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ABSTRACT

That a play has one central action which is its formal cause is the most influential interpretative idea to emerge among theatre writers since the old model of situation/incident/complication/climax/denouement. Unfortunately, the action concept has been insufficiently developed, excessive hopes have been pinned on it, and it has become a reductive threat. One way of properly handling the concept of action is to consider the definition of the action of a play as the "master psychic event" of the play. In this way, the play is seen to exist only as mental events in the audience and as sign-potentials of the playscript. The play does not have an action, but is perceived as being an action. The interpreters of plays, variously the actors and directors, do not observe the actions but invent them. As part of the process of reducing the ambiguity of specific signs to be seen by the audience, these interpreters test possible syntheses of individual perceptions into a functionally integrated structure of meaning. There need not be only one response to a play's action, even at the conceptual level of master event. Because it operates at a level "close to the script," constant reference to the play as an action tends to serve as a corrective on more abstract levels of meaning. (RL)

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THE PLAY AS A DRAMATIC ACTION

That a play has one central Action which is its Formal Cause is the most influential interpretative idea to emerge among Theatre writers since the old situation/inciting-incident/complication/climax/denouement model and the only one to hold much currency among practitioners. (The old model was ludicrously simplistic and reductive; it was used almost exclusively by writers about drama, not by playwrights or directors.) Unfortunately, the Action concept has been insufficiently developed and excessive hopes have been pinned on it. It too has become a reductive threat. Properly handled, however, it is one of the most important and useful of all interpretative ideas.

Just as literary critics have concerned themselves most often with "theme," theatre practitioners have shown a preoccupation with the play as an Action. Reasoning somewhat oversimply from the evidently active nature of performance and from Aristotle's cryptic description of Tragedy as "an imitation of an action," they have often concluded that the play is "primarily" or "essentially" an Action. Though knowledge of the playscript from the viewpoint of Action is no doubt necessary, and often valuable, the elevation of Action to such central importance in all drama is reductive, and tends to blind the interpreter to the individuality of playscripts which do not conform to this concept. For example, King Lear and Hamlet are much illuminated by consideration of their central Actions; Glass Menagerie, on the other hand, reveals very little.

My purpose here is to think out the concept of Dramatic Action in some detail and to deal with a widely circulated notion of Action which seems to me muddled and inefficient.

The simplest definition of "the Action" is "the Master Psychic Event" of

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the play (Psychic Event as opposed to Physical Process). Physical process is our label for that which is actually going on in the world. By the time Physical Processes are perceived, recognized, and their significance realized, they have been transmuted into Psychic Events. Physical Processes are the "matter" of drama; Psychic Events are what Physical Processes provoke in our minds, and that is what really counts.[1] Physical Processes are the medium by which Psychic Events are communicated from artist to audience. Only when an appropriate Psychic Event occurs in the mind of the audience or the interpreter has the play "succeeded." Only Physical Processes are actually on stage. Psychic Events, Dramatic Actions for example, exist only as mental events in the audience and as sign-potential of the playscript.

So, the Action of the play is the Master Psychic Event, the play as a whole seen as one Psychic Event. The play does not <u>have</u> an Action; it is perceived as <u>being</u> an Action. The audience/interpreter gradually constructs this sense of Dramatic Action, testing possible ways of converting each minute moment of Physical Process into brief Psychic Events which are only tentatively interpreted, held in suspension until a structure of meaning emerges, i.e. a way of seeing the whole which reduces the ambiguity of the moments and gives them clear function. The interpreter may trust his sense of Action only when it appears to give each moment a reason for being. The Action is "what happens" in the play. "What happens" is merely implicit in the script or the performance, not literally seen but inferred.

