
Theater as a Humanizing Force

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The opening words in Philip Roth's novel *When She Was Good* describe the character Uncle Willard: "Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized—that was the dream of his life." Paul Woodruff never uses the word "civilized"; instead he uses "human," "wise," and "wisdom" in framing the thesis of his new book, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched*.^{*} Theater is necessary and inevitable because the ultimate goal of the human being is to be "human" and "wise," and blessed with "wisdom"; if the objective of one's life were not to become human and wise, theater would never have been initiated or performed. Every culture engages in theater as Woodruff describes it, in its variety of forms—stage plays, rituals, weddings, funerals, sports—because theater ultimately serves to humanize the members of that culture. One becomes human and aware of what it is to be human, thereby embarking on the path to wisdom, by watching and being watched.

This thesis appealed to me from the outset of Woodruff's book because I have long maintained—to myself and to others—that the theater, especially stage plays, has been my greatest teacher and the greatest influence on the civilizing of my own nature. As an adolescent I said to my father, "Dad, I want to grow up to be a civilized person." He nodded approval and replied, "Son, that's a great objective, but you must know that to become what people from our back-

^{*}Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii + 257 pages, \$27.95.

ground call a 'mensch,' a civilized human being, you must learn to wrestle with your uncivilized feelings every day until the day you die." My journey has been just that, but I never any longer read books or hear people around me seeking the cultivation of civilized behavior. When I completed Woodruff's volume, I went to a local library and had the reference desk locate Woodruff's phone number so that I could announce to him, "Mr. Woodruff, you are from my nation."

Figure 1 is of a child watching the ducks in a local pond; the larger photo, figure 2, is of a group of adults, members of the New York Philharmonic, watching fellow members of an ensemble play a piece by Bach. As is clear from these photos, our habits of watching alter considerably as we evolve into adults and presumably completed human beings. I take this lesson seriously, but not grimly, as does Woodruff.¹

No one taught that child to watch the ducks in that pond with such concentration, diligence, intensity, and engagement. The ability to watch so intently seems instinctual. As adults we learn to watch casually, as is evident in the larger photo, not without motive and intelligence but casually nevertheless. Continuing to be capable of watching, if not as engaged as the child but still engaged, is a skill we must exercise and develop. I am reminded of a passage in David Lodge's book *Deaf Sentence*, in which the narrator has decided to learn how to read lips in order to supplement his ability to hear with his two hearing aids:

She told me there was no need to wait until the start of a new course because there was no real beginning or end to the course. It's not like learning a new language. It's more a matter of developing habits of observation. Identifying what's easy and what's difficult. Learning how to anticipate problems and get round them. The more practice you have the better.²

And so it is with our ability to watch.

Our powers of observation may be inborn. But what we do with that gift is our own business. I have yet another example from my own life. My mother-in-law was born in

Antwerp, went to college in Germany, and married in Amsterdam. During her college days she lived in the same city as her cousin, Jakob Rosenberg, he who survived the Nazis to become an international expert on Rembrandt and a member of the Harvard faculty in the Department of Fine Arts. At the time of my story, however, he was selling brassieres to meet expenses. On Saturday when both were free, after attending services at the synagogue and then returning to their respective homes for lunch, they met at the city museum of art, where Jakob seated my mother-in-law on a bench and then placed himself behind her while they both looked at a painting. After twenty minutes or so, he would approach her with the words, "Minnie, tell me what you see." She would tell him, and he would usually say, "Minnie, that's very good. Now I will show you what you didn't see." He then proceeded to show her specifics of the painting and talk about the painter's vision. When I, some fifty years or more after those sessions, took her to the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, I purposefully arranged for our tour to end in the contemporary American gallery. Walking through that area we passed a Jasper Johns "Number Three," at which point she abruptly stopped and practically shouted to me, "Now there's an artist!" I stopped just as suddenly and called out, "Where?" When I realized what she had discovered, I asked her how she, who was so devoted and knowledgeable about seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting, could get so excited by a modern American artist's work. She answered quickly, "Jakob taught me how to recognize artists, not just painters." The skill was learned, taught, and received, building upon a natural inclination to see. With our daily preoccupations as adults, activities which own us, we give away the natural gift and have nothing to build upon. Woodruff wants to restore the cultivation of that gift in the same way the narrator in *Deaf Sentence* wants to hear better by learning to read lips.

