Theatre and Moral Education

JONATHAN LEVY

The moral virtues, then, are produced in us neither by nature or against nature. Nature, indeed, prepares in us the ground for their reception, but their complete formation is the product of habit.

*Aristotle, Ethics*, Book 3, Chapter 1

I

Theatre, by which I mean the practice of theatre—writing, acting, and producing plays in front of an audience—has been a part, often a central part, of education for over four hundred years. Examples abound, but two instances must suffice here.

On the Continent, the Jesuits made theatre an integral part of their educational system. The order was founded in 1540, and the first play, a tragedy in Latin, was performed in Messina in 1551. From then until the order was suppressed in 1773, by one account one hundred thousand plays were performed in over five hundred school theatres, first in Europe and, with the spread of the Counter-Reformation, in India, Japan, Mexico, and indeed in most of the known world. For among the many educational virtues the Jesuits found in theatre, they found it a most effective method of propaganda—*propaganda fidei* (the propagation of the faith)—which is what the order was founded to do.
In England, plays were performed in schools very soon after there were schools, first at Winchester in the last third of the fifteenth century, and soon after at Eton and Westminster. A Shrewsbury school ordinance of 1577-78 decreed that “every Thursday the scholars of the highest form . . . shall exercise declaim and play one act of a comedy.” The comedies were in Latin, but the first regular comedies written in English, *Ralph Roister Doister* and *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* (also sixteenth century) were performed first at Eton and Cambridge, respectively. In fact, plays were so important a part of education at the great English schools that Ben Jonson railed against the schoolmasters “who make their scholars play-boys.”

Francis Bacon summarized pretty well what the educational benefits of theatre were thought to be. (I am talking now about the educational benefits except the moral benefits, which I will address in a moment):

> It is a thing indeed, if practiced professionally, of low repute, but if it be made a part of discipline, it is of excellent use. I mean stage-playing; an art which strengthens the memory, regulates the tone and effect of the voice and pronunciation, teaches a decent carriage of the countenance and gestures, and gives not a little assurance, and accustoms young men to bear being looked at.¹

The Jesuits would have added practice in speaking Latin, and, later, other advocates would make the case for other languages.

There is one more advantage, noticed by a minister and schoolmaster in Lincoln, Massachusetts, at the very end of the eighteenth century. His name was Charles Stearns, and I want to mention him because what he said has so contemporary a ring. “It has often been observed,” Stearns wrote, “that where there have been in the same town, schools on the same footing in other respects, yet some have had exhibitions [here, public dramatic performances] and others not, that the schools in which there have been exhibitions, have not only excelled in the point of exhibitions, but in every other.”²

II

At the same time, there was a recurring intuition that the practice of theatre could help form what psychologist William Damon calls “the moral child.” This intuition was expressed in many ways, but for now let me try to summarize the chief and recurrent argument: that live theatre was the closest we could get to practice for life; that theatre, like a pilot’s simulator, could give a child, in a predictable, compressed, and *repeatable* form, a preview of the moral dilemmas he or she would encounter in life and practice in living through them correctly and honorably—in short, that theatre might be used as kind of basic training for life, staged battles without live ammunition.

This meant, predictably, for boys acting judiciously, heroically, and, on occasion, holily. As an anonymous seventeenth-century Jesuit wrote in a prologue to his Latin tragedy:
Perhaps one day, when they shall have grown up, these young people will be fired with the desire of equalling these virtues and will be, in their turn, ambitious for a good death. They would like perhaps actually to imitate those whose actions they represent today, and carry off similar victories. Thus, even as we play, it is necessary to direct morals toward piety, to conduct them through great images to great deeds, and to plant in their hearts the love of Christ.

And it usually meant, predictably, for girls (and small boys) acting in a kindly, modest, and charitable manner. At the end of the eighteenth century an author of dramatic pieces for girls wrote she hoped "that the lessons I inculcate may be conducive toward establishing such habits of patience, meekness, and complacency, as are essentially necessary to render young ladies happy in themselves and to qualify them for the discharge of the various duties, which particularly belong to the female character."

III

There are two questions that arise out of the intuition that experience of and in the theatre can help make a child moral. The first is: How? That is, by what means did the clergymen, school masters and mistresses, and philosophers of the past think that the theatre could help make a child moral? Just how did they think that the theatre might (in the words of the eighteenth-century Frenchwoman Mme de Genlis) become a "theatre of education"; or (in the phrase used in the nineteenth century by the Italian Giulio Genoio) produce an "ethical drama"? That is a historian's question and seems to me to be a very interesting one.