The process is much the same as in the observation of any occurrence in real life. The same distinction between Physical Processes and Psychic Events applies (which is why eye-witnesses so often disagree) and so does the relationship between subsidiary and master Psychic Events. Take, for example, a complex printing process. In "reality" everything that happens is one undifferentiated

process. When we observe it, we inevitably transmute that process into numerous subsidiary Psychic Events. If we want to understand what is going on, we try to spot relationships between these Psychic Events and to recognize the effect of those Events. We then interpret each Event in the light of all the others and evolve a sense of overall structure which gives us the feeling that we get the point. When the question "what does this machine do?" is asked, the answer sought is usually not of the sort "well, that part goes up and down, and that one in and out, etc.". The answer wanted will be in terms of the Psychic organization of all these subsidiary Events into functional interaction, producing the Master Event: "the machine prints money."

This is not in an absolute sense the "real" event, the inevitable answer. A repairman might well want to know about the subsidiary Psychic Events. There is, however, a strong human tendency to convert all seemingly related subsidiary Events into Master Psychic Events (i.e., to try to comprehend all moments as functional stages in larger, more meaningful events) but it is only a tendency, and these Master Psychic Events are "ways of looking," not "facts."[2] To speak of the Action of the playscript, then, is to look at the events from a particular point of view, to hypothesize a Master Psychic Event which rationalizes the identity and texture of particular moments and makes each of these moments functionally integral.

The interpreter does not "observe" the Action, he "invents" it. As part of the process of reducing the ambiguity of specific signs, he tests possible syntheses of individual perceptions into a functionally integrated meaning-structure. If he is a careful reader, he will evaluate all the evidence of the playscript, he will thoroughly contextualize the playscript, and he will avoid projecting his own theories, values, etc., into his reading, preferring to remain as open as possible to the "suggestions" of the author.

The interpreter's best knowledge of the Action is at the pre-conscious, intuitive level; it is a subtle, intricate, detailed disposition to respond to the playscript in a functionally integrated way. Whenever the Action is reduced to conceptualization, much is lost. It is easy to exaggerate the value of a formulated Action, to believe that it "describes" the action whereas it does no more than name it. This name is only slightly more descriptive than a proper name. As with proper names, it is quite possible to "know" the name and yet be quite ignorant of that which the name refers to. The Action itself is unstateable.

The concept can be clarified by comparison with Story and Plot. To put it briefly, Plot is what the author does to the Story to make it mean the Action. The Story is raw material, a relatively unshaped history of events. The Plot is the concatenation of events, the events as purposefully structured to control the meaning-response of the audience. The Action is the structured meaning-response seen from a particular point of view, as a virtual event. The story can be repeated, in altered form, without perishing; the Plot and the Action cannot. The Plot is the whole of the play seen as purposefully organized (in which sense, every telling of a story is plotted, but some tellings seem to have purposeful structure and others seem to have an arbitrary or random pattern; any telling can be seen from either point of view). The Action is not a part of the Plot but the Plot seen from a particular aspect.

Action may be related to Theme thus:

ACTION (the Psychic Event) OPERATION (the play seen as temporal)	AS	THEME (the Psychic Subject) THING (the play seen as atemporal)

The two may be different, or they may be only ways of stating the same observation. (E.g., Hamlet as Action: "Hamlet, obliged to revenge his father's murder, finds

his situation and his obligation repugnant and life intolerable under the burden of his responsibilities; but he learns, through experience, to accept fate's decrees. He is able to carry out his job; though he dies, he achieves a kind of peace and understanding." Hamlet as theme: "the philosophical education of Hamlet."[3]). This way of stating theme, with an Action implied, is often more useful to the director than the "universal truth" sort of theme statement. This same sense of "what Hamlet is about" could be stated in the universal truth form (E.g., "the readiness is all").

King Lear is a good example of the play which reveals itself extensively when studied from the viewpoint of Action but very little when studied from the viewpoint of universal truths. A well-stated action (e.g., "the death of Self and the birth of Divine Love"[4]) may evoke an integrated meaning-response which rationalizes the entire play. One could go on at great length drawing out general significances and implications without finding one which has such integrating value. Bald Soprano, on the other hand, is a play in which Qualitative Theme is all and Action is of almost no interest. The rule, as always, is to discover in each playscript what can be discovered by each way of looking at it without forcing the playscript to conform to preconceived notions of form or content, and without limiting investigation to a preferred range of reading techniques.