Stage plays are not the only theater to be observed by any means, although they are a major contribution to the culti-

vation of our powers of observation. They provide us with a population so diverse that we can see ourselves over and over again in a variety of people. We learn to be human by interplay with other human beings.

Woodruff establishes that conviction very early in his book. He cites the example of a married couple, John and Olivia: she loves opera, while he loathes opera but loves sports. "John and Olivia will not be married much longer. He is sharing less and less of his experience with her, and she with him. They are growing apart. If they found a theater to watch together, that theater would give them a shared life. *The art of theater brings people together—or apart*" (7). On another occasion, he ponders the difference between theater and film: why go to a wedding or a sporting event, he asks, when one could watch them at home on TV or DVD?

Theater is immediate, its actions are present to participants and audience. And in the theater you are part of a community of watchers, while in a cinema you are alone, or alone with your partner, whose hand you squeeze from time to time. (17)

Reading these words suddenly caused me to recall an experience of more than sixty years ago. Before jumping off to the continent and into battle with the enemy, I was stationed on the coast of England and given a one-day pass to go to London. Immediately on my arrival in the city, I ran into the theater district to get a ticket for that evening's performance of *Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward, in a production starring Margaret Rutherford and Penelope Ward at the Drury Lane. During the first act of the play, sirens began to blare and on the prompter's box on the stage big red lights spelled out "ALERT." I assumed those letters were a signal for all of us to leap up and run for shelter. I did just that, making my way to the rear of the auditorium and looking back to see those following me. I was totally alone. No one in the theater audience and no one on stage was with me; not one person registered any activity other than watching, the only activity required by the play. I was dumbfounded. I stood in the

lobby unnerved and undecided about what to do next. During my indecision, which was a piece of time, the letters "ALL CLEAR" in bright green appeared on the prompter's box. Embarrassed and admittedly confused, I returned to my seat and resumed watching. My real life had trumped the life on the stage. The lesson, of course, is that real life trumps the theater of make-believe, even while having been enriched by the good fortune of watching.

You and I probably know many people who say, "Today others don't listen," or "One has to learn to listen," or "We hear but don't listen." However, I seldom or never hear, "We don't watch." The fact is that most of us don't watch ourselves *or* others. Yet Woodruff defines and describes theater as watching, an activity to be cultivated and nurtured because it informs us of what humanity is all about.

His definition of theater is so all-inclusive that it must make my reader wonder what he has to say about the theater on stage, and my answer is, "Plenty!" He considers plot and action, compassion and empathy, and discusses extensively the elements of stage theater that are "worth watching," which he separates from that which is not worth watching. He treats emotion together with acting. Whereas I would discuss emotion with my playwriting students by differentiating emotion from passion, offering a convenient one-line distinction ("Emotion is passion filtered through a prudent will"), he offers a round, firm, and fully packed chapter on emotion and the stage. He also offers a similar chapter on empathy, a subject usually confused with compassion. That chapter is a rare piece of insight into human character and is worth the entire volume. In fact, *The New York Times* review by Leah Hager Cohen states clearly: "Theater's tendency to promote empathy serves as the leit-motif of Paul Woodruff's book." Although he posits from the early chapters that stage theater is only one example of the theater which he considers necessary for the development of the human being and spirit, he is not shy about its value:

People need theater. They need it the way they need each other--the way they need to gather, to talk things over, to have stories in common, to share friends and enemies. *They need to watch, together, something human.* (11; emphasis added)

Just as Aristotle's description of poetry in general and tragedy in particular rests upon his initial assumptions, which he calls "instinct," so Woodruff expects his reader to rely on intelligence, common sense, and the voice of experience to follow his thesis. Neither Aristotle nor Woodruff intends his discussion of theater to be an exact science or a textbook with strict laws. As Francis Fergusson describes it, "The *Poetics* is much more like a cookbook rather than it is like a textbook in elementary engineering."³ Aristotle posits that

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. . . . Next, there is the instinct for "harmony" and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm. Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to Poetry.