The second question is this: Is the intuition true? Can theatre, in one permutation or another, in a form already found or in a form yet to be discovered, help educate a child morally? This is a teacher's question, a parent's question, indeed, a citizen's question and a question of the first importance.

Since the two questions are interrelated, as history and solid speculation almost always are, I will take them in order.

IV

First, then: How did our predecessors imagine that theatre might help form a moral child? Let me again try to summarize, condense, and enumerate briefly the most frequently recurring arguments of the past four hundred years.

1. Through the strong educational power of dialogue itself, which has been recognized from Socrates to the Catechism.

2. Through the strong educational power of repetition, which is the essence of theatrical preparation and is, of course, the word the French use for rehearsal.
3. As a corollary, through the strong educational power of memorization which is especially vivid and enduring when the memorizer is physically active and affectively engaged—as, for example, in acting—while he is reciting what he has memorized.6

4. Through the power of acted moral lessons, or “moral lessons on their feet.” For the audience, this can be what Strindberg (in another connection) damned his theatre for being: a pauper’s bible, lessons in primary colors for the un instructed. For the actors, this means moral situations as if lived through. For both it means the presentation of the gist of a moral dilemma, with the confusing irrelevancies that surround it in life removed. As Alfred Hitchcock said, “Theatre is life with the boring parts left out.”

5. Through the theatre as a place to train the faculty of decision making by presenting “hard cases”—nearly equally good but opposite arguments—about an important choice to be made on stage. The Jesuits made much of this and so, more recently, did Bertolt Brecht.7

6. Through the theatre as a stimulus to emulation of the virtuous characters the actors are portraying and the spectators are watching.

7. Through the theatre as an arena for public ridicule of vice and folly. This, the classic justification of comedy, was reiterated in regard to school theatre by Charles Poreé, a Jesuit scholar and theorist of the theatre, who held the Chair of Rhetoric at the celebrated Collège Louis-le-Grand in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Comedy, Poreé wrote, “rebukes with a smile and corrects with one facetious stroke.”8

8. Through the “outside/inside principle.” That is, the idea that if you can master the the external—the outside, then the internal—the inside—will follow. If you act in a compassionate manner, you will become compassionate. If you act in a selfless way, you will become selfless, and so on.9

This is an acting technique for which English actors are both praised and damned. Olivier said if he could find a character’s nose and walk, he had the character. The most vivid example of this I know is Max Beerbohm’s story The Happy Hypocrite, in which a grumpy man puts on a smiling mask and wears it all his life. And, when he dies and the mask is removed, he is found to be smiling.10

V

Now for the second question: Might the notion that the theatre can be used for moral education be true? Might the theatre in some form or another actually help develop a (the?) moral sense in the young?

Let me start by drawing what seems to be a useful distinction in addressing this second question. It is the distinction between educating a child to be good—obedient, “right thinking,” and so on—and educating a child to be moral.
Educating a “good” child means educating him to certain absolute virtues and their like. For example, a properly trained good child will not lie. Nor will he do anything like lying, like passing a bad check. Educating a moral child is more complicated, for it means educating him to act correctly (whatever that means) or to act morally (whatever that means) in new situations: situations that neither you nor he can foresee or imagine. I say that this distinction is useful because the education of the good child and the education of the moral child seem to require different kinds of theatre.

The good child can be, and often has been, trained to be “good” by a theatre of propaganda or advertising, though this sort of live theatre has now been largely replaced by the theatre’s electronic spawn. Yet a theatre of this kind of education—education by the inculcation of “known truths” and “true” attitudes—still exists and is often to be found touring schools. The known truths and “true” attitudes used to be those of religion (the Jesuits’ propaganda fidei, the Sacred Dramas of Hannah More). Now they are more likely to be social attitudes (Safe Sex; Jennifer Has Two Mommies). But whatever the product, the method of selling remains essentially the same.

The question to ask about this theatre of propaganda or advertising is whether it works and, if it does work, for how long it works, and whether it will still work when its message is contradicted by actual experience. My own sense is that it does work, if the message is clear and the client is gotten to early enough. The Jesuits, I think, say before the age of seven, and they have long been authorities in these matters.

VI

The question of using theatre to help educate a moral child is more difficult and more interesting. A moral child, to repeat, is one who can be expected to act morally in unforeseen circumstances. The question then becomes: What kind of theatre might help him do that? I would like to suggest two possibilities.

