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INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS IN REGIONAL AESTHETICS

If one were to compare standards of criticism within and without national boundaries, one would be hard put to find a touchstone other than a case of plagiarism to make points of any consequence. No one work of art is so completely universal and so bereft of emotive bias that it can stand, incandescently, as the ultimate monument around which all wreaths may be judged equally. But in a case of plagiarism, all emotive bias to the work being reviewed is absent; the plagiarist has, essentially, no attitude to the work, and is thus able to reflect, objectively, regional differences.

The problem here is that there are not many plagiarists to whom one is able to turn for enlightenment. Most critics make up their own reviews; those who regurgitate what was said in the bar, use a pseudonym[1], or are unduly influenced by a spouse, a publicity officer, or a cheque, are not helpful to our quest because (a) No evidence of the original remains, and (b) All participants are of the same nationality.

How, then, are we to pursue our quest? Where are the plagiarists of the age? At this point, I should like to introduce the reader to Geraldine Pascall, critic of theatre and film for *The Australian*, a newspaper.

Now I do not suggest for a minute that Miss Pascall is a plagiarist. What I do suggest is that the conditions which we have found so ideal for our purpose in plagiarism are conditions which are to be found operating, intermittently but effectively, in the reviews of Miss Pascall.

Let us take an example from two reviews of the same play, *Equus* by Peter Shaffer. Michael Billington of *The Guardian*[2], London, wrote:

> Peter Shaffer's *Equus* fulfills a very ancient function of drama: it seeks to put dark, irrational forces that motivate much of our existence on to the stage . . . it works as an ecstatic conjuration of Dionysiac forces. . .

Geraldine Pascall[3] wrote:

> . . . it digs down into what drama was and still is about, fulfilling its most ancient function: trying to put on stage some of the dark, unknown, mysterious and irrational forces that can still frighten and move us. . . *Equus* works . . . because it so effectively conjures up these forces.

It is apparent that here we have two different approaches to the theatre, and, by extension, to art in general. Billington, the Englishman, is content to see tradition honoured. He says the play "fulfills a very ancient function of drama." Immediately the reviewer has allotted a

role for himself and for the artist. He, the reviewer, has observed and is observing, and has matched the previous observation with the current observation. The reviewer thus occupies a role with no central dynamic; he is beyond the circle of creation or imaginative interpretation in both the perception of a phenomenon and in its dissemination. Peter Shaffer is similarly awarded the kudos reserved for one who reaffirms rather than challenges.

With Pascall, from a new society, the role of the reviewer is interpreted in a radically different way. Immediately she ascribes to herself a role which Billington does not assume. She adumbrates ("drama was") the phenomena of the past and redefines, creatively, the function of the contemporary manifestation of an admittedly ancient art ("and still is"). Nowhere in Billington do we find any inclination to venture beyond the traditional; but in Pascall we find an assertive opinion on the role of the drama today.

Similarly, Pascall ascribes to Shaffer a role which transcends the Billingtonian implication of passivity ("fulfills") and by its very nature ("digs down") gives Shaffer a function more in keeping with hardy, inventive human beings such as pioneers, gold prospectors and investigative journalists. Shaffer, she asserts by her use of a suggestive transitive verb, is a dynamic innovator, not a role-playing traditionalist.

Finally, the passage shows us, with its inclusion on the one hand, and deletion on the other, of the term "Dionysiac", the difference between one who is excessively given to find affirmation in the myths of the past and one who seeks to find new standards free from the inhibitive shibboleths of antiquity.

> . . . the boy's intemperate passion for horses becomes a metaphor for any form of deviant love.
>
> — Michael Billington

> . . .The boy's intemperate passion for horses becomes a metaphor for any form of deviant love.
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

Here we see no significant departure from the conditions necessary to assess differing standards of regional ideology; both reviewers demonstrate a similarity bordering on unanimity in the emotive bias towards the subject matter.

> . . . the spectacle of the boy seeking to become one with the horses . . . only in the street outside do doubts about the argument begin.
>
> — Michael Billington

> . . . the boys (sic), for instance, seeking to become one with the horses . . . so that your own doubts don't really start to nag until you're out of the theatre.
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

In these passages a valuable lesson about the extent and presence of subjectivity and objectivity – given, as we have established above, a reasonably similar response to the theme of the work – can be gleaned from the personal, intellectual response of the reviewer.