(4.1-6; Butcher trans.)

Woodruff challenges Plato but he doesn't challenge Aristotle. However, he does extend Aristotle! Explaining her observation on the significance of empathy in Woodruff, the *Times* reviewer goes on to note, "It also lies near the heart of the rather brave claim with which he opens the book: 'People need theater.' . . . Theater is necessary, he says, for no less than 'to secure our bare, naked cultural survival.'" Unlike Plato, Woodruff acknowledges a utilitarian function to theater. Although he doesn't make a case for Aristotle's acknowledging tragedy to have a utilitarian dimension, one might argue



Figure 1. One way of watching.



Figure 2. Members of the New York Philharmonic watching as an ensemble plays Bach.

David Goldman / The New York Times / Redux

in light of Woodruff's insights that the old master was indeed implying just that, and thus transcending his teacher Plato. Aristotle accepts what in his day was a prevailing axiom: that the fine arts have no end beyond themselves, unlike the useful arts such as shipbuilding and carpentry, which provide the benefits of transportation and shelter respectively. The fine arts, on the other hand, such as plays or music, cannot be used for anything other than pleasure. But in his definition of a tragedy he states, "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . . in the form of action, not of narrative; *through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions*" (4.2; emphasis added). Now what is the result of such purgation other than the cleansing of the human spirit, as in confession? The watchers have witnessed people on stage who are like us, while the hero is like us but more than us (15.8). (In a comedy, the people on stage are like us but less than us; 2.4.) We are invited to watch our humankind performing human deeds and speaking human words, which we experience vicariously through genuine feelings of pity and terror. We are using the drama to reflect and illuminate human life, to know ourselves a little better, to be reminded of ourselves—both our civilized and uncivilized elements—over and over and over again.

Although Aristotle never associates with tragic drama a useful dimension other than pleasure, he seems to recognize that the quality of such an experience is special. The watchers experience a variety of emotions and feelings including pleasure and suffering without having to endure in their daily life the pain and horror being performed on stage. We get off scot-free with our purgation, just as we do in a sense with our confessions in church on Saturday or in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Obviously, with most confessions there remains lingering some regret, guilt, fear, and longing; however, we do not have to endure the grief of a Hamlet or an Electra or a Hecuba or an Iphigenia. What we gain, though, is the reminder that we have experienced what human beings are and

do, what we are and do, and that reminder seems to me to have plenty of utility in our lives. A society is healthier when its members have such reminders.

Among his explanations of his positions and convictions, Woodruff never attempts to define the term “the human condition.” I will make my own attempt to describe it rather than to define it. Although other species, my scientist-son tells me, are capable of being included in my description, one major distinction still leaps out. That critical condition is the conflict between an individual’s self-interest and the interest of another, whether that be another person, an institution, a religion, an organization, a deity, or a community. That conflict is constant and endless and arises when we wake up in the morning and isn’t over until we are asleep at night (and who knows, it may even continue in our dreams). All drama, it seems to me, is based upon this reality, just as all of our lives require us to deal with it all the time. Because such conflict elicits consequences and repercussions, it is immediately to be separated from debate which doesn’t deal with consequences and repercussions other than winning or losing an argument. No culture is without this condition, and although it may not define the human condition as unique, it does indeed describe the dynamic that rules our lives. That conflict exists in sports and in religion, in weddings and funerals—all aspects of what Woodruff calls “theater.” Stage presentations, however, most significantly provide the scope of situations and populations that permit one to recognize and develop what it means to be “one of us.”

