THEATRE ARTS IN A FREE SOCIETY

JOHN GASSNER

I

In a world of growing tensions, the subject of freedom for the theatre and its related arts necessarily gives us great concern. The subject, considering the state of the world, can be approached only with faith in the strength of American democracy to survive the onslaughts of totalitarianism from abroad; and faith, too, in the common sense and the confidence of the American people to resist intolerance within our own borders. Faith should not be confused, of course, with complacency. It should be accompanied with works; that is, with a constant endeavor to sustain a free theatre in all the communities in which it is threatened or is likely to be threatened.

We shall not be able, however, to retain our faith and to give it the support of policies and action unless we achieve usable perspectives. And for this purpose we must remind ourselves of several salient facts.

The first of these is that the fate of the theatre arts is inextricably associated with the fate of the society in which they exist. As goes society, so goes the theatre. The United States must remain independent and free, if the theatre is to enjoy any freedom at all. Our subject would have had no relevance—it could not even have been raised before this or any other convention—if Hitler's totalitarianism had conquered. And today we can entertain no thought of a free theatre whatsoever without an unqualified rejection of communist dogma and without giving complete support to every realistic effort to oppose aggressive Russian totalitarianism. I have no hesitation in saying that anyone of good faith who does not fully subscribe to this premise is living in a Never-Never-Land of such woeful ignorance and pathetic naïveté that he can be of no more use to the theatre than to his country. Communist totalitarianism is inimical to a free theatre because it is inimical to a free society.

Nor should we allow ourselves to be deluded today when we read that a Soviet composer or a man of letters such as Ilya Ehrenburg is attacking the narrow censorship of his craft to which he paid a full measure of tribute only a week or a month ago. Liberty that is at the mercy of shifting lines of political strategy is not liberty. Freedom that exists on temporary sufferance is not freedom. Liberty must be ingrained in a society and in the traditions of a people if it is to have any reliable existence.

Moreover, it would be a gross error

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to assume that in such a society one craft or one aspect of the craft can go free while another remains enslaved. One of the first arts to be controlled in a dictatorship—once speech is controlled—is the stage. The theatre is considered dangerous because it communicates directly with a people, and because theatre is necessarily a public activity and does not exist in the privacy or the secrecy of a man's library. But before long, as the Russian experience has demonstrated, the less specific, or less public, arts also fall into a state of slavery.

In the theatre, too, the first art to be shackled is the playwright's, because he employs words, and words have a high degree of specificity. The first men of the theatre to be restrained in Russia were the playwrights, whether they had their plays removed from the theatre or were denied access to it; whether they were deprived of a livelihood or of life itself; or whether they were tethered semi-voluntarily or by prescript to the wheel of utilitarian playwriting—e.g., in support of five year plans or, later, to anti-American propaganda. But before long, the controls were extended to cover not just the words and subject matter of the play, but the very style and dramatic form. At first, in 1934, Soviet writers were merely *lectured* on the desirability of favoring a "constructive" style of so-called Socialist Realism. But the recommendation quickly turned into an order. Whereas realism has been and still is an acceptable style when left to the discretion of a playwright, Socialist Realism, a narrow style fostered by intimidation, is tyranny. Stalinism established the dictatorship of a single style in the theatre.

Before long, finally, this dictatorship was foisted not merely on playwriting, but on styles of play production. Meyerhold, the great if eccentric Russian director, was discredited and removed from his position in 1937 as an alleged purveyor of foreign ideologies because he employed nonrealistic styles of stage production, and was arrested after protesting against criticism of his art. He has never been heard of since that day. Henceforth it was expedient for every Russian stage director to follow the blueprint of humdrum Socialist Realism, and a theatre that had once won the interest and admiration of foreign visitors without regard to politics was entirely subdued to a policy of narrow and literal showmanship.

The history of the enslavement of the Russian theatre is given in devastating detail by Juri Jelagin in his book *Taming of the Arts*.[1] But even my present brief summary is sufficient to show us the "shape of things to come" if our theatre were to fall into the hands of the totalitarian state. That state can alluringly offer the security of employment so greatly desired by all who work in our theatre. It can provide, if so disposed, magnificent theatre buildings, expensive scenery, and financial rewards to favored artists, as it did in Russia. But sooner or later, the theatre must pay for such security with a complete sacrifice of integrity and freedom.