For Billington, the process of questioning inherited assumptions remains a consuetudinary procedure for society as a whole; it is even, he implies, a tradition in itself. Individual responsibility has not been relinquished to a collective ideology; it has never been entertained as an alternative in itself.

Pascall demonstrates with one phrase ("your own doubts") a vision of individual responsibility fused with observable phenomena as a vehicle for change within society as a whole. The proclivities towards subjectivity are certainly there; but they are harnessed to an evangelical desire to raise the level of objectivity both within and without the self.

It is cautionary, and proper, to add, however, that the uncanny resemblance between the phrases "in the street outside" (Billington) and "out of the theatre" (Pascall) shows a similarity that is a necessary counter-weight to our evolving theories of cultural differences. Both reviewers, it is openly demonstrated, share a distrust for catharsis and a desire to extend the perception of drama beyond the walls of the playhouse.

> He discovers that the child, with no music, art, friends or history to sustain him, finds in his worship of horses a substitute for religion and sex; and in the end he comes to question his right to eliminate that worship, however perverse a form it takes, and his duty to return the boy to our allegedly normal society. . . . Intellectually, one can pick all kinds of holes in the play's thesis. It argues the sanctity of worship and passion. But what if worship takes the form of racial intolerance?
>
> – Michael Billington

> Without education, art, history, skills or friends to sustain him, the boy has found in his worship of horses a substitute for religion and sex. And, in the end, Dysart doubts his right to take away that worship – however perverse, however much pain it causes the boy – and the value of returning him to normality . . . But Shaffer's thesis relies on sanctifying worship and passion no matter what form it takes. . . .
>
> – Geraldine Pascall

Here we have an accurate guide to the values of each of our participants, and, by extension, the values of the society they inhabit. The data extrapolation scale shows that these values have been placed in order by the reviewers themselves.

BILLINGTON	PASCALL
1. Music	1. Education
2. Art	2. Art
3. Friends	3. History
4. History	4. Skills
	5. Friends

For Billington, the old world has asserted itself over those ideas which could have been the harbingers of change in the theatre and on the street oustide. That music and art should take precedence betrays a withdrawal from those areas in which the dynamics of revolution could viably fructify.

Pascall's thoughts reflect a more pragmatic, developing society, a society in which Education and Skills are paramount. But of all the evidence in this codification of the necessary, the most revealing is the credence given to "Friends". Billington places this at number three, whereas Pascall, displaying a rugged individualism not at odds with the pioneer spirit of her society, places "Friends" last.

> Alec McCowen's psychiatrist was remarkable for its questing intellectual hunger.
>
> — Michael Billington

> Dysart should have more dimension — a hungry questing intelligence. . . .
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

The definition of attitudes towards the solution to the perennial question "What is Man?" and its corollary "What does Man want?" has never been more clearly focussed. Billington withdraws into the effete notion of "intellectual hunger" and envisages, even proselytises for, a world of civilized intercourse among the intellgentsia.

The instinctive lapse into elitism which characterises Billington's ideological drawbridge is triumphantly undermined by Pascall's pensive reversal. The "questing intelligence" she unleashes is clearly directed towards a continuing, relevant Cultural Revolution that aims to reform in and out of the theatre.

It is one thing, however, to animadvert to the point of invective on the inadequacy of an old society vis-à-vis a new one; it is quite another to indulge in deviant metaphor by hurling into the literary ring two bantams from frontier societies at the interface of the hemispheres. Some similarities on the following comparisons must be made immediately.

Both reviewers, Geraldine Pascall and the American John Skow of *Time* magazine, have seen the same film, The Duellists. Consider their differing reactions to the film's opening:

> We understand immediately . . . Duels at dawn are as familiar as gravesides in the rain.
>
> — John Skow[4]
>
> There have been many movies . . . that have begun with or used duels at dawn. We recognise the signals and we know the rites to come.
>
> — Geraldine Pascall[5]

Here we see only a cursory nod to tradition and even here, tradition is downgraded to the status of cliché. From the very beginning, Skow and Pascall are searching for new horizons, as their forebears did before them.

