

~ CANADIAN CLUB LUNCHEON ~

Monday, April 1, 1996

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“Hear me, my Lord.

What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,

What need one?

O! Reason not the need.”

Occasionally, when I'm not directing tragedies such as **King Lear** from which I've just quoted, I cheer myself up by reading the newspapers. Those of you who are regular readers of papers, will know that their pages often play host to the seemingly never-ending debate on whether the arts should receive public funding or should be set free in the marketplace to sink or swim - if that's something you can do in a marketplace - on their own merits.

In the papers, free-enterprise advocates list all the reasons why artists should have to stand on their own two economic feet, just like the makers of computers or washing machines. And if the marketplace decides that opera or ballet or classical theatre should go the way of the Ford Edsel or the Sony Betamax, well then, that's only right and proper. Let those who want high art, like those who want private health care, pay for it at the full market value, and don't impose the cost of it on the rest of us.

And then after one of these pieces appears, a whole raft of artists and other interested parties will write to the newspapers, pointing out all the economic benefits that the arts bring to their communities and indignantly list all the reasons why the arts cannot survive without public funding, why they are not an elitist pastime, and why these ultra conservative commentators should be put in the stocks and left to rot.

Well now. I'm an artist. I believe in government funding of the arts, and I have you at my mercy for the next half an hour. Don't worry. I do not intend to spend my time - at least not all of it - haranguing you about the funding issue. After all, our governments have largely made up their minds and now we all must live with their actions. To fund or not to fund: that was the question.

Now, we as individuals, must examine our own conscience and decide if we must step in and fill the breach left by our diminishing public funds. The Stratford Festival is currently involved in a historic renovation of its Festival Theatre. This renovation will extend from our front-of-house to our auditorium. It will make for improved sightlines for our stage, more comfortable seating and better washroom facilities for our patrons. This Capital Campaign is being ably led by Senator Michael Meighen, our Board President, and has received the generous support of the Federal and Provincial governments, and recently, a commitment of \$1,000,000 from the City of Stratford.

Stratford City Council's enlightened funding policy is one which has done wonders for the City itself and given Canada as a whole something to be proud of. We are well on our way to our \$13 million target and I pray that my muse will now fill me with the eloquence needed to open your hearts and wallets to this good cause. Senator Meighen has brought a large black bag with him today for this very purpose. In fact, he never leaves home without it!

To return to the newspapers and the public funding debate, I must confess that frankly, I'm sick of the whole damn thing. I think big business should pick up the whole tab! For heaven's sake, why can't we just find it in our hearts to put aside our philosophical differences, let all the free-marketing columnists rot in their stocks, and get on with making art?

After all, economically, what is there to talk about? In Germany, the theatre receives 80% subsidy from government, while the Royal Shakespeare Company in England receives 40% of its budget from government, and the Royal National Theatre 48%. Their Canadian cousin in Stratford, Ontario receives only - can you guess? - 8% of its total budget from the government. In return for that begrudging support (less than \$2,000,000 annually from all levels of government combined), Stratford generates \$25,000,000 in taxes and \$100,000,000 in total economic activity per year. Much of that is "found" money, as 35% of our audience comes from the United States.

Not all the arts are as thriving - nor may Stratford be in the future. Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that the arts

provide revenue (and jobs) that far exceed public funding, many politicians and members of the press continue to ignore or distort the facts - so much for economics. But I do think there is a bigger question to be addressed here.

That question has to do with the role of the arts in our society, which is, I think, rather an ambiguous one. I sent a letter to the editor of **The Globe and Mail** not long ago, in response to a series of articles by the paper's theatre critic. In particular, I took exception to that writer's dismissal of a piece of what they termed "commercial theatre" at the Canadian Stage, as no better than a "Jarvis Street whore."

That's the sort of metaphor that tends to stick in the mind, eh? And in fact, if you stop and think about it, it's actually quite alarming how many parallels you can find between my profession and one that's only slightly older.

The theatre, like all the arts, occupies a shadowy place in our society, rather as prostitution does - though not, of course, in quite the same way. Whereas, prostitution is officially disapproved of but largely tolerated, theatre is officially lauded, while in practice it is something that our governments can barely abide.

Plato was probably responsible for this. He was quite upfront about it: he didn't want poets in his Republic. Nasty troublemakers the lot of them, always whining and criticizing and interfering with the good and grave work of the philosopher kings. But we're less honest than Plato: we have a double standard. We tell our children that art is good for

them. We trundle them in busloads to the Stratford Festival and the Art Gallery of Ontario and other cultural centres. But at the same time, we balk as a society from providing the support that is required for those institutions to do their work.