The first possibility is that experience in the theatre could become an additional source of experience, both for actors and audience, on which they could draw when they came to act in real life. The premise behind this hypothesis is that fiction of all kinds (books, film, and theatre, especially for the actors) goes into the same part of our memories, the same memory bank as (a) actual reported fact (from newspapers, television news, history, etc.); and (b) actual experience, what we have lived through ourselves and observed firsthand. This means that all experience—lived-through, acted-through, read, seen, heard, and so on—is somehow composted in the memory, so that after a certain length of time one kind of experience becomes indistinguishable from another; and that, when we come to feel, believe, and act, we draw on all of it equally as evidence.
This, of course, depends on the way memory works, and that is a mysterious and much-disputed subject. But it does seem to me to be possible. A superficial form of this confusion of fiction with actuality has been widely ridiculed in recent years—Dan Quayle citing Murphy Brown’s illegitimate child as an example of the decline of American values, and Newt Gingrich telling the critics of orphanages to resee Boy’s Town. But let me mention a deeper example, and one that seems particularly in point in this discussion because it comes from fiction but remains with me more vividly than most fact.

Samuel Beckett, in his one-act play Krapp’s Last Tape, has Krapp, his protagonist, remembering images and shards of his past. Among these are five women: his mother, a nurse wheeling a baby carriage, Bianca, whom he had lived with years ago, an unnamed young woman with whom he made love drifting in a punt, and Effie. The first four were women in Krapp’s (and Beckett’s) actual past. Effie is Effi [sic] Briest, the heroine of a novel by Theodore Fontane. In a moving passage, Krapp speculates on how happy he could have been with Effie, the fictional heroine, up on the Baltic. My point is that all the women in Krapp’s memory have equal reality, equal weight, with the fictional character having perhaps more reality, more weight, than the real people.11

If memory does work in this way, fiction of all kinds, and theatre in particular, could, and perhaps already does, become the raw data for both moral belief and moral action. I say “theatre particularly” since theatre, for the actor—and in this kind of moral theatre all children would be actors—adds body and vocal memory to the film of memory recorded on the mind.

Another possibility is that theatre could help educate a moral child by being used as a school for feeling.12

There are great gaps in our system of education which have always baffled me, the chief one being the education of the emotions, which we simply do not attempt.13 I don’t mean to imply by this that we leave the emotions of our young alone. Any parent who has quashed a tantrum in a MacDonald’s or told a little boy that he is too old to cry has tampered with, interceded in, the natural flow of the emotions. But this is merely the “down, boy” school of instruction in emotion, perhaps inherited from the English. It is not real education, unless you think obedience school is real education.

There is, of course, a more recent approach that urges us to “get in touch with our feelings.” The premises of this approach seem to be (a) that the feelings are there, waiting to be got to, like Cape Hatteras; and (b) that we have various individual barriers that prevent us from getting to them. And the further assumption seems to be that with work and help we can learn to get in touch with them. I don’t want to discuss the merits of this approach. What I would insist, though, is that, whatever this approach is, it is not education either, any more than ear cleaning is ear training.
By educating the feelings I mean “educating” them the way we educate anything else—an art historian’s eye or a wine-taster’s palate, for example: training it to experience more deeply, more vividly, and more fully; to discern distinctions, nuances, suggestions, and intimations not available to the uneducated faculty.

I want to close by describing an experiment in training the emotions to do just that, and to train them through the theatre. It was an odd experiment, and it failed. But it is, like a lot of failed experiments, more interesting and suggestive, to me at least, than experiments that succeeded.

Joanna Baillie was a Scotswoman, a playwright, a friend of Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth. She lived eighty-nine years, from 1762 to 1851. Between 1798 and 1802 she wrote A Series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the strong passions of the mind. Each passion being a subject of a tragedy and a comedy. In her long Introductory Discourse she explained her purpose. Again, I will try to synthesize her argument.

“Nothing becomes so much an object of man’s curiosity as man himself,” she wrote. Because of the “strong sympathetic propensity” which most creatures, but humans above all, feel for others of their kind . . . it is not at all wonderful that theatrical exhibition has become the grand favourite amusement of every nation into which it has been introduced.” For “[i]f man is an object of so much attention to man, engaged in the ordinary occurrences of life, how much more does he excite his curiosity when placed in extraordinary situations of difficulty and distress.” [When we sit in the theatre] “. . . with limbs untorn, with head unsmitten, with senses unimpaired by despair, we know what ourselves might have been on the rack, on the scaffold, and in the most afflicting circumstances and distress.”

“Every species of moral writing,” she continues, “has its own way of conveying instruction, which it can never, but with disadvantage, exchange for another.” The theatre—“a school in which much good or evil may be learned”—teaches by arousing our fellow-feeling, our “natural, sympathetic propensity” combined with “the natural desire we have to look into the thoughts, and observe the behavior, of others” and “in examining others, know ourselves.”