II

My second point derives from the first. If ideological strangulation of the theatre is repugnant to us when it occurs in a foreign and totalitarian country, it certainly cannot be accepted at home, in a country which may be properly cherished as the one strong bastion of democracy left in the world. So long as the American way of life remains substantially unaltered, thought-control in the

[1] E. P. Dutton & Co., 1951.

theatre cannot be considered even tolerable by most Americans.

That there are fears for that way of life in general, however, and fears for the continued freedom of the theatre, is no deep secret to any of us. They are intensified whenever a vocal minority exerts pressures against a play, an author, or a player. These pressures have been most strongly exerted in the mass media, but they have also been felt in the theatre, especially in communities where the commercial stage leads a marginal existence, and where the noncommercial stage depends on the support of subscribers and sponsors.

The active members of the American Educational Theatre Association are in a better position than I to determine how great or how small these pressures actually are at present in their communities. And they will have to search their own hearts to determine how far their policies have undergone any change in consequence, and to what degree they have been intimidated into conformities to which their minds cannot give a true consent. For myself, I can only say that the consequences of hysterical repressiveness and of submission to such repressiveness would set back the noncommercial theatre by half a century and subvert the purpose for which the "little theatre" movement was created—namely, the presentation of stimulating art in American communities. I know of very few distinguished plays written since the advent of *A Doll's House* in 1879 to which fanaticism or timidity could not point a censorious finger if it tried. For that matter, I am not sure that many of the older classics could not also be assailed. If Robin Hood is not conducive to public safety, why should Falstaff be! We cannot pretend that he was a paragon of morality, and his record as a recruiting officer was distinctly below par.

If I refrain from exhuming more Shakespeariana, foraging among the minor Elizabethans and the Romantic playwrights, looking too closely at Molière and the Restoration wits, and browsing in the Loeb Library of Greek and Roman classics, I, too, am following the paths of caution that in the theatre lead but to Cain's Warehouse for discarded scenery. I might be taken seriously! I recall a luncheon conversation in the twenties at which Senator King declared his intention of reducing a wave of censorship to absurdity by offering a bill requiring the Library of Congress to put all the classics under lock and key. He was instantly dissuaded by a veteran editor, who warned the Senator that his bill might be passed! I cannot, however, refrain from reporting that my research into recent world theatre uncovered the information that *Hamlet* was banned in Japan a short time before Pearl Harbor on the ground that the treatment of Claudius was conducive to disloyalty.

To return to serious business, it is obvious that a community theatre for adults reduced solely to a diet of absolutely safe *Charley's Aunt* and *What a Life* theatricals would avail little in securing national safety and avail a good deal in securing the demoralization of the theatre.

The logic of refraining from the production of good and approvable plays solely because the author happens to be in our bad graces, of course, also escapes me. And perhaps the last word on this delicate subject was said recently in a bulletin of the College English Association. An article on "Book Lists" concluded as follows:

Nearly two hundred years ago we sent Benjamin Franklin to Paris and there was a good deal of evidence that while there he broke at least

one of the Ten Commandments several times. But his fellow citizens at home did not on that account tell their children they must not read *Poor Richard's Almanac.*

It is obvious that reason and good judgment are necessary if we are to continue the high enterprise of theatre in times of understandable anxiety and irritation. And we should assume that a theatrical producer can count on the reason and sound judgment of a majority of the community to support his honorable decisions against submitting to the idiosyncrasies or malevolence of anybody who takes it into his head to censor his endeavors.

Before the producer, however, can act upon this assumption—to me the only one that expresses any faith in the American people and the strength of our institutions—he must give some further thought to the realities of theatre in a free society. If he expects millenial conditions for his enterprise, he is likely to move from disappointment and chagrin into desperation, a desperation of inactivity or an equally unfortunate desperation of cynical opportunism.

III

We must realize that the freedom of theatre has not been unlimited even in a free society except at rare intervals. When we do realize this we are less likely to be overwhelmed with terror upon encountering opposition or angrily to conclude from such opposition, however unreasonable, that ours is an *unfree* society, and that its defense need not, therefore, be our very first consideration.