We take the Madonna-and-the-whore approach to art: revering it as the embodiment of all that is good and pure and inspiring in our civilization, while at the same time giving it a contemptuous kick as if it were an importunate street-walker. The suggestion I'd like to make to you today is that if artists are whores, we are at least sacred ones. And our proper home is not in the marketplace at all, but in the temple.

To debate about whether or not the arts should be able to make it on their own in the market place, begs the question of whether economic success is any kind of relevant criterion. If you accept that premise, then you're inevitably going to suspect that, if an artistic enterprise can't make it financially, then there must be something fundamentally wrong with it.

Either it's:

1. being inefficiently managed.
2. or the enterprise is worthless anyway, and its audience is giving it a vote of no confidence by going elsewhere.

Neither of these assumptions stands the test of experience.

The first of these conjectures — that the arts are inefficiently run — comes from giving the average theatre or opera a quick glance.

To the superficial observer, they will be seen as cluttered and apparently disorganized as a beehive, filled with too many people doing the most exotic things. But creating art is a “hands on” process. You cannot train violinists by the hundreds in lecture halls, as you cannot replace an opera chorus with a synthesizer. Therefore, the conventional wisdom of “downsizing” does not apply to the arts. And while they may seem inefficient, just like the beehive they are filled with dedicated and selfless workers. People in the arts work hard, often for very little personal reward. In Canada today, most actors, for instance, live well below the poverty line. Throughout history, most artists have died poor, and often we haven’t come to appreciate their work till well after their death. Mozart, one of the greatest composers who ever lived, ended up in a pauper’s grave. And this summer at Stratford, he will do this three times a week in **Amadeus** .

Shakespeare did all right for himself though, but only because he enjoyed royal patronage - now known as government funding. It’s only recently that we’ve come to think that the arts ought to be able to support themselves. So much for this first assumption of inefficiency.

The second assumption is the basic credo: “If it’s good, people will come.” And if it’s good, it will attract private sponsorship, and government won’t have to get into the act. This is desirable, the argument goes, because you don’t want some bureaucrat deciding what’s good and thereby

distorting the market place, which is the ultimate test of all things. Since the market place works for every other section of our society, why wouldn't it work for the arts?

There's a cartoon in the syndicated Bizarro series that neatly answers that argument. It shows two storefronts, side by side. One is topped by a huge flashing neon sign, garishly advertising what may be found within: "Trashy schlock for the simple-minded!" There's a line-up of people outside this door, stretching round the block, all of them with expressions of eager anticipation on their faces. Next door to it is a much smaller store, with a discreet and elegant little sign promising "Quality products for people with taste." Toward that door steps one solitary customer. What makes this cartoon so perceptive is not its acknowledgment that people will pay good money for rubbish, or that they'll flock to whatever appeals to the lowest common denominator.

We all know that, many careers in the movies and popular music, depend on it. What makes the cartoon perceptive is that it recognizes that what we think we believe in and what we're prepared to spend our money on are two different things: that we may actually choose schlock over art, knowing that it's schlock, because schlock is easier on us. And that, much as we may admire quality goods, we may choose something else when it comes time to actually buy.

I have to stress at this point that I have nothing against honest entertainment. Even the most high-minded of us appreciates the value of pure entertainment. It is designed to

give you pleasure, which is admirable. So is art, but it's a different kind of pleasure.

I'm not calling for the wholesale elimination of commercial entertainment in order to make way for more High Art. How could I? As Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival, my mandate is to make art, but I have to make money in order to make art. I embrace those twin responsibilities - making money and making art - even though they are very uncomfortable bedfellows.

At the moment, fortunately, the Stratford Festival is making art and making money. This is heartening, because it proves that art and entertainment need not be mutually exclusive. The fact that it's a classic doesn't mean it can't be fun, any more than the fact that it's a blockbuster has to automatically mean that it's trash. (For instance, the recent Livent production of **Showboat** was by far the best musical I saw in New York and Toronto for many seasons, and the beauty of Mr. Prince's production brought tears to my eyes.)

Classical plays at Stratford are doing well today. But we cannot become complacent. For in making art of any worth, you have to keep insisting on extreme risk, rather than commercial viability. And somebody's got to pay for that risk - should it go wrong - otherwise the artistic choices become safer and safer.

So, if it's good, will they come? Not necessarily. They may say they'll come, just as most people would say they prefer "quality products" every time. Whatever the reason, the

hard truth is that art's a bit like crime used to be: it doesn't pay unless you're very, very lucky. Product is conceived so that it will pay.

Investors understand it; audiences who are trained in the ways of consumption, like it; even governments are more comfortable with product, because it is entrepreneurs rather than artists who are best at managing it, and governments like entrepreneurs (at least successful ones).