> Several hundred films have used ground fog rising off fields and the dark figures of waiting men to give the same contrast between soft landscape and hard purpose.
>
> — John Skow
>
> the soft, welcoming beauty of the landscape is an immediate contrast to the savagery of the men who use it.
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

The essence of Pascall lies once again in the pragmatic thrust of the argument. While Skow generalises about "hard purpose" (What purpose? Who is hard?), Pascall defines the violation of land by the "men who use it". Concern for the dimensions and caparison of the figures in the landscape can be traced to Pascall's humanity as contrasted with Skow's fundamentally American impersonality.

> . . . a young hussar lieutenant named D'Hubert (Keith Carradine), an unexceptional man, collides with another lieutenant named Feraud (Harvey Keitel). Feraud is a strutting, bloody-minded fool, and he challenges D'Hubert to a duel. Though D'Hubert knows that the matter is silly, honor forces him to fight. Feraud is wounded. . . .
>
> — John Skow
>
> D'Hubert (Keith Carradine), a young hussar lieutenant and a fairly ordinary man, unintentionally upsets another lieutenant, Feraud (Harvey Keitel), a pompous, arrogant fanatic, and Feraud challenges him to a duel. D'Hubert realises the cause is foolish and the means to settle it unnecessary but his own code of honor (sic) requires that he fight. He wounds Feraud. . . .
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

The key here is that Skow finds D'Hubert (Keith Carradine) "unexceptional" whereas Pascall's description, "fairly ordinary", emphasises the extremes of empathy to be found at either end of the Pacific.

Because D'Hubert (Keith Carradine) has not Rockefellered his way to immortality by building a railroad or dying in the saddle, he is, perforce, "unexceptional". The warmth and compassion of Pascall for the battler, the underdog, the person in the street has never before been

demonstrated to greater effect.

> Feraud remains crazed with hatred, and D'Hubert, though he cannot remember the original cause of the quarrel and is quite willing to forget the feud, continues to dance to honor's tune and his adversary's whim. Though Feraud's mania never subsides, and though D'Hubert thinks him contemptible, the two are bound together in something that is almost comradeship.
>
> — John Skow
>
> Though both no longer remember the original cause of the quarrel, Feraud's frenzy continues and D'Hubert must march to the same drum.
>
> In the end the mad grandeur of their actions creates a sort of bond between them. . . .
>
> — Geraldine Pascall

The internal decline of America, limned by de Tocqueville with effortless prescience, has yet to find a more rewarding proponent than John Skow. To show Skow's "tune" parallelled, boarded, and sunk by the omniscient gunboat rodomontade of Pascall's "drum" is to see a ferris wheel baying at a helicopter. The gesture is inadequate, even fraudulent, and must perforce foreshadow a questioning of values and a redefinition of what constitutes, if in fact it ever did, the "new world" or indeed, for that matter, the "brave new world", for the gulf of conceptualising has narrowed to the point of necromantic purification.

Given the difficulty of obtaining suitable role-models to enable comparisons to be made on the level of plagiarism, it is nevertheless of inestimable value to be able to draw conclusions between those values propagated in the northern hemisphere by Michael Billington and John Skow, and those crusaded for in the southern hemisphere by Geraldine Pascall, whose critical pantheon has always placed a high honor on writers of rigorous originality.[6]

While the ultimate conditions for assessing regional aesthetics and their consequent prognostications for the idiosyncrasies of their societies must wait until a foreign reviewer "goes all the way" and plagiarises Geraldine Pascall, we can nevertheless make a beginning by observing those confluences where the seeds of such interaction have already begun to fruitfully interweave.

FOOTNOTES

1 E.g. V.I. Richards, the Melbourne critic of *Theatre Australia*, is a pseudonym for Roy Fredericks.

2 *The Guardian*, 21–4–76, quoted in Theatre Australia, Oct./Nov. 1976.

[3] *The Australian*, 28–9–76, quoted in Theatre Australia, *op cit.*

[4] *Time*, 6–2–78.

[5] *The Australian*, February 4–5, 1978.

[6] *Time* is published on the Wednesday five days before the issue date. *Time* of 6–2–78 was therefore published on 1–2–78.