

"On Politics and the Art of Acting"

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Here are some observations about politicians as actors. Since some of my best friends are actors I don't dare say anything bad about the art itself. The fact is that acting is inevitable as soon as we walk out our front doors into society; I am acting now; certainly I am not speaking in the same tone as I would in my living room. It is no news that we are moved more by our glandular reactions to a leader's personality, his acting, than by his proposals or his moral character. To their millions of followers, after all, many of them highly intelligent university intellectuals, Hitler and Stalin were profoundly moral men, revealers of new truths. Aristotle thought man was by nature a social animal, and in fact we are ruled more by the arts of performance, by acting in other words, than anybody wants to think about for very long.

But in our time television has created a quantitative change in all this; one of the oddest things about millions of lives now is that ordinary individuals, as never before in human history, are so surrounded by acting. Twenty four hours a day everything seen on the tube is either acted or conducted by actors in the shape of news anchor men and women, including their hairdos. It may be that the most impressionable form of experience now, for many if not most people, consists of their emotional transactions with actors which happen far more of the time than with real people. For years now commentators have had lots of fun with Reagan's inability to distinguish movies he had seen from actual events in which he had participated, but in this as in so much else he was representative of a common perplexity when so much of a person's experience comes at him through the acting art. In other periods, a person might confront the arts of performance once a year in a church ceremony or a rare appearance by a costumed prince or king and their ritualistic gestures; it would have seemed a very strange idea that ordinary folk would be so subjected every day to the persuasions of professionals whose studied technique, after all, is to assume the character of someone who is not them.

Is this persistent experience of any importance? I can't imagine how to prove this, but it seems to me that when one is surrounded by such a roiling mass of consciously contrived performances it gets harder and harder for a lot of people to locate reality anymore. Admittedly, we live in an age of entertainment, but is it a good thing that our political life, for one, be so profoundly governed by the modes of theatre, from tragedy to vaudeville to farce? I find myself speculating whether the relentless daily diet of crafted, acted emotions and canned ideas is not subtly pressing our brains to not only mistake fantasy for what is real but to absorb this process into our personal sensory process. This last election is an example. Obviously we must get on with life, but apparently we are now called upon to act as though nothing very unusual has happened and that nothing in our democratic process deteriorated, as for instance our claim to the right to instruct lesser countries on how to conduct fair elections. So in a subtle way we are induced to become actors too. The show, after all, has to go on, even if the audience is obliged to join in the acting.

Political leaders everywhere have come to understand that to govern they must learn how to act. No differently than any actor Gore went through several changes of costume before finding the right mix to express the personality he wished to project. Up to the campaign he seemed an essentially serious type with no great claim to humor, but the Presidential type character he had chosen to play was apparently happy, upbeat, with a kind of Bing Crosby mellowness. I daresay that if he seemed so awkward it was partly because the image was not really his, he had cast himself in a role that was wrong for him. As for Bush, now that he is President he seems to have learned not to sneer quite so much, and to cease furtively glancing left and right when leading up to a punch line, followed by a sharp nod to flash that he has successfully delivered it. This is bad acting because all this dire over-emphasis casts doubt on the text. Obviously, as the sparkly magic veil of actual power has descended upon him he has become more relaxed and confident, like an actor after he has read some hit reviews and knows the show is in for a run.

At this point I suppose I should add something about my own bias. I recall the day, back in the Fifties, during Eisenhower's campaign against Adlai Stevenson when I turned on my television and saw the General who had led the greatest invasion force in history, lying back under the hands of a professional makeup woman preparing him for his TV appearance. I was far more naive then, and so I still found it hard to believe that henceforth we were to be wooed and won by rouge, lipstick and powder rather than ideas and positions on public issues. It was almost as though he was getting ready to go on in the role of General Eisenhower instead of simply being him. In politics, of course, what you see is rarely what you get, but in fact Eisenhower was not a good actor, especially when he ad-libbed, disserving himself as a nearly comical bumbler with the English language when in fact he was actually a lot more literate and sophisticated than his fumbling public speaking style suggested. As his biographer, a Time editor named Hughes, once told me, Colonel Eisenhower was the author of all those smoothly liquid, rather Roman-style speeches that had made his boss, Douglas MacArthur, so famous. Then again, I wonder if Eisenhower's syntactical stumbling in public made him seem more convincingly sincere.