Woodruff’s chapter on empathy comes late in his volume. It precedes his chapter on wisdom, which completes his presentation. Empathy, he tells us, is putting oneself in another person’s shoes. When one expresses compassion, warmth, sympathy, or consideration for another, one is behaving in a human fashion, but not in the fashion required when one is expected to put oneself in that other’s shoes. The difference between empathy and compassion is not only difficult to cultivate, but even difficult to recognize. We

confuse the two frequently. Let me offer yet another example to illustrate the difference.

When our oldest son was about three, he reached into an ashtray and retrieved a cigarette butt that my wife had deposited earlier in the afternoon. When he started to eat the butt I rushed to his side, grabbed it, and shouted, "David, you don't eat cigarettes!" My wife was standing by, watching, and then interrupted us by saying, "Howard, what do think he thinks when he sees a cigarette in my mouth getting smaller and smaller and smaller?" She could put herself in the shoes of a three-year-old. Every parent has to be able to do that, just as every husband and wife have to be able to do with each other, as every teacher in the classroom has to be able to do with his or her students. Of course, all this empathy is impossible for us to master. However, the one member of society who must try to master it is the actor. If the actor portraying Othello is not in Othello's shoes, the watcher may not find the portrayal convincing or credible; but if the actor succeeds too well in putting himself in Othello's shoes, he will strangle Desdemona, an action obviously not desirable in the theater. So the actor intent upon being credible has to be in Othello's shoes, but he mustn't, but he must, but he mustn't. Recognizing this dilemma and demand helps the watcher learn something about his or her own empathy. That task is actually for giants and heroes, I fear, but it is the task Woodruff would have us undertake. Cultivating that skill, nurturing that talent, is the fundamental process by which watchers become capable of watching.

Woodruff employs some forty stage plays from the history of western dramatic writing to support his theory. He knows whereof he speaks. However, I would like to cite yet one more experience from my theatergoing by way of supporting his theory. When I went to the theater in Boston to see for the first time the first production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I was joined by a friend and his wife. My friend, Bob, spoke to me immediately after the performance: "That play has no meaning in my life. We have no dope addicts in our

family." I was aghast. "But Bob," I said, "I have no dope addict in my family either. But all families have trials and tribulations that have to do with secrets, lies, habits, conflicts of interest. However, I thought I have never seen a family in a play or in life that loved each other so much they were driven to be honest with one another." He looked blank. When he recovered his disgust, he said, "You call what I saw love, that family?" I repeated that I saw an extraordinary expression of love felt and articulated from the depths of their humanity. He continued to shake his head in utter disbelief. Do you suppose that my friend Bob in his daily work at the bank puts himself in his customer's shoes? Do you suppose that my friend Bob thinks of putting himself in his customer's shoes when that customer comes to take out a mortgage that he or she cannot really afford? A watcher of plays should be free enough to feel not the cliché "I feel your pain!" but the genuine pain, not unlike the actor who must be able to call it forth from his reservoir of emotional experiences.

Woodruff explains his view of the power of theater:

The earth is no place for the wisdom that would know the true nature of justice; I will not challenge Plato on that point. But this earth is the place for another kind of wisdom, and so is theater. I call this second sort of wisdom "human." It is the wisdom of knowing ourselves. Human wisdom is available here on earth; we do not have to die in order to attain it. We may not even have to leave the theater. (214)

Human wisdom is not an acquisition; it is a process sustained by frequent reminders of the *wonders and terrors* that we are. Woodruff's comments left me with memories of my father's words to me when I was a youngster.

My dad's comment to me was the healthiest, the wisest, and the most practical statement possible in my development over eighty-six years. Wrestling with uncivilized feelings in the journey towards a civilized life is an endless task. Try it.

notes

1. The distinction between these two photos can be enriched and enlightened by an outstanding article by D. W. Harding. I urge you to read "The Role of the Onlooker," *Scrutiny* 6.3 (December 1937), 247–58.
2. David Lodge, *Deaf Sentence* (New York 2008), 121.
3. Francis Fergusson, introduction to *Aristotle's Poetics*, S. H. Butcher, trans. (New York 1961), 3.