But the goal of art is not profit, but insight. It is for that insight that we return again and again to the great works of art, and it is the lack of that insight that ultimately dooms lesser works to oblivion, whatever their popularity in their own time. It's interesting to note that the greatest period of commercial theatre in Britain was the 19th century, a period from which we have very few memorable plays.

Going to the theatre was incredibly popular during this period, and there were some splendid actors on the stage. This was the great age of theatrical machinery and spectacular special effects: elephants and horses were brought on stage, sets were built that could collapse on cue or burst into flames. Tickets to the theatre sold like hot cakes. But out of the whole period, from Sheridan to Shaw, we don't have one play that has lasted. That's because creating art that would endure was not the theatre manager's primary concern. Art has other goals besides a healthy bottom line, goals that sometimes, in fact, demand that the bottom line be sacrificed. And while product has to be general and easily understood, in order to appeal to the

greatest possible number of people, art has nothing to do with the general, it is all about particulars. Art banishes banality. It is the expression of an individual's appreciation of the world that he or she shares with others. It is something that is inherently personal, and there are no easy scales by which its value can be measured.

Therefore, the financial risk in making art lies within its very heart. The risk lies within its uniqueness; its individuality may not please the crowd today, although it may please a judicious few forever. In its uniqueness, it may not be slick, it may be awkward and express insight through its very flaws. Shakespeare would have made a very poor Hollywood screenwriter. His work is full of unnecessary faults, characters that are discontinuous, time sequences that don't work, and anachronisms everywhere. But that's part of Shakespeare's technique. He is an impressionist - among other things. He takes what he needs, he adapts. He buried convention. In Hollywood, he would have been forced to conform or leave - "art" would have been out of the question.

The great works of the theatre, the classics, offer a deep insight into the human condition. And I don't know any author who explores the human condition so deeply, so broadly, as Shakespeare. I'm drawn to Shakespeare not only because he's been such a good employer, keeping me off the streets for some 30 years. I am drawn to him because of the infinite variety of his work, the depth of his vision, which is all-embracing and bodied forth in such magnificent language. One of the chief glories of being alive is to be able to listen to that language. It constantly

astounds. Shakespeare's voice is so loud you have to be deaf not to hear it.

Like all great art, Shakespeare's plays work on a human level, yet transcend to another plane because of their poetry. I mentioned that I'm directing **King Lear** at the moment. No one can come to grips with that play.

I've read essay after essay about it. They all say different things. The play refuses to be pinned down to one consistent interpretation. It's a paradox, and that's its greatness - you cannot pluck out the heart of its mystery.

I played Hamlet at 19, I played it again at 32 and I directed it at 50, and my view of that play changed every time I did it. It didn't change because I wanted to be clever and do it a different way. It changed because my experience of the play had changed. That, I think, is one of the definitions of greatness: it can sustain many different encounters. There are very few plays in the world I would want to see twice. But Shakespeare you can come to again and again.

As Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's contemporary wrote: " He was not for an age but for all time." Even when, as sometimes happens, a particular play by Shakespeare falls out of tune with the times, it eventually reasserts itself - even many decades later.

For 150 years, **King Lear** was forgotten about and replaced with a piece of product. This was a version that had been

contrived by a man called Nahum Tate, who found Shakespeare's original, with the blinding of Gloucester and the hanging of Cordelia, just too horrible to put on the stage. So he rewrote it with a happy ending, or at least one in which the good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That, as Miss Prism remarked, "is what fiction means."

This was one of the most successful pieces of product ever devised. For a century and a half, it was the only version of the play to be performed. Clearly, people found it enjoyable. It is indisputably more pleasant to contemplate a universe where virtue is rewarded, and folly is rescued from the consequences of its actions, than to contemplate one where the gods, if any, treat human beings the way wanton boys treat flies. It was, no doubt, a much more morally instructive piece of work, imbued with a solid sense of family values. It sounds better all round than Shakespeare's bleak and stony saga, where everyone ends up dead or heartbroken.

But who remembers Nahum Tate's *King Lear* today? Once the original version was rediscovered, and restored to the stage, (by the actor William Charles Macready-1838), there was simply no contest, because the experience Shakespeare's play offers is an infinitely harder but infinitely more rewarding one. For art at its highest is not soft or comfortable. Even Shakespeare's comedies strike uneasy notes. The pleasure you get from great art is like no other, for it is won through pain. Aristotle called this bittersweet pleasure **catharsis** .

Shakespeare didn't write **King Lear** the way he did because he thought we needed more pain in our lives. We have enough pain in our lives, and it's fair to bet that the Elizabethans had more than we do. The rigour that you find in great art is in order to make the pain bearable on a human level. The rigour, allied to beauty of form and of expression, is what transmutes raw experience into art.