Watching some of our leaders on TV has made me wonder if we really have any idea what is involved in the actor's art, and I recall again a story once told me by my old friend, the late Robert Lewis, director of a number of beautiful Broadway productions, including the original "Finian's Rainbow." Starting out as an actor in the late Thirties, Bobby had been the assistant and dresser of Jacob Ben Ami, a star in Europe and in New York as well. Ben Ami, an extraordinary actor, was playing in a Yiddish play but despite the language and the location of the theatre far from Times Square on the lower East Side of Manhattan, one of its scenes had turned it into a substantial hit with English-speaking audiences. Experiencing that scene had become the in-thing to do in New York. People who had never dreamed of seeing a Yiddish play travelled downtown to watch this one scene, and then left. In it Ben Ami stood at the edge of the stage staring into space, and with tremendous tension, brought a revolver to his head. Seconds passed, whole minutes, some in the audience shut their eyes or turned away certain the shot was coming at any instant. Ben Ami clenched his jaws, sweat broke out on his face, his eyes seemed about to pop out of his head, his hands trembled as he strove to will himself to suicide; more moments passed, people in the audience were gasping for breath and making strange asphyxiated noises; finally, standing on his toes now as though to leap into the unknown, Ben Ami dropped the gun and

cried out, Ich kann es nicht!" I can't do it! Night after night he brought the house down; Ben Ami had somehow literally compelled the audience to suspend its disbelief and to imagine his brains splattered all over the stage.

Lewis, aspiring young actor that he was, begged Ben Ami to tell him the secret of how he had created this emotional reality, but the actor kept putting him off, saying he would only tell him after the final performance. "It's better for people not to know," he said, "or it'll spoil the show."

Then at last the final performance came and at its end Ben Ami sat in his dressing room with the young Lewis.

"You promised to tell me," Lewis said.

"All right, I'll tell you. My problem with this scene," Ben Ami explained, "was that I personally could never blow my brains out, I am just not suicidal, and I can't imagine ending my life. So I could never really know how that man was feeling and I could never play such a person authentically. For weeks I went around trying to think of some parallel in my own life that I could draw on. What situation could I be in where first of all I am standing up, I am alone, I am looking straight ahead, and something I feel I must do is making me absolutely terrified, and finally that whatever it is I can't do it?"

"Yes," Lewis said, hungry for this great actor's cue to greatness. "And what is that?"

"Well," Ben Ami said, "I finally realized that the one thing I hate worse than anything is washing in cold water. So what I'm really doing with that gun to my head is, I'm trying to get myself to step into an ice cold shower."

Now if we transfer this situation to political campaigns -- who are we really voting for -- the self-possessed character who projects dignity, exemplary morals and forthright courage enough to lead us in war or depression, or is he simply good at characterizing a counterfeit with the help of professional coaching, executive tailoring, and that whole armory of pretense which the grooming of the president can now employ? Are we allowed anymore to know what is going on not in the candidate's facial expression and his choice of suit, but in his head? Unfortunately, as with Ben Ami, this is something we are not told until he is securely in office and his auditioning ends. After spending tens of millions of dollars both candidates -- at least for me -- never managed to create that unmistakable click of recognition as to who they really were. But maybe this is asking too much. As with most actors, maybe any resemblance between them and their roles is purely accidental.

The so-called Stanislavsky System came into vogue at the dawn of the 20th Century when science was recognized as the dominating force of the age. Objective scientific analysis promised to open everything to human control and the Stanislavsky method was an attempt to systematize the actor's vagrant search for authenticity as he seeks to portray a character different from his own. Politicians do something similar all the time; by assuming personalities not genuinely their own -- let's say six-pack, lunch box types -- they hope to connect with ordinary Americans. The

difficulty for Bush and Gore in their attempts to seem like regular fellas, was that both were scions of successful and powerful families. Worse yet for their regular fella personae, both were in effect created by the culture of Washington, D.C. and you can't hope to be President without running against Washington. The problem for Gore was that Washington meant Clinton whom he dared not acknowledge lest he be morally challenged; and as for Bush, he could only impersonate an outsider pitching against dependency on the Federal Government whose payroll, however, had helped feed two generations of his family. There's a name for this sort of cannonading of Washington, it is called acting. To some important degree both gentlemen had to act themselves out of their real personae into freshly begotten ones. The reality, of course, was that the closest thing to a man of the people was Clinton-the-unclean, the real goods with the six-pack background who it was both dangerous and necessary to disown. This took a monstrous amount of acting.