The decisive difference between a society such as ours and the Russian totalitarian state is that in the latter the artist can work only for the state, that the theatre can subsist only on the bounty of the state, and that artistic policy is determined only by the state. In a free society, the artist works for himself or for other individuals. And if, as in the case of the *Comédie Française,* his enterprise receives government subsidy, it does not take orders from the government in those matters which are vital to art—namely, choice of material and mode of execution.

An important distinction, too, lies in the fact that the theatre arts in a free society are not tethered to any officially sanctioned or imposed style of writing and performance. Our theatre artists today are not mechanics on an ant heap, despite the tremendous development of machinery and mass production methods for which our industry is celebrated and by means of which the American standard of living is the highest ever achieved in human history. The individuality of our theatre, indeed, is so pronounced as to be sometimes indistinguishable from a mild case of anarchy. And I may say from direct experience that even in our mass-communication media there is more individuality than would appear on the surface. There is considerable flexibility in dramatic structure and style. Our motion-picture, radio, and television writers and directors, not to mention performers, bring a personal equation into their work regardless of its merit, and often leave their personal imprint upon that work.

Stereotypes there are, of course, especially in the most popular types of entertainment. These, in the opinion of a mature and independent intelligence, may even be patently absurd in Grade B pictures and in soap opera. They are fostered by showmen who try to pyramid entertainment on the broadest base, on the lowest common denominator of taste and mentality. From the point of view of literary and dramatic criticism there is no excuse for such stereotypes and clichés. But a distinction must be made

between totalitarian dictatorship of the arts and the commercialism of a private enterprise. The one presumes to *rule* the public, the other to *reflect* it. The one permits no violation of policy, the other allows it; is, in fact, always subject to correction by competition. Stereotyped entertainment has even been travestied, as it was for years by Henry Morgan, and so long as it has captured the interest of the public, the travesty has even enjoyed lavish sponsorship.

Above all, however, we must realize that stereotypes are present in every national art. There is nothing more stereotyped in my opinion, indeed, than the risqué boulevard comedies on which the Parisian stage has nourished generations of Parisians, presumably the most individualistic and intelligent public in the world. And the stereotypes of folk humor among *all* nationalities, as well as the theatrical cultivation of English superciliousness, rustic Irish charm, and Latin fervor, are too well known to require comment. We are correct in deploring tendencies to "mass-produce" taste and thought. They are inconsistent with good art, intellectually debilitating, and unwholesome for a free people. But there is no tyranny where alternatives exist or can be created because they are not forbidden by government policy.

Another decisive consideration is the distinction that normally exists between censorship and private opposition. Censorship is official action enforcable by every means available to the state. It is also *a priori* action. The censor reads the script in advance and decides against its publication or production. Censorship thus described is dictatorship, and it is not only especially associated with a totalitarian philosophy of government but is intrinsic to that philosophy. I am unable to make a blanket statement to the effect that there are absolutely no elements in this or any other free society that favor this kind of censorship and that try to impose it. But this tendency is aberrant in, not characteristic of, a free society. And I believe that the point needs to be borne in mind, in order that we may, on one hand, distinguish between democratic and totalitarian rule even when intolerance does flare up in a democracy; and in order that we may, on the other hand, detect and oppose any tendency to destroy the distinction. It tends to vanish when plays or other books are taken from library shelves before anyone has read them simply because some individual or group has decided that they are harmful to the reader, or when productions are forbidden in the same manner. This is not the same thing as simply expressing and urging disapproval, a move which is the prerogative of any person or group in a free society; and without which, for example, dramatic criticism would cease to be a profession. One of the many casualties of Stalinist totalitarianism was, indeed, the disappearance of independent dramatic criticism. Critics became mouthpieces for the Stalinist bureaucracy.

In a *free* society, many things are possible because human beings are not invariably models of discretion and integrity. Groups have tried to exert their pressures again and again, have succeeded or been thwarted. In France and Ireland, where tempers have often been inflammable, there have been riots over plays and concerts. The battle of *Hernani* and the patriotic demonstrations against *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Plough and the Stars* made theatrical history. But the distinction between censorship and unofficial pressures remains. And as long as the distinction is maintained, the theatre arts are fundamentally free. The theatre

arts can be harassed in a democracy, as in any other society, and patronage of them can be withheld or made conditional. But there remains a distinction between impediments to free creativity in a free society and strangulation in a totalitarian state.