The stories in opera, for example, are for the most part, extremely painful. But the music makes the horror bearable and transforms it into a work of art.

A great play, like **King Lear**, has a structure, an esthetic proportion, of a kind that you don't find in life. That structure provides a safety mechanism, or life preserver if you will, allowing you to plunge into a difficult sea of experience, knowing that you will emerge from it re-born. Suffering in real life is random and horrible and brutalizing. But art heals and understands. Art imparts meaning.

The esthetic experience of going through the death scene of **Lear** or **Cordelia** refines you as a human being and helps make you sane. Art is here to make us sane. This is not to reduce art to some kind of didactic experience. As someone once said of the theatre: "If you want to send a message, use **Western Union**."

What do you learn, in terms of knowledge, from watching **Hamlet**? Not to dither when your father's ghost asks you to do something? Or from **The Merchant of Venice**? Not to

ship goods abroad without taking out plenty of marine insurance? No, the meaning I'm talking about has to do with giving shape and significance, through art, to the random and arbitrary experiences of life. It's a way of putting ourselves at the centre of things. I remember when I was young, how impressed I was emotionally by the **Group of Seven**, because their work described my country's geography in artistic terms, and it made me understand my country in a very different way. It defined it. As Northrop Frye remarked: The arts "give us our bearings."

Art enables you to both deal with grief and articulate joy. It's art that we turn to when we want to say something about love, for instance. Love is the profoundest of human emotions, and thus one of the hardest for us to articulate. Art gives us a way of dealing with this powerful emotion. When you fall in love, you don't actually say what Romeo and Juliet say to each other, you only feel it. You don't say, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun." Nobody says that sort of thing in real life, but plenty of people feel it.

Poetry is a very carefully considered, very deliberately constructed way of giving voice to our most intimate, spontaneous and unselfconscious feelings.

That phrase from **A Midsummer Night's Dream** likening "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" is truer than you might think.

Being in love and creating art are both a bit like insanity:

A)The schizophrenic lunatic, like the artist, imposes meaning on the randomness of experience. The only difference is that the schizophrenic's sense of meaning is private, incoherent and incommunicable.

B)Lovers, too, live in a private world in which everything is given meaning by their intimacy; the difference there is that, although their particular perspective remains unique to them, we can all recognize and understand its nature. Art is the sole form of madness that its witnesses can both comprehend and share.

The only other human activity that does for us what art does is religious ritual. The difference here is that religion makes us part - albeit a very special part - of the order of things. In art, we are the order of things. Religion is our way of accepting the gods. Art is our way of standing up to the gods.

But there is nonetheless great similarity between art and religion. Watching **King Lear** is a spiritual experience. Sharing that human grief and pain, and arriving at that catharsis at the end, is a secular equivalent of the kinds of ceremonies that all religions use to help us through the major passages of our lives, ceremonies in which we are reminded of our relationship to the eternal and the unknowable. That's why I believe that great theatre belongs in the temple, not the marketplace.

We've lost a lot of faith in the course of this century. Now we're heading into a new century and a new millennium, and I don't think we can make much of it without some more meaningful sense of ourselves than what we can create through getting and spending.

Church attendance has declined, social interconnections have been eroded, and new technologies have given rise to distractions that are more solitary than communal: the video and the computer game. The theatre is one of the few places left to us where we can gather and share a significant communal event, where we become at one not only with our fellow audience members but with the participants in the ritual. I can't explain why communing is important, I just know that it is. And it doesn't happen at movies, where your interaction is not with other live human beings but with images on a screen. I can remember almost every play I've seen. But I can remember very few movies.

That's in part because when I go to the theatre I have to make an investment, as an audience member, in order to share in the experience on stage. I can't just sit there; I have to do some of the work to make the performance happen. I am required to be engaged as a participant.

I think that this kind of engagement is a *sine qua non* of civilization, like education or a system of justice. It isn't something frivolous. It isn't a frill. It's a fundamental necessity.

If I had children, I wouldn't want them to grow up in a place, however materially comfortable, that didn't have art. Because I wouldn't know myself. I wouldn't know where I came from or where I'm going.

What is the price of enlightenment? What value can you set on that? We cannot answer this question, because it is a question of the marketplace. And culture is not a commodity. Art is the spiritual equivalent of vitamins. Doctors don't quite know what vitamins do. They just know that without them you die.

John Ruskin said: "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art." It is not that society owes the artist a living; it is that society needs the artist, and always has.

We must have that spiritual dimension that art brings to our lives, we must honour it, and we must be prepared to pay whatever cost is entailed in making it possible. We must stop regarding our artists as cheap tricks, and give them an honoured place in the temple of our highest aspirations. Or to repeat the words of the old King...

"O! Reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's."

Thank you.