What Miss Baillie wanted us to do was examine and thus educate our emotions by feeling them, in all their depth and nuance, while simultaneously experiencing/examining the interconnection between what we think and what we feel. Her method was to isolate and then “trace a [single] passion”—hate, ambition, love, and so forth—“through all its varieties, and in every stage” and then ask her audience to observe itself feeling through the performance of each play.

Miss Baillie concluded that even if her reader did not like her plays, he must give credit to the originality of her design. “I know of no series of plays, in any language,” she wrote, “expressly descriptive of the different passions; and I believe that there are few plays existing in which the display
of one strong passion is the chief business of the drama, so written that they could properly make a part of such a series . . . [of] this (pardon me if I call it noble) design.”

The plays got a mixed reception. Miss Baillie was criticized for writing plays without having had more practical experience of the stage, and Wordsworth, though he admired Miss Baillie as a woman and thought she had “much talent for observation and good sense,” concluded regretfully that she did not have “poetic sense” (my italics). But it was William Hazlitt who put his finger on the center of the problem. He wrote that Miss Baillie’s “tragedies and comedies, one of each to illustrate each of the passions, separately from the rest, are heresies in the dramatic art. With her the passions are like the French republic, one and indivisible; they are not so in nature, or in Shakespeare.”

I must admit the criticism is justified. The plays are almost unreadable and are certainly unproducing today. However, both the kernel and the implications of Miss Baillie’s “noble design” seem to me to be still very interesting and right in point today.

I take the kernel of her design to be this: that the best way for human beings to gain self-knowledge about our human feelings is through the exhibition of those feelings, in all their depth, variety, and nuance, in the theatre, the theatre being the best “species of moral writing” for instruction in feeling because of the combination of “the natural desire we have to look into the thoughts, and observe the behavior, of others” and “the sympathetic propensity”—that is, the propensity to feel with others—that all human beings share. Therefore, the theatre, better than any other means, perhaps including actual experience, can educate us in feeling.

I take the implications of her design, including the implications of the failure of her design, to be these: The way to produce informed and mature goodness is to educate the emotions, and to educate them liberally. This means educating them fully and completely, not isolating them, simplifying them, or censoring out some and concentrating on others. Since the child is father to the man, the way to educate the moral adult is to educate the moral child, theatrically. “Theatrically” means, or should mean, using the full power of the theatre; using the theatre the way the theatre really works: not through the reasoning mind but, like music, as a stimulus to and a strengthener of the unsaid. The nameless faculty upon which we draw instinctively in a moral dilemma can be enriched and deepened through the intense and various sympathetic experience theatre, in its fullness, can give. And, just as we count on an educated mind to reason better than an uneducated mind, we can count on educated emotions to respond more humanly, more morally, than uneducated emotions. And the best way to educate the emotions, at least until virtual reality is much further along, is through the theatre.
I don’t know if what I have just written is true. My hunch is that an extensive education of the feelings would produce better deliberators on moral issues, because their well of information is deeper and wider than mere thought can provide; but whether or not it produces better actors in moral situations, I really do not know. My inkling (which is even less solid than a hunch) is that there is a shadow, a millisecond of neural static, that falls between understanding—including the kind of emotional understanding I have been talking about—and action, which disconnects, or at least interrupts, the circuit between the two. As I say, I don’t know whether that is so, but I find the possibility that it might be so tantalizing and and well worth further investigation.

NOTES

1. Francis Bacon, quoted by Richard Courtenay in *Play, Drama & Thought* (London: Cassell & Company, 1966), pp. 15-16. Mme de Genlis, author of the much-reprinted *Theatre of Education*, stated a similar case for girls: “... in playing these pieces,” she wrote, “in learning them by heart, several advantages may be found, such as engraving excellent principles upon their minds, exercising their memories, forming their pronunciation, and giving them a pleasing manner.” Countess Felicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin de Genlis, *Theatre of Education. Translated from the French... in four volumes* (London: T. Cadell and P. Elmsley, 1781), vol. 1, p. 4.


4. “P. L.”, “Dramatic Pieces calculated to exemplify the mode of conduct which will render young ladies both amiable and happy when their school education is completed,” 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Abel Morse, 1791), vol. 2, p. x.

5. In this regard, it is interesting to remember that the liturgical drama of the Middle Ages developed out of antiphonal singing to which written texts, or tropes, were added. These often took the form of dialogue, and one of these, the *Quem quaeritis* (Whom Do You Seek?) of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Gallen, is credited with being the beginning of liturgical drama.