It was in the so-called debates that the sense of a contrived performance rather than a naked clash of personalities and ideas came to a sort of head. Here was acting, acting with a vengeance. But the consensus seems to have called the performances decidedly boring. And how could it be otherwise when both men seemed to be attempting to display the same genial temperament a readiness to perform the same role and in effect to climb into the same warm suit? The role, of course, was that of the nice guy, the mildness was all, Bing Crosby with a sprinkling of Bob Hope. Clearly they had both been coached to not threaten the audience with too much passion, but rather to reassure that if elected they would not disturb any reasonable person's sleep. In acting terms there was no inner reality, no genuineness, no glimpse into their unruly souls. One remarkable thing did happen, though -- that single split second shot which revealed Gore shaking his head in helpless disbelief at some inanity Bush had spoken; significantly, this gesture earned him many bad press reviews for what was called his superior airs, his sneering disrespect -- in short, he had stepped out of costume and revealed his reality. This, in effect, was condemned as a failure of acting. The American press is made up of disguised theatre critics; substance counts for next to nothing compared to style and inventive characterization. For a millisecond Gore had been inept enough to have gotten real! And this clown wanted to be President yet! Not only is all the world a stage, but we have all but obliterated the fine line between the feigned and the real.

But was there ever such a border? It is hard to know, but we might try to visualize the Lincoln-Douglas debates before the Civil War when thousands would stand, spread out across some pasture to listen to the two speakers mounted on stumps so they could be seen from far off. There certainly was no makeup; neither man had a speech writer but, incredibly enough, made it all up himself. In fact, years later Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on scraps of paper on his way to a memorial meeting. Is it imaginable that any of our candidates could have such conviction, and more importantly such self-assured candor as to move him to pour out his heart this way? To be sure, Lincoln and Douglas, at least in the record of their remarks, were civil to one another, but the attack on each other's ideas was sharp and thorough, revealing of their actual approaches to the nation's problems. As for their styles, they had to have been very different than the current laid-back cool before the lense. The lense magnifies everything; the slight lift of an eyelid and you look like you're glaring. If there is a single most basic requirement for success on television it is minimalization; to be convincing before the camera is that whatever you are doing do it less and emit cool. In other words -- act. In contrast, speakers facing hundreds of people without a

microphone and in the open air, must inevitably have been broader in gesture and even more emphatic in speech than in life. Likewise, their use of language had to be more pointed and precise in order to carry their points out to the edges of the crowd. And no makeup artist stood waiting to pounce on every bead of sweat on a speaker's lip; the candidates were stripped to their shirtsleeves in the summer heat and people nearby could no doubt smell them. There may, in short, have been some aspect of human reality in such a debate.

Given the camera's tendency to exaggerate any movement, it may in itself have a dampening effect on spontaneity and conflict. There were times in this last campaign when one even wondered if the candidates feared that to really raise issues and engage in a genuine clash before the camera, might dangerously set fire to some of the more flammable public. But of course there is a veritable plague of benign smiling on the glass screen, quite as if a revealing scowl or passionate outburst might ignite some kind of social conflagration.

No differently than with actors, the single most important characteristic a politician needs to display is relaxed sincerity. Ronald Reagan disarmed his opponents by never showing the slightest sign of inner conflict about the truth of what he was saying. Simple-minded though his critics found his ideas and remarks, cynical and manipulative as he may have been in actuality, he seemed to believe every word he said; he could tell you that atmospheric pollution came from trees or that ketchup was a vegetable in school lunches, or leave the implication that he had seen action in World War II rather than in a movie he had made or perhaps only seen, and if you didn't believe these things you were still kind of amused by how sincerely he said them. Sincerity implies honesty, an absence of moral conflict in the mind of its possessor. Of course this can also indicate insensitivity or even stupidity. It is hard, for example, to think of another American official whose reputation would not have been stained by saluting a cemetery of Nazi dead with heartfelt solemnity while failing to mention the tens of millions of victims of their vile regime, including Americans. But Reagan was not only an actor, he loved acting and it can be said that at least in public he not only acted all the time but did so sincerely. The second best actor is Clinton, who does occasionally seem to blush, but then again he was caught in an illicit sexual act which is far more important than illegally shipping restricted weapons to foreign countries. Reagan's tendency to confuse events in films with things that really happened is often seen as intellectual weakness but in reality it was -- unknowingly of course -- a Stanislavskian triumph, the very consummation of the actor's ability to incorporate reality into the fantasy of his role; in Reagan the dividing line between acting and actuality was simply melted, gone. Human beings, as the poet said, cannot bear very much reality, and the art of politics is our best proof. The trouble is that a leader somehow comes to symbolize his country, and so the nagging question is whether, when real trouble comes, we can act ourselves out of it.