But the concept of Action is not so simple as has been suggested. In addition to the Master Psychic Event, it is possible to distinguish sub-events which divide the playscript into smaller moments either by isolating segments of time (e.g., the Psychic Event of Act I, Act II, or in Stanislavskian terms, the first "beat," the second "beat," etc.; the divisions can be made for convenience according to any segmental scheme) or by following the whole event from

the point of view of one character or group of characters. In general theory of operation analysis, the former would be called division into "stages," the latter division into "phases." The stage is the behavior of the whole for a limited time; the phase is the behavior of a part for the whole operation. Any way the interpreter can think to "slice" the event may produce new insights. Again, the events are not real; they are ways of looking. The same rules apply to action conceived at any level. The sub-divided actions must correlate with the Master Event; the more a sub-action reveals the relation of the moment to the whole, the more useful and reliable that conception is; the more the Master Event reveals the relation of moments to each other, the more useful that conception is. There is no other evidential standard.

Response to a play in terms of its Action need not be single, even at the Master Event level. I find value in the Action-concept of Hamlet stated earlier. Fergusson prefers to think of the Master Event as the seeking out and destruction of the hidden imposthume which is destroying Denmark.[5] The two are in no way contradictory. Each integrates the moments of the play well at its own level. The first from the point of view of Hamlet as the central character, the second from a social viewpoint. Since the two are not contradictory and since there is evidence to allow treating each as an implication (but not a literal meaning) of the playscript, the director should aim to mount a play which will elicit both responses from the audience. There is no theoretical limit to the number of Actions which might co-exist. The interpreter's task is to see that there are no contradictions. Another example may help to clarify this multiple-Action idea. Oedipus Rex, like Hamlet, may be seen profitably at both social and religious levels, as "the purging of the sinner whose guilt infected Thebes" and "the working out of Oedipus' fate despite his efforts to evade it." It

would be possible to go still further and see the play as a purely personal Action, as "Oedipus destroyed by his own hubris." Etc. The same sort of multiple-Action seems called for in all of Shakespeare's history plays, particularly in those which approach tragedy, and in his tragedies proper. It is simply not sufficient for the director to experience the Eureka moment when he feels, having found a central-seeming Action, he is ready to stage the play.

Unfortunately, two brilliant critics of drama, both theatre artists and both true scholars, the two who have done the most to popularize the concept of Action, have fallen into a destructive confusion at one point in their analyses of the concept. Both Harold Clurman and Francis Fergusson have defined Action clearly and argued the importance of the concept well, then, at the point of application, confused Action with Motive. At this crucial moment, each uses the term action as though it were synonymous with Stanislavski's Super-Objective. Both concepts are useful, but they are not the same. "What happens" is not the same as "What motivates the happening." Fergusson, for example, states his concept of the Master Event in Hamlet not as it was stated above but thus: "to find and destroy the hidden 'imposthume' which is poisoning the life of Claudius' Denmark," clearly a statement of a character motive. In this case the confusion may not mislead the interpreter; in many cases it does. In his essay on Chekov's The Three Sisters, he states the "Action": "to get to Moscow." This is dangerously reductive. The idea does not perform the integrating function which gives Action-study its value. This is a Motive, not an Action, and it pertains to a few of the characters without involving the others. This Motive is nowhere near the center of interest; it is, in fact, quite the opposite of what happens in the play. To base a production on such a concept of Master Event would inevitably distort the play and confuse the audience. As a Motive, however,

it would be very useful to the actresses playing the sisters (though a more fundamental statement would work better: "to escape boredom"; this allows an important irony of the play to emerge: the sisters believe, naively, that Moscow would eliminate their boredom, their sense of spiritual impoverishment, but the audience should be aware that this is a delusion, that the problem lies within the sisters and the society).