A free society does not and could never guarantee the artist against the criticism or even the censoriousness of individuals and groups. It is, in fact, contrary to the spirit of a free society to abolish the right of individuals and groups to endeavor to influence an artistic enterprise. The right of free association *against* an enterprise is as inviolable as the right of free association in its behalf.

An issue is properly joined and the freedom of art is endangered only when such free associations acquire the power to legislate against an artistically valid enterprise. Yet even in this case there is a difference between totalitarianism and a democracy. In the former, there are no alternatives once such legislation is in force. In a democracy, the alternatives are always present. For example, such legislation may be local, in which case it can be appealed, repealed, or evaded by transfer of the stage production beyond the reach of local power, as was the case when the city fathers of Boston banned the production of *Strange Interlude* in 1929. In a totalitarian country, the law is inflexible and nation wide. In a free society, it is entirely possible for municipality to become agitated over actual or imagined affronts, and take suitable action. This does not, however, mean that it is impossible and unsuitable for citizens to take counter action, to try to exert persuasion, or to challenge the legality of an edict.

Nor are inconsistencies in human attitudes or opinions automatically eliminated by the mere existence of a democratic form of government. The fact that we had drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights and had concluded the Revolutionary War did not automatically open every community to the theatre. It was still necessary after 1776 to present Sheridan's *School for Scandal* as a "Comic Lecture in Five Parts on the Pernicious Vice of Scandal" rather than as a play. And lest we begin to contemplate the benightedness of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, we would do well to look at England, the cradle of liberty, where the Lord Chancellor still licenses plays for non-subscription performance and was able to keep Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* from the public stage for decades. Nor can a free society always escape detraction by fear or self-interest. Especially in an age of uncertainty, although it is especially then that we ought to mind John Donne's words "What almsman of any foreign state can do so much harm as a detractor . . .!" Freedom, we must conclude, does not come into existence, does not indeed exist, to an equal degree on all levels of human activity, in all parts of a country, and among all segments of the population.

In a nontotalitarian society, moreover, the ownership of a radio or television station and the support of its program are generally in private hands. We cannot expect to order owners or sponsors to accept or support a production they deem to be injurious to their best interests.

And these interests are likely to be large and based on calculations that the producers must be allowed to compute themselves. If they make the wrong computation, they will injure themselves. We must assume therefore that we cannot in principle compel them to grant every privilege of free expression in the

case of productions for which sponsors pay the entire cost. The air is free and belongs to all of us. The production is *theirs* in so far as it is their own operation and is paid for by themselves. All we can do is to hope that they are properly imbued with the democratic spirit, that they are reasonable persons, and that they have the good sense not to make judgments in fields in which they have no competence.

If the professional stage centered in New York has enjoyed a much greater measure of freedom than any of the mass-communication media, an important reason is that it is relatively a small business enterprise. It also depends entirely on the support of individuals, dozens of so-called backers or angels, who band together on a basis of common taste or, as frequently happens, common indifference to the matter of the play. And once the play opens, it is on view to a public that may attend the performances or stay away from them, that may like or dislike them without affecting any other product than the stage production itself.

In the case of the media of radio and television, we have only one recourse, the full implications of which are a tangled mass of legalities. The government which issues licenses to the stations may be reasonably expected to require equitable policies from them. But the very fact that the government's role in regulating these media involves areas of cloudy indeterminacy points to an important difference between a free society and the totalitarian state. In the latter, there is never any doubt as to what the state may do: it may do anything it pleases.

IV

It does not, however, follow from what I have said that our free society is one which guarantees individuals, groups, cities, or states the liberty of withholding liberty from those who wish to exercise it in the theatre arts or, for that matter, in any art.

In the first place, there are constitutional guarantees, born of this nation's original belief in freedom, forbidding those infringements of freedom of speech and assembly which are manifest and decisive. Folly, fear, or power lust may endeavor to infringe upon these rights, or to expunge them. But the law of the land and its strongest traditions are on the side of those who desire to preserve them. Fundamental freedoms in a free society cannot be lost. They can only be surrendered.

