

# Notes & Letters

## Knowing What Play

THE EDITOR:

In what seemed to the present writer a somewhat labored article "On Style" (TDR T-51), Michael Kirby made heavy weather of his analysis because he both over simplified and over complicated the meaning of style as applied to a theatre performance.

Over simplified because he seemed to suggest that any particular style is something that is readily recognizable and identifiable, almost as if it has an independent existence. Concepts such as the different performance styles he enumerated, Japanese Noh, Russian social-realism, Italian opera, Mexican folk play; or the different period styles (Classic Greek, Medieval, Elizabethan, Restoration), are really only the broadest of generalizations. This is especially so when the terms are applied out of their individual contexts. For instance, can the style of a performance of a Japanese Noh play in translation given by a group of Western actors be expected to have more than a remote stylistic relationship with an actual Noh play as performed by Japanese actors steeped in the tradition? Can one really suppose a "period style" to have any true existence at all in any period other than its own?

At the same time, Mr. Kirby over complicated the issue by his attempt to analyze the elements of style (pictorial style, time style, movement style, sound style). This objective analysis of the elements of what is described as perceptual style has apparently led Mr. Kirby toward certain conclusions that demand to be examined.

One can accept that, from a purely objective point of view, it is possible to draw a distinction between form and

content in art. In the theatre such differentiation and analysis is probably only for the critic, whose particular function it is to analyze the performance. The audience seldom have the wish to separate objective and subjective reactions, as they respond simultaneously to content and form. Even the actors, who have had to give conscious consideration to the question of style, are not always able to make the distinction as form and content become ever more closely integrated during rehearsals into the unity of the finished performance.

The audience response to the content will be both intellectual and emotional. The first response to the idea content may be intellectual, but, unless the particular idea is entirely abstract, the emotions will be immediately involved. This may be in empathy or, as perhaps in the case of Artaud, in antipathy or, as in the case of Brecht, in an emotional attitude (e.g., anger at the state of society), which is derived from the play but not within it.

The audience response to form or to style is an aesthetic one (if such an old fashioned term may be allowed). There is the pleasure one derives from a perfection of style *per se*. This may be the perfection of a style which is perfectly and consistently maintained. This, however, is not complete unless the style as well is perfect in its total fitness to express the content. This aesthetic pleasure is not just a matter of the mind. Emotions as well as intellect are involved in the appreciation of beauty. The idea that the style of itself, irrespective of the content of the play, can create a "state of mind" in the specta-

tor, does not accord with the indivisibility of form and content, with the simultaneity of objective and subjective response and of emotional and intellectual involvement, as the audience receives the play in the course of a performance.

The attempt to consider style apart from content, and to analyze objectively the elements of theatre style, seems doomed to failure for various reasons, chief of which is the evanescent nature of the theatre.

It is easier to be clear about what one means by style as applied to, say, painting or literature, which have a permanent existence. For instance, one can gather round a picture painted in any period; while it is there before one with its style fixed for all time, one can discuss, analyze, weigh up, consider this aspect and that, and arrive, if not at a definition of the style, at least at a description of it and an assessment of how it expresses the content of the painting.

Such consideration is not possible in relation to a performance in the theatre. Only when the show is over is the audience in a position to assess the style fully and then it can only be done in terms of memory; in retrospect. The only *consideration* of the style of the performance is that given by the director and the actors.

Our difficulty is what one means by "style." The best definition from the actor's point of view is Sir John Gielgud's, who said: "Style is a matter of knowing what play you are in."

This seems both precise and embracing. It certainly implies stylistic consistency. This may not necessarily be the same as stylistic unity. The old theatrical gag of creating an "illusion" in a more or less naturalistic style (to use one of Mr. Kirby's convenient labels) and then deliberately breaking it for shock effect by, say, a direct speech to the audience would be a break in styl-

istic unity, but it may be made stylistically consistent. Indeed, unless it is, it will not work.

Two actors playing together in conflicting styles will certainly jar, unless justified by some over-all and consistent stylistic concept. In other words, it must appear to the satisfaction of the audience that these two actors, who at first sight seemed to be in different plays, turn out to be in the same play after all.

But Gielgud's definition is more precise than that. It implies that each play has its own stylistic requirement—it might be said that each production of each play has its own style—and this is what the actor has to find. The broad generalized stylistic labels become irrelevant. The style of the performance, contributed to by many artists each having his own personal style, is infinitely complex. It is compounded of many elements and cannot be defined by any labels. The ultimate style of the whole must depend for artistic consistency on all concerned knowing which play they are in, and on all being in the same production of the same play. This can only be sensed, and its achievement depends upon the sensibility of the actors and the director.

