was the vast complex in Munich that hosted the 1972 Winter Olympics.

In Nuremberg the architecture is huge and impressive and as I walked around the grounds I felt small and insignificant. The architecture was definitely preoccupied with control, submissive behaviour, manipulation of emotions and the repudiation of the intellect. The opposite experience awaited me in Munich at the Olympic Stadium. Despite the magnitude of the gigantic complex, everywhere I walked, I felt present and large. The architecture invited diverse responses and hypertextual wandering.

The Nazi Party's rally ground is a huge complex of assembly halls and stadiums on a site that conformed to what Hitler's architect Albert Speer called *Versammlungsarchitektur* (assembly architecture). Related in function to Hitler's interest in mass psychology and how best to influence people en masse, Speer described the architecture as 'a means for stabilizing the mechanism of his domination'. The architecture induced servitude by putting everyone in their place. The intention behind the design of this site was to make people feel small and for them to be impressed.

In Munich, by contrast, the grounds and buildings of the 1980 Winter Olympics, designed by the noted architect Frei Otto, is an open playful environment. One of his most beautiful achievements is the roof of the Olympic Stadium, astonishing in its grace and fluidity. Otto specializes in tensile architecture. Structures designed as tensile architecture are created by tension, or pulling apart, in contrast to the more familiar, conventional architecture which is forged by compression. The buildings look like huge spidery

tents. They are generous and asymmetrical and as you walk around them, the views constantly shift. The buildings and stadium lie gracefully over several hills and invite wandering and contemplation. Quite different from the fascist intention to control and subdue, these structures encourage people to move and think freely and creatively.

After the physical experience of these two contradictory expressions in architecture – one which unleashes the imagination and another which closes it down – I knew that I had to apply the lesson to my work as a director in the theatre. Do I want to create work in which everyone feels the same or everyone feels differently? Do I want the audience to feel small and manipulated or do I work towards something in which there is room for the audience to move around, imagine and make associations?

The paradox in an artist's relationship to an audience is that, in order to talk to many people, you must speak only to one, what Umberto Eco calls 'the model reader'. I learned about the model reader in the theatre after directing a play entitled *No Plays, No Poetry* . . . in 1988, based on the theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht.

In New York City, around that time, a joke was circulating among the downtown theatre scene that downtown theatre people only made work for other downtown theatre people. In reaction to that bothersome notion, I always tried to throw as wide a net as I could in order to speak to the

biggest, most diverse audience I could imagine. But with *No Plays, No Poetry* . . . I decided to go ahead and make a play for my friends. I wanted the play to serve as a love letter to the theatre community. At the end of the process, I always imagined an artist in the downtown theatre community as the receiver. I had no expectations of a wider public. Paradoxically, *No Plays, No Poetry* . . . became one of the most accessible works of theatre that I have ever directed. It spoke to many people because I chose one person to speak to. Since then, I have always pictured my model reader while preparing and rehearsing a play.

In the theatre we reach out and touch the past through literature, history and memory so that we might receive and relive significant and relevant human questions in the present and then pass them on to future generations. This is our function; this is our task. In light of that purpose, I want to think more positively about the usefulness of stereotypes and challenge my assumptions about originality. If we embrace rather than avoid stereotype, if we enter the container and push against its limits, we are testing our humanity and our wakefulness. The containers are powerful visual and audio stimuli for audiences and, if handled with great vigilance by the artist, can connect us with time.