The parallels between acting and politics are really innumerable and, depending on your point of view, as discouraging as they are inevitable. The first obligation of the actor, for example, just as with a politician, is to get himself known. P.T. Barnum said it for all time when a reporter asked if he wasn't ashamed at having tricked the public -- he had originated the freak show which had drawn an immense audience to his Bridgeport Connecticut barn to see the bearded lady and the two-headed calf. But the show was such a great hit that his problem was how to get people to leave and make room for new customers. His solution was to put up a sign with an arrow

pointing to a door, the sign reading, "This way to the Egress." Since nobody had ever seen an egress before the place emptied satisfactorily and the audience found itself in the street. The reporter asked if this ploy wouldn't anger people and ruin his reputation. Barnum gave his historic reply, "I don't care what they say about me as long as they mention my name." If there is a single rubric to express the most basic requirement for political or theatrical success, this is it.

Whether admitting or not, the actor wants to be not only believed and admired but loved; what may help to account for the dullness of the last campaign was the absence of affection for either man, not to speak of love. By the end it seemed like an unpopularity contest, a competition for who was less disliked by more people than the other, a demonstration of negative consent. Put another way, in theatrical terms these were character actors but not fascinating stars. Ironically, the exception to all this lovelessness was Nader, whose people, at least on television, did seem to adore their leader even after he had managed to help wreck Gore and elect Bush, who they certainly despised far more than they did Gore, whose technical defeat they ended up helping to seal. We are so accustomed to thinking of politicians as hard-headed, but as with certain movies and plays the whole enterprise threatens to turn into illusion, an incoherent dream.

It occurs to me at this point that I ought to confess that I have known only one president who I feel confident about calling The President of the United States, and that was Franklin Roosevelt. My impulse is to say that he alone was not an actor, but I probably think that because he was such a good one. He could not stand on his legs, after all, but he took care never to exhibit weakness by appearing in his wheelchair or in any mood but upbeat, cheery optimism which at times he most certainly did not feel. Roosevelt was so genuine a star, his presence so overwhelming, that Republicans, consciously or not, have never ceased running against him for this whole half century.

The mystery of the star performer can only leave the inquiring mind confused, resentful, or blank, something that of course has the greatest political importance. Many Republicans have blamed the press for the attention Bill Clinton continued to get even out of office. Again, what they don't understand is that what a star says and even what he does is only incidental to people's interest in him. When the click of empathetic association is made with a leader logic has very little to do with it and virtue even less, at least up to a certain distant point. Obviously, this is not very encouraging news for rational people trying to uplift society by reasoned argument. But then not many of us rational folk are immune to the star's power to rule.

The Presidency in acting terms is a heroic role. It is not one for comedians, sleek lover-types, or second bananas. In a word, to be credible the man who acts as President must hold in himself an element of potential dangerousness. Something similar is required in a real star.

Like most people I had never even heard of Marlon Brando the first time I saw him on a stage not long after the end of World War II. The play was "Truck Stop," a failed work by Maxwell Anderson that was soon to close, hardly a promising debut for an ambitious actor. The set was a shabby cafe on some country highway. It is after midnight, the place is miserably-lit and empty. There is a counter and a few booths with worn upholstery. Now a car is heard stopping outside. Presently a young man wearing a worn leather jacket and a cap strolls in, an exhausted looking

girl behind him. He saunters down to center stage looking around for a sign of life. For a long time he says absolutely nothing, just stands there in the sort of slouch you fall into after driving for hours. The moment lengthens as he tries to figure what to do, his patience clearly thinning out. Nothing has happened, he has hardly even moved, but watching him, the audience, myself included, is already spellbound. Another actor would simply have aroused impatience, but we are in Brando's power, we read him, his being is speaking to us even if we can't make out precisely what it is saying. It is something like an animal that has slipped from its cage, packed with all kinds of possibilities. Is he dangerous? Friendly? Stupid? Intelligent? Without a word spoken this actor has opened up in the audience a whole range of possibilities, including, oddly enough, a little fear. Finally he calls out, "Anybody here?!" What a relief! He has not shot up the place. He has not thrown chairs around. All he wanted, apparently, was a sandwich!