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These thoughts on style in the theatre, as doubtless were Mr. Kirby's, too, are in the context of the English-speaking theatre, where even semi-permanent companies are all too rare. But where the theatre is organized in permanent companies, there can evolve what may be called "company style."

In terms of painting, one may recognize the individual and personal style which shows itself in a particular artist's work. This style is the expression of a *single artist*, which is why it is so clear, consistent and artistically valid. In terms of theatre, the closest analogy to the individual painter's style is company style.

In the course of an International Theatre week held at The Questors Theatre, London, in the autumn of 1971, an artistic seminar was arranged during which each of three groups, one English, one Czechoslovakian, one French, presented as a workshop production short scenes from "Macbeth." By working on a common script (in fact the scenes chosen were not entirely identical) it was hoped to highlight differences of style and of approach. This indeed happened in almost startling fashion. The writer was not in a position to assess objectively the stylistic aspects of the English performance, but in the other two there were strikingly apparent both elements of *company* style, recognizable from the other performances given by the respective companies during the week, and elements of *national* style, deriving from national cultural traditions.

In London we have been fortunate in having Peter Daubeny's World Theatre Seasons at the Aldwych Theatre, giving the opportunity to see many different companies from different countries. There also, it has been possible to recognize elements of both company style and national style. The elements of such company style derive from many sources. It will reflect na-

tional cultural traditions which become integrated into the company style; it will be molded by the personal outlook of its director and its designer. There may be many influences, even chance influences, and it will only evolve over a period of time. It is complex and defies precise description, however readily one may recognize its expression.

Even more complex, however, is the style of the "Play-Production." A company with a developed and clearly marked style of its own still has to consider the nature of the style required to express a particular play. The company style itself is clearly not sufficient. It is not a matter of adapting the company style to the particular requirements of the play. Rather, the company style is one of the elements in finding the style for the play.

What seems of greatest artistic significance is not so much the *similarity* of style in a series of productions by the same company, as the *differences* of style found for each play within the company style. It does seem likely, however, that the existence of a firm company style may help to ensure a consistency of total style through any given production. Indeed, such a company may well be able to experiment more successfully with stylistic variations within a single production, as urged by Mr. Kirby, than can the ad hoc or semi-demi-permanent companies more usual in the English speaking theatre.

But it still comes down to the actor knowing what "Play-Production" he is in. The precise, complex, subtle style which will most perfectly express a particular play by a particular company at a particular time cannot be defined or labeled: it can only be sensed by all concerned in the performance. A stylistic consistency will certainly be recognized by the audience—or perhaps more accurately, a stylistic *inconsis-*

tency will be recognized; a stylistic perfection will be appreciated, not least because of the fuller emotional response it will evoke, and for the heightened aesthetic pleasure it will give; but the style is not capable of acute analysis by the viewer, who will know only whether he believes himself to have shared the same "world" as the actors, in other words whether the actors and he have all been in the same play.

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London

**MICHAEL KIRBY** replies:

Mr. Emmet and I do not disagree as much as the length of his letter might suggest. Some of these differences might be semantic. For example, he describes a play that breaks the "illusion" of the fourth wall as being stylistically consistent but not stylistically unified, while I prefer to consider such changes as *inconsistencies* in style that become unified through repetition, explanation and justification. As for "knowing what play you are in," I would be very happy to have Sir John Gielgud in my hypothetical *Style Play*. I see no reason why his statement "implies stylistic consistency," and I am sure he would understand and fulfill the requirements of stylistic change.

I appreciate Mr. Emmet's discussion of individual acting style, "play-produc-

tion" style, company style and national style. In an attempt to keep my piece short, I barely suggested these areas, but they are certainly relevant to any complete examination of style. Our major difference seems to lie in Mr. Emmet's belief that a play must have a single unified style, while I do not believe this is true. In this regard, it is important to note that individual style, "play production" style, company style and national style are—like the cultural and historical styles with which I was concerned—generalizations. Thus Mr. Emmet accuses me of over-simplifying because I "seemed to suggest that any particular style is readily recognizable and identifiable," yet he accepts company style because it is "recognizable from the other performances given by the respective companies." In other words, even though he speaks of "the indivisibility of form and content," he



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