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REALITY

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!" "This isn't real!" How often do we say this about an overpoweringly real event in life? We are balancing the experience against the daily, ordinary manifestations of life. Christopher Fry once said: "*Reality is incredible*, reality is a whirlwind. What we call reality is a false god, the dull eye of custom."*

We have to open all our senses and innermost feelings to the *extraordinary* realities of existence. We have to receive these realities with innocence and freshness, as though we had just been born. To create, one has to take known elements and make something new of them, and as we have only a few hours of compressed life on stage, our creation better count. We must *take* from life, and *what* we take must have pertinence. A mere imitation of nature in its familiar, daily aspects is the antithesis of art.

In the preceding chapters, I have not yet differentiated between truth in life and truth on stage. I have continuously stressed life realities (and will continue to do so) in an effort

* "How Lost, How Amazed, How Miraculous We Are," *Theatre Arts*, August 1952.

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to steer away from the misconceptions and customs of old theater conventions, false theatricality, tricks and gimmicks. But truth in life as it is, is not truth on stage. If I bring real snow into the theater it will melt, even before the curtain goes up. I remember a play in which real milk boiled over on cue on the stage stove. The audience was *disillusioned* as they audibly speculated on how this had been mechanically achieved. In *Look Back in Anger*, Mary Ure ironed with a real steam iron. Not only did the audience murmur, "Real steam!" as they missed what she was saying, but at one performance she was scalded, and the curtain was rung down.

There is a lovely story about the old German actor Albert Basserman during rehearsals for a play in which it was supposed to rain. The director and the designer were worrying about real water and how it could be produced on stage. Basserman interrupted them: "When I come on stage, it rains!" And everything in his behavior convinced you that it *did!*

I once played with an actor who had to take me by the arms to shake me. After showing him that I had to put more makeup on my bruised arms than on my face, he apologized with, "I'm sorry, but I really felt it!" and promptly went on stage and bruised me again. Finally, at one performance I screamed as he dug his fingers into the muscles of my arms. He forgot his lines and let go of me in wild confusion. Backstage he confronted me: "You weren't supposed to scream there." I explained, "I'm sorry, but I really felt it." He never hurt me again.

It is not "real" simply to slug it out in a stage fight and possibly send an actor into the orchestra pit or to the hospital. Really hurting someone is like the boiling milk: the audience concerns itself with the wounded actor instead of with the character he is portraying. To bring about a "real" fight requires the detailed and controlled definition of each

movement. The physical action must be as concrete as the words of the playwright.

The intruding realities which spring from our private lives must be put aside so that our stage realities will be allowed to evolve spontaneously. If my Romeo has garlic on his breath it is unreal to the play. It is also unreal if I "use it" as is. (So many actors employ this phrase, evidently meaning that *whatever* moves in on them on stage is supposed to be spontaneously put to use.) In *Romeo and Juliet*, garlic is not a part of Shakespeare's dictum. I can plead with the actor after the performance not to eat garlic again, and if this fails, try to ignore it or desperately endow it with attar of roses.

To swat at a live roach on stage in a room that should be a palace may not only be irrelevant to the play and the character, but will take the audience away from the truth of the stage life. You must see what you *have* to see in order to tell the story, or see it so that it doesn't distort the story.

To go from the ridiculous to the sublime, I would like to cite the example of Jean Louis Barrault's Hamlet, in the scene of his advice to the players. While the chief player was emotionally reciting about Hecuba, Hamlet quietly approached him and literally lifted a teardrop from his cheek, balancing it on two fingers and regarding it in wonder. It later catapulted him into, "Is it not monstrous that this player here . . ." etc. This is an example of poetic action which might never occur in life, but which became *real* and deeply meaningful on stage because Barrault really did it and believed it so that we in the audience did, too.

In our search for genuine emotion and sensation and truthful behavior and action, we should never forget that selection is our goal. Nor should we forget the obligation to the playwright. We can perhaps aim to give him even more than he had hoped for by our revelation of the detail of the human being he envisaged.

In defining the difference between reality in life and reality in art, Tolstoy said, "Something is added to nature which wasn't there before." That "something" is the artist's point of view and his power of selection, which comes *from* life and makes for *new* life.