I can't explain how Brando, without a word spoken, did what he did, but he had found a way, no doubt instinctively, to master a paradox -- he had implicitly threatened us and then given us pardon. Here was Napoleon, here was Caesar, here was Roosevelt. What Brando had done was not ask the audience to merely love him, that is only charm; he had made them wish that he would deign to love them. That is a star. On stage or off, that is power, not different in its essence than the power that can lead nations.

And of course on stage or in the White House, power changes everything, even including how the aspirant looks after he wins. I remember running into Dustin Hoffman on a rainy New York street some years ago; he had only a month earlier played the part of the Lomans' pale and nervous next door neighbor Bernard in a recording session with Lee Cobb of Death of Salesman. Now as he approached, counting the cracks in the sidewalk, hatless, his wet hair dripping, a worn coat collar turned up, I prepared to greet him thinking that with his bad skin, hawkish nose and adenoidal voice some brave friend really ought to tell him to go into another line, of work. As compassionately as possible I asked what he was doing now, and with a rather apologetic sigh he said, after several sniffles, "Well they want me for a movie." "Oh?" I felt relieved that he was not to collapse in front of me in a fit of depression, "what's the movie?"

"It's called 'The Graduate,' he said.

"Good part?"

"Well, yeah, I guess it's the lead."

In no time at all this half-drowned puppy would have millions of people at his feet all over the world. And once having ascended to power, so to speak, it became hard even for me to remember him when he was real. Not that he wasn't real, just that he was real plus. And the plus is the mystery of the patina, the glow that power paints on the human being.

The amount of acting required of both President Bush and the Democrats is awesome now, given the fractured election and the donation by the Supreme Court. Practically no participant in the whole process can really say out loud what is in his heart. They are all facing an ice cold shower with a gun to their heads. Bush has to act as though he was elected, the Supreme Court has to act

as though it was the Supreme Court, Gore has to perform the role of a man who is practically overjoyed at his own defeat, and so on.

It is all very theatrical but the closest thing to a deliberately rehearsed passion that I witnessed was the organized mob of Republicans banging threateningly on the door of a Florida vote counting office and howling for the officials inside to stop counting. Watching this outburst I could practically hear the rehearsal. I must confess, though, that as a playwright I would be flummoxed as to how to make plausible on the stage an organized, stampede of partisans yelling to stop the count and in the same breath accusing the other side of trying to steal the election. I can't imagine an audience taking this as anything but a satirical farce. But it was reality, the political kind, which easily spills over into the sort of chaotic dream where a cockroach becomes a Cadillac which in turn turns into the Grand Canyon.

An election, not unlike a classic play, has a certain strict form which requires that it pass through certain ordained steps to a logical conclusion. When, instead, the form dissolves and chaos reigns, what is left behind -- no differently than in the theatre -- is a sense in the audience of having been cheated and even mocked. After this last, most hallucinatory of our elections, it was said that in the end the system worked when clearly it hadn't at all. And one of the signs that it had collapsed popped up even before the decision was finally made in Bush's favor; it was when a Republican leader, one Dick Armey, declared that if Gore were elected he would simply not attend his inauguration despite immemorial custom and his obligation to do so as one of the leaders of the Congress. In short, Mr. Armey had reached the limits of his actor's imagination and could only collapse into playing himself. But in the middle of a play you can't have a major performer deciding to leave the scene without utterly destroying the whole illusion. For the system to be said to have worked, no one is allowed to stop acting.

The absence of any great affection or love for the candidates also suggests some distinct correlations in the theatre. The play without a character we can really root for is in trouble. Shakespeare's "Coriolanus" is an example. It is not often produced, powerful though it is as playwriting and poetry, no doubt because, as a totally honest picture of power hunger in a frightening human being, the closest he ever gets to love is his subservience to his mother. In short, it is a truthful play without sentimentality, and: truthfulness, I'm afraid, doesn't sell a whole lot of tickets or draw votes.