6. Mme de Genlis wrote: “Learning detached pieces of verse and prose by heart cannot produce the same effects [as acting them], because it is impossible to declaim alone in a chamber with the same spirit as playing in character,” echoing the Jesuit principle stated in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1591: “friget enim poesis sine teatro”; that is, “Poetry becomes cold (or lifeless) apart (or away) from theatre.”

7. The Jesuits took pains to write and present plays in which the weight of opposing arguments was almost equal, in order that the audience have practice in deciding hard cases. This is interesting in light of the kind of teaching play that came later, from William Godwin’s *The Fib Found Out* (1808) to the safe sex and anti-drug plays that are, as of this writing, touring our schools. The question of how, or indeed whether, a theatre that promotes detached contemplation rather than emotional involvement works is still open. Bertolt Brecht, certainly the most celebrated modern author and theorist of this kind of “learning play,” demanded (or said he demanded) the rational attention of his audience in the theatre so that they could think, and by thinking, learn. However, I think the scholar Jonas Barish is right about the effect of Brecht’s “Smoking Theatre”:
Charles made demands, we The University, activity of students teaching the ing' students assiduously, able depression, Smooth [which] Jonathan he has in American Course, quoting Harold Gould, "Functions of Dramatic Activity in American Schools, Colleges, and Universities" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1953), p. 141.

For a student of the workings of memory, the actual case is even more interesting than that. In 1929, Beckett was carrying on a flirtation with a woman named Phyllis Sinclair. The novel Effi Briest doesn't take place on the Baltic, but the flirtation did.

There was a debate in the eighteenth century as to whether the strong emotions we feel in the theatre propel us to or sap the impulse to moral action. Rousseau believed that tragedy "draws tears from us when the equivalents in real life would leave us unmoved. It prompts us to lavish our pity on unrealities, so that we can escape committing ourselves to the relief of the miseries that lie all about us. And in so doing it constitutes a falsification, a perversion of the pity which, as he has elsewhere maintained, forms the basis of moral action... Theatre... enables us to substitute easy tears for difficult action." Jonas Barish, whose translation this is, goes on to say that there is no easy answer to this contention, "since even today we know so little about audience psychology. The subject would require an exact and finely tuned sociology of a sort that has never been undertaken." But, he concludes, "it is hard to believe... that the piteous aspects of tragedy make us less responsive to actual trouble than we would otherwise
be... If we have learned to shed tears—as audiences of eighteenth-century pathetic drama had certainly learned—then it seems likely that we will respond so in similar situations in the real world—with an increase, rather than a decline, in sympathy.” Barish, The Anti-theatrical Prejudice, p. 269. Maybe. It was certainly believed by the contemporary writers of plays for children that the children’s versions of sentimental comedy would produce fine feelings in the audiences. And it was assumed that there would develop a causal relationship between good feelings and good actions: that one would produce the other; that, say, benevolence would turn naturally into beneficence. For that argument, see my Gymnasium of the Imagination: A Collection of Children’s Plays in English, 1780-1860 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), Introduction, esp. pp. 15-18.

13. After I had given a version of this article as a talk, I was directed to Daniel Goleman’s then just published book Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam Books, 1995). In it, I discovered an account of a recent attempt in California to educate children’s emotions (“Schooling the Emotions,” pp. 261-87), though not in the sense I mean.

14. Joanna Baillie, A series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the strong passions of the mind. Each passion being the subject of a tragedy and a comedy, vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1799 [vol. 2; 1802; vol. 3, 1812]), pp. 2, 5, 8-12, 15, 26, 37, 58, 59-60, and 71. Miss Baillie is also extremely suggestive on the ways theatre is different from life and therefore a more effective teacher than life. First of all, we come to the theatre prepared, forewarned, and thus open to experience: “In confirmation of this opinion I may venture to say, that of the great number who go to see a publick execution, there are but very few who would not run away from, and avoid it, if they happened to meet with it unexpectedly.” Second, the theatre is vivid, secondhand. “No man wishes to see the Ghost himself, which would certainly procure him the best information on the subject, but every man wishes to see one who believes that he sees it, in all the agitation and wildness of that species of terror,” p. 8. Sir Walter Scott thought Joanna Baillie “the best dramatic writer” Britain had produced “since the days of Shakespeare and Massinger.” Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott (Boston: 1894), p. 99, quoted by Margaret S. Carhart, The Life and Work of Joanna Baillie (N.P.: Arcon Press, 1970), p. 2.

15. Like Miss Baillie, I prefer the word “sympathy” to describe the sensation of fellow-feeling that the theatre elicits to the more commonly used “empathy.” For the reason why, see my article “A Note on Empathy,” New Ideas in Psychology (Fall 1997).