Clurman exaggerates the importance of Action: "All this [script study] resolves itself into one question the director must ask himself: What is the basic action of the play?" Then he limits the concept even more dangerously:

> what is the play about from the standpoint of the character's principal conflict? . . . what fundamental desire does the plot of this play symbolize, what deep struggle gives it shape and direction? What is the play's core?

He calls this core "the spine." Though he has over-limited the concept, he is still talking about Action. But then he loses his grip on the concept of Action and calls this spine "the desire," the "basic motivations," and equates it with the character's "super-problem." The confusion is complete and his concept useless when he summarizes thus:

> Since drama is action, it is best that these basic motivations or spines be stated in the form of a verb: the desire is an action; the things it prompts the character to do are further actions.

This simply does not fit with the earlier statement of supposedly the same concept:

> the director must have discovered the active center of the play as a whole, and the exact position of the actor's part in relation to the whole. . . . What is the basic action of the play? What is the play about . . . ?[6]

The director must be curious about both Action and Motive. The two are different ways of looking at the playscript; they have different evidential functions in his reading and different values in rehearsal. The concepts must

be kept clearly separated.

Elia Kazan theorizes little, but employs the concept of Action well. In his notebook on Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, he formulates his sense of the play's Master Event:

> We are shown the final dissolution of a person of worth, who once had great potential, and who, even as she goes down, has worth exceeding that of the 'healthy,' coarse-grained figures who kill her.

He sub-divides this Action thus (calling the formulations "an effort to put poetic names on scenes to edge me into stylisations and physicalizations."):

> "1. Blanche comes to the last stop at the end of the line.
> "2. Blanche tries to make a place for herself.
> "3. Blanche breaks them apart, but when they come together, Blanche is more alone than ever!
> "4. Blanche, more desperate because more excluded, tries the direct attack and makes the enemy who will finish her.
> "5. Blanche finds that she is being tracked down for the kill.
> "6. Blanche suddenly finds, suddenly makes for herself, the only possible, perfect man for her.
> "7. Blanche comes out of the happy bathroom to find that her own doom has caught up with her.
> "8. Blanche fights her last fight. Breaks down. Even Stella deserts her.
> "9. Blanche's last desperate effort to save herself by telling the whole truth. The truth dooms her.
> "10. Blanche escapes out of this world. She is brought back by Stanley and destroyed.
> "11. Blanche is disposed of."[7]

These are clearly Actions, not Objectives or Motives. They are not in themselves sufficient, but they are usefully evocative. The director might go through the scenes in such a manner for each character. He might then go through each scene, for each character, to define Objectives and Sub-Objectives. All such considerations are useful if kept in perspective.

Though it is unreasonable to call Action the primary concern of the interpreter or the central core of the playscript, it is surely true that any study of a playscript which aims at production requires consideration from this

point of view. Action has the advantage of being a directly "actable" concept. Because it operates at a level "close to the script," constant reference to the play as an Action tends to serve as a corrective on more abstract levels of meaning.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Different sorts of Actions are found in different dramatic genres. The Action of Melodrama tends to be superficial, i.e. the Action is no more than a literal summary of the Story. In richer scripts, the Action tends (but only tends) to be more profound, i.e. to chronicle Psychological and/or Social changes which result from the literal incidents of the Story but are only subtley implied by the playscript.

[2]An audience which doesn't sense the basic Dramatic Action of a play usually goes away distressed and dissatisfied, a feeling which is usually expressed "What was that supposed to be about?"

[3]Such abbreviated formulations always seem ludicrously awkward and simplistic. Fortunately they are not the sum of the interpreter's knowledge, merely attention-directors.

[4]John Middleton Murry, Shakespeare, (London: 1936), p. 338.

[5]Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre, (N.Y.: 1949), p. 117.

[6]Harold Clurman, "The Principles of Interpretation," in Producing the Play, ed. by John Gassner, (New York: 1948), pp. 277-78.

[7]Elia Kazan, "Notebook for A Streetcar Named Desire," in Cole and Chinoy, Directors on Directing, pp. 365-66.