Which inevitably brings me to Clinton. Until the revulsion brought on by the pardon scandal, he was leaving office with the highest rating for his performance and the lowest for his personal character. Translated -- people had prospered under his leadership, and with whatever reluctance they still connected with his humanity as they glimpsed it, ironically enough, through his sins. We are back, I think, with the mystery of the star. Clinton, except for those few minutes when lying about Lewinsky, was relaxed on camera in a way any actor would envy. And relaxation is the soul of the art, for one thing because it arouses receptivity rather than defensiveness in an audience. That receptivity brings to mind a friend of mine who many years ago won the prize for selling more Electrolux vacuum cleaners in the Bronx than any other door-to-door salesman. He explained once how he did it. "You want them to start saying 'yes.' So you ask questions that they can't say no to. 'Is this 1350 Jerome Avenue? Yes. Is your name Smith? Yes. Do you have

carpets? Yes. A vacuum cleaner? Yes." Once you've got them on a 'yes' roll a kind of psychological fusion takes place, you're both on the same side, it's almost like some kind of love and they feel it's impolite for them to say no, and in no time you're in the house unpacking the machine. What Clinton projects is his personal interest in the customer, which comes across as a sort of love. There can be no doubt that like all great performers he loves to act, he is most alive when he's on; his love of acting may be his most authentic emotion, the realest thing about him, and as with Reagan there is no dividing line between his performance and himself -- he is his performance. There is no greater contrast than with Gore or Bush, both of whom projected a kind of embarrassment at having to perform, an underlying tension between themselves and the role, and tension, needless to say, shuts down love on the platform no less than it does in bed.

On every side there is a certain amount of lamenting about the reluctance of Americans to utterly condemn Bill Clinton, but rather than blaming their failed moral judgement I think one would do better to examine his acting. Clinton, to me, is our Eulenspiegel, the mythical arch prankster of 13th Century Germany, who was a sort of mischievous and loveable folk spirit, half child- half man. Eulenspiegel challenged society with his enviable guile and a charm so irresistible that he could blurt out embarrassing truths about the powerful now and then, earning the gratitude of the ordinary man. His closest American equivalent is Brer Rabbit, who ravishes people's vegetable gardens and just when he seems to be cornered, charmingly distracts his pursuer with some outrageously engaging story, long enough to let him edge closer and closer to a hole down which he escapes. Appropriately enough, the word Eulenspiegel is a sort of German joke; it means a mirror put before an owl, and since an owl is blind in daylight it cannot see its own reflection. So that as bright and happy and hilariously unpredictable as he is, Eulenspiegel cannot see himself and so among other things he is dangerous. In other words, a star. Indeed, the most perfect model of both star and political leader is that smiling and implicitly dangerous man who likes you.

In part, I think, it was because neither Gore nor Bush were particularly threatening that their protective affection was not very important. Gore was so busy trying to unbend that he forfeited whatever menace he may have had, and while Bush did his best to pump up his chest and toughly turn down the corners of his mouth to show he was no pushover it was all too obviously a performance, and for too long his opponents failed to take him as more than the potential president of a fraternity. In any case, he so understood what people needed to hear that a number of times, risking immodesty to say the least, he actually referred to himself as a "leader" and to his forthcoming administration as one that would fill the vacuum of "leadership." Caught time after time fouling up his syntax, thus shaking his image of manly command, he has improved since real power has descended upon him, and his sentences, saving on grammar, have gotten shorter and shorter. To the point where, at times, he comes close to sounding like a gunslinger in a Clint Eastwood film. But he is beginning to relax in his role and like most Presidents may in the fullness of time seem inevitable.

The ultimate foundation of political power, of course, has never changed and it is the leader's willingness to resort to violence should the need arise. But even this is too simple; an Adlai Stevenson may have seemed too civilized to resort to violence without a crippling hesitation, and Jimmy Carter was so clearly restrained by Christian scruple that a single military accident involving a handful of unfortunate soldiers in one stroke destroyed all his credibility. An

American leader may deliver the Sunday Lesson provided his sword is never out of reach; the two best examples, FDR and John Kennedy. But those types, which don't come along every day, were aristocratic populists and the aristocrat has to learn how to act at a very early age, acting is part of his upbringing. A Nixon, on the contrary, has to learn as he goes along. Indeed, once he had ordered himself bugged, Nixon was acting during all his waking hours, his entire working life a recorded performance.