Only apathy on the part of the theatre's leaders and supporters can result in surrender. No free society ever came into being on the premise that liberties once achieved could be left unguarded. The theatrical profession, along with its public, would be unworthy of freedom if it failed to make every effort to defend constitutional rights and to strengthen American traditions. And I may say with gratification and pride in the profession that I have found no indication of negligence or carelessness in the one region of our country which I have had occasion to visit three times within a period of eighteen months. That region is our old-new South.

First at Shreveport, where I had the honor to address the Southwest Theatre Conference headed by John Wray Young, then at Chapel Hill where I addressed the Southeastern Theatre Conference, and still more recently during a tour of the open-air theatres in Virginia and North Carolina under the tutelage of Samuel Selden, I saw heartening indications of every resolve to sustain and advance those values which have kept Americans free. And I did not visit a

single outdoor production, attended by a thousand or more citizens at each performance, from which any man could not derive an education in the history of our struggle for freedom and justice. The American dream seemed firmly enshrined in these summer productions which have enjoyed the encouragement of their communities and states and the patronage of hundreds of thousands of Americans every year since the projects were established.

From Roanoke Island, the seat of the first English settlement on the Atlantic Coast, to Cherokee, in the Smoky Mountains near the border between the Carolinas and Tennessee, I saw a fervent dedication to national tradition and heard ringing words on behalf of freedom such as I have not heard on Broadway since the production of Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* some fifteen years ago.

I have spoken of the South because, in this instance, I can speak from experience. I have no reason, however, to believe that the theatre in other regions is less devoted to democratic principles. Nor was it my intention to content myself solely with a tribute to Southern colleagues. The main point I have wanted to propose is that the theatre has, in some measure, its own correctives for intolerance—in the co-operation without which no theatre can exist, in the humanist tradition which it has inherited from its long history, and in the educational possibilities of the stage. The theatre can educate for democracy, and in doing so help to assure freedom for itself, as well as for our other institutions.

In the second place, let us reflect that only in a totalitarian state can pressures be exerted from a single direction. In a free society, there are no irreversible equations. If those who are disposed to impose restraints upon the arts and its artists are free to make their influence felt, so are those who oppose those restraints.

It is one of the cardinal principles of a free society that the channels of public opinion are open to all. In practice, this is not always the case, for many of these channels are *owned* and others can be *bought* if not already owned. But nobody's vote is owned in a democracy, nor voice either. It follows then that if only anti-democratic clamors are allegedly heard in any marked proportion, and if these fill the conference rooms of the mass-communication media to such an extent that restraints on freedom multiply, there must be considerable torpor on the part of the professed believers in freedom. Concerning failure to oppose well-organized pressure groups articulate well beyond their actual numbers, we may say with Shakespeare:

> And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?
> Poor man! I know he would not be a wolf
> But that he sees the Romans are but sheep:
> He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.[2]

And with respect to this matter of staging countermoves—that is, of making opinion effective—surely, again, it is the theatre's practitioners who should have the edge. The art of showmanship, of vivid presentation, belongs to them. If they do not choose to use it, they waive their advantage. And in doing so, they fail to exercise not merely a privilege but an obligation in a free society—that of making a forceful presentation of an honestly held and openly maintained case. A free society does not offer sanctuaries for anyone from the vigorously driven arguments of the other side, as every election year demonstrates anew. A free society merely allows the traffic to be a two-way affair. But for this to

[2] *Julius Caesar*, I, 3, ll. 103-106.

be the case, the drivers situated at one end will have to use the roadway.

In the theatre, moreover, my metaphor may be applied in another way than that of expressing a demand that the channels of communication be kept open. Even in these days of high production costs, it is still possible to present stage productions representative of divergent opinions and taste. That is how an art theatre came to be born in the United States between 1910 and 1920, a period when a few managements virtually pre-empted Broadway and the touring circuits. If there is one institution in which uniformity cannot be imposed except by totalitarian rule or a reign of terror, it is the stage. Professional producers and off-Broadway theatre groups are constantly cropping up in our society with no more regulation than that which comes from building and fire-prevention rules.

Nor is individual enterprise entirely closed even in the case of the more expensive mass media. The range of private enterprise in the field of broadcasting has been wide, and the networks are not in absolute control. Time can also be bought from stations for radio and television programs. Motion pictures have been produced outside the orbit of Hollywood industry, and some of these have won esteem and a public. The financial fiascos of Hollywood in recent years may indeed have beneficial results in one respect. Film production with a view to reaching every available spectator has been an important factor in imposing intellectual conformity and a common banality on studio-made products. When more motion pictures are made with reduced budgets for different types of audiences, there is a likelihood that there will be less self-decapitation by movie makers. Hollywood's golden dream of pleasing everyone is coming to an end now that its mass audience has been whittled down for most of its offerings. It may not be the 3 D's but the three R's that will revive motion-picture production.

I would conclude, then, that in a free society the theatre arts do not necessarily give rise to imperishable masterpieces, do not necessarily attain distinction or infallibility in performance. Nor are they able to operate without impediments to honest and worthy creativeness at one time or another or in one place or another. But the range of possibilities for the exercise and public enjoyment of creativity remains large and varied. And the degree of freedom enjoyed by these arts is proportionate to the will of the majority of people to grant and preserve that freedom.

V

The one question that cannot be answered so as to cover every exigency is what freedom invariably consists of in the theatre arts. But on that score I do not hesitate to say that our demands, as a rule, have surely not been excessive. No responsible representative of the legitimate stage has broken any lances in behalf of obscenity and of any candor that cannot be justified to the adult mind. A reasonable area of disagreement arises only in the case of the mass-communication media to which children and impressionable adolescents have easy access. I do not know what solutions there are for radio and television theatre except the scheduling of certain programs past the bed-time hours of the young. In the case of motion pictures, the best solution may well be the restriction of certain films to theatres where attendance by the young is unlikely and can be restrained by regulations, preferably voluntary. There is no sense, however, in depriving adults of

the gratifications of wit and intelligent observation, and the dangers of a widening and spiraling dictatorship of the arts are considerable in any effort to do so.

In the case of the legitimate stage, of course, the question of safeguarding the morals of the young hardly ever enters. Commercial productions are well beyond the price range of adolescent attendance, and attendance in the case of the comparatively small communities in which our noncommercial theatres flourish can be easily enough regulated by the parents themselves. As for efforts by any group of citizens to safeguard the morals of adults who are likely to want to see a play of any intellectual caliber, the case is a clear-cut one. Such efforts will be defeated, I trust, by their very impertinence so long as our society remains intact. It is not a principle of democracy that the bias of the uneducated or the bigoted is sacrosanct even when they constitute a majority. A free society guarantees fundamental rights to an educated minority no less than to the uneducated, the half-educated, or the miseducated. A free society, secured by constitutional guarantees, differs from a totalitarian society in securing its citizens against a legalized leveling of taste and thought. Such leveling is public policy only where it is public policy to establish uniformity in the interests of tyranny.

The problem of restriction is more complicated in the case of motion-picture licensing, since a board of censors, unlike a pressure group, is vested with legal authority. Lines are drawn fine in drawing distinctions between turpitude and genuine art in cases of censorship. In such instances, persuasion and a resort to the courts of the land decide the particular issue, whereas in a totalitarian country attempts at persuasion are construed as disloyalty and a resort to the courts is impossible. It does not follow, of course, that errors and injustices cannot be committed in a free society; we should never confuse the City of Man with the City of God, as some naive liberals have tended to do. But in a free society men are at liberty to combat the errors and injustices; and labeling their effort treasonable is the real treason we must guard against.

Beyond flagrant and commercialized depravity, against which laws are in force, we are left only with the question of subversive propaganda, alleged or actual. This question, however, brings us back to the problem with which I started. And I have no further views to offer on that subject other than the belief that our free and strong society has little to fear from the assaults of subversive propaganda via the theatre arts and much to fear from the suppression of anything on which opinion can be honestly divided. Men and women who understand the nature of a free society and want to keep it free will, if anything, be inclined to err on the side of laxity rather than rigor. And on this subject there are still no sounder words than Milton's when he wrote "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race," or our own Benjamin Franklin's ringing reproof: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."