The case of President Truman and the atomic bomb is particularly rich in its references to acting and power. When a couple of dozen of the scientists who had built the first bomb petitioned Truman to stage a demonstration off the Japanese coast rather than dropping it on an inhabited city, he chose the latter course; the fear was that the first bomb might fail to work, encouraging the Japanese to even more resolutely refuse peace overtures, thus intensifying the war. However frightful its consequences it was better, so it was claimed, to drop it on a city and in one flash bring the war to an end. The weakness in this defense is that if the bomb was in fact so uncertain to explode, why drop it on a city where Japanese scientists might examine and maybe even copy it?

A more persuasive explanation, I'm afraid, is that if the bomb been dropped in the ocean after the Japanese had been warned to expect a demonstration of a terrible new weapon, and had it been a dud, a dead iron ball splashing into the sea, Truman's unwillingness to kill would have threatened his leadership altogether and his power, personally and symbolically, would have lost credibility. I'm not at all sure even now what I might have done in his position, confronting as he did the possibility of terrible American losses in any land invasion of Japan. But the issue is not Truman so much as the manifestations of power that people require their leaders to act out. Jesus Christ could not have beaten Hitler Germany or Imperial Japan into surrender. And it is not impossible that our main reason for cloaking our leadership with a certain magical, extra human, theatrical aura is to help disguise one of the basic conditions of their employment, namely, their readiness to kill for us.

So whether for good or evil, it is sadly inevitable that all political leadership requires the artifices of theatrical illusion. In the politics of a democracy the shortest distance between two points is often a crooked line. While Roosevelt was stoutly repeating his determination to keep America out of any foreign war he was taking steps toward belligerency in order to save England and prevent a Nazi victory. In effect, mankind is in debt to his lies. So from the tragic necessity of dissimulation there seems to be no escape. Except, of course, to tell people the truth, something which doesn't require acting but may also damage one's own party and, indeed, in certain circumstances, the human enterprise itself. Then what?

Then, I'm afraid, we can only turn to the release of art, to the other theatre, the theatre-theatre where you can tell the truth without killing anybody, and may even illuminate the awesomely durable dilemma of how to lead without lying too much. The release of art will not forge a cannon or pave a street but it may remind us again and again of the corruptive essence of power, its immemorial tendency to enhance itself at the expense of humanity. The director and critic, the late Harold Clurman called theatre 'lies like truth.' Theatre does indeed lie, fabricating everything from the storm's roar to the fake lark's song, from the actor's calculated laughter to his nighty

flood of tears. And the actor lies; with all the spontaneity that careful calculation can lend him he may nevertheless fabricate a vision of some important truth about the human condition that opens us to a new understanding of ourselves. In the end, we call a work of art trivial when it illuminates little beyond its own devices, and the same goes for political leaders who bespeak some narrow interest rather than those of the national or universal good. The fault is not in the use of the acting arts but in their purpose.

Paradox is the name of the game where acting as an art is concerned; it is a rare hard-headed politician who is at home with any of the arts these days; most often the artist is somehow suspect, a nuisance, a threat to morality, or a fraud. At the same time the second most lucrative American export after airplanes is art -- namely music and films. But art has always been the revenge of the human spirit upon the short-sighted. Consider the sublime achievements of Greece and her military victories and defeats, the necrophilic grandeur of the Egyptians, the Romans' glory, the awesome Assyrian power, the rise and fall of the Jews and their incomprehensible survival -- and what do we have left of it all but a handful of plays, essays, carved stones, and some strokes of paint on paper or the rock cave wall -- in a word, art? The ironies abound. Artists are not particularly famous for their steady habits, the acceptability of their opinions, or their conformity with majority mores, but whatever is not turned into art disappears forever. It is very strange when you think about it, except for one thing that is not strange but quite logical -- however dull or morally delinquent an artist may be, in his moment of creation when his work pierces to the truth, he cannot dissimulate, he cannot fake it. Tolstoy once remarked that what we look for in the work of art is the revelation of the artist's soul, a glimpse of god. You can't act that.

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