

Live Theater and the Limits of Human Freedom

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Abstract This paper argues that there is a relationship between the structure of live theater and the question of whether human beings have free will, and that the practice of live theater and the pursuit of philosophical certitude regarding free will are both constructive human experiences coalesced around roughly the same set of sensations.

Keywords Freedom · Constraint · Painting · Thought experiment

My earliest experience having to do with the pleasure of seeing live theater came to me second-hand. When I was seven, my father and stepmother had gone to a revival of “Camelot” at the Kennedy Center and my father had come home positively glowing.

Glowing about what? It wasn’t the beautiful tunes or extravagant sets that had launched him into his wise-yet-boyish “Gosh, ya really gotta hand it to ‘em” fervor. It was the fact that Richard Harris, the grizzled, grinning star of the show, had forgotten his lines; and, once the train had jumped the tracks, Mr. Harris drove it into the woods. He sat down on the edge of the stage with the actor playing Lancelot and improvised a dialogue about the struggles of keeping a kingdom running: a dialogue which was also a thinly-veiled code for the difficulties of remembering one’s lines after having reached a certain age and after having drunk a certain amount, over the decades, of alcohol.

This interlude lasted several minutes: and during those precious minutes, my father, as he put it, “enjoyed the

living shit” out of “Camelot.” What he actually enjoyed was being present in the same room, in real time, in a genuine real-life predicament, with the movie star Richard Harris. Over and over again, the actor playing Lancelot attempted, with comically public effort, to remind Harris of the missing line: but Harris didn’t want help. He didn’t want to go back to the play. He was enjoying taking a break from the unremitting constraint of performing that beloved war horse. Once Harris finally wrung all the humor he could out of his performative faux-pas, he rose to his feet and, with his trademark Irish gameness, leapt back into the story. When he did so, repeating with self-conscious derring-do the last line he’d uttered before the comically cathartic catastrophe, the audience leapt to its feet and applauded and cheered for a long time.

For what were they cheering? What had happened? *Why was my father so happy?*

The play had broken open. The real people behind the fiction had been revealed: more importantly, *they’d freely elected to reveal themselves*. And those real people, led by Richard Harris, then led the audience, after a long soak in the silly ocean of relatively absolute freedom, back into the comforting constraints of an essentially tragic tale.

Usually when one attends a performance of “Camelot,” it isn’t until the sweetly melancholic passing-away-of-glory the musical demonstrates has *ended* that the audience gets the eschatological pleasure, during the curtain call, of being reminded that there is a world where it doesn’t necessarily have to end *that way*: it’s the *real* world they’re about to walk out into. But my father and his fellow theater-goers got that jolt of hopeful acknowledgment in the *middle* of the play, and *then* watched the now *more-obviously* fictional disassembly of Paradise ensue. For the second half of the performance, from the moment Richard Harris restarted, with modest yet swashbuckling charm, the

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play, and on through the end, the audience enjoyed what we might call “the best of both worlds.”

They watched it all “go wrong” in Camelot, but they watched it “go wrong” knowing all the time, far more deeply than the average audience, that nothing could really “go wrong”—because, obviously, everything in Camelot was unreal. The actors playing Arthur and Lancelot, no matter how much they might fight onstage, were obviously good friends. The friendship they shared, demonstrated by Lancelot’s willingness to join Harris in the unmasking and then by his offers of comradely assistance, assured the audience that they would never be led by this smiling crew into a sorrow from which they couldn’t recover. Of course, the sense of cosmic decay that “Camelot” enacts in miniature still had its accuracy and truth: but how much more accurate and true seemed those sensations they had enjoyed while the play was completely blown open. Cosmic decay be damned, Mr. Harris’ slip-up, smile, and sly abdication seemed to say: *it’s just a bloody play*.

Thought experiment: which would you rather see? (A) a production of “Camelot” in which the stars playing the leads flawlessly perform the play; (B) a production of “Camelot” in which the stars break character by accident, playfully improvise for a while, and then resume the play; or (C) an entirely different play, flawlessly performed, about actors breaking character in a production of “Camelot,” during which the actors pretend to forget their lines and pretend to improvise, but it’s all in the script, word for word.

Extra credit: *What kind of world do you think you’re living in?*

Every art form has its own unique interplay of freedom and constraint: and within each form, different artists find their own way of striking a fresh and personal balance of the two competing impulses. In painting, for example, the photorealism of Richard Estes offers a highly constrained vision of the world. Estes’ painstakingly realistic depictions of cityscapes are vehement and vivid testimonies to the power of precision, of working within viciously delineated limits. Of course, we never know how religiously Estes has *actually* conformed, in a given painting, to the facts of what was in the photograph from which he worked: but the internal visual syntax of the paintings decree almost audibly that nothing will be allowed to look less than real and everything will be required to appear real to roughly the same degree. The style sets the rules and the rules are exacting.

Another kind of exactitude shines forth, in an entirely different manner, from the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Barnett Newman. By confining himself, in much of his work, to a severely limited visual lexicon—solid fields of color bisected by his trademark “zip”—Newman presents

a highly constrained vision. The viewer looks for freedom within the work and finds it in only four places: what colors did Newman use? Where did he put the “zip”? What is the shape and size of the canvas? And: the freedom that can be located by the question: why did he choose to paint this painting at all?

Those freedoms are all relatively massive, given the way Newman organizes reality for himself and the viewer. But there are ways of painting that are even more replete with a sense of freedom than the methods of Estes or Newman generate.

In the action paintings of Jackson Pollock, to choose a rather obvious example, one is presented with a vision of freedom driven almost to the point of chaos. In the vastly multi-various body of work created by Pablo Picasso, one gets the sense they are watching a mind supremely free, at play with itself and the universe. In the whimsical moves made by Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, a freedom of content, of thought regarding what is the proper subject matter for art, is inherent in the work.

(Just to be clear: I’m aware that it’s possible to see all these binary oppositions in exactly the opposite way. Estes might say, in an interview, that in his slavish commitment to painting realistically, he finds himself set free, so to speak, to actually paint. It is also possible to see the action paintings of Pollock not as records of human freedom, but as records of one man’s absolute submission to the constraints of chance. Fine. My point is simply that within painting, as in any art form, the consumer receives a transmission that contains degrees of freedom and constraint in various ratios, and, I would say, the ratio of freedom to constraint within a given work of art is either a partial record of the artist’s experience of the world or a pure creation made in response to a world which has been experienced as being to some degree free and to some degree constrained.)

Live theater, in which human beings, speaking words from pre-written scripts, moving in patterns dictated by others, *go through the motions*, as it were, of making free choices, initiating causes and experiencing effects, presents the audience with, to me, the most interesting mixture of freedom and constraint available. Most people, when they say they love live theater, say they enjoy knowing that “it’s different every night.” And it *is* different every night, but *within limits*: in some cases, within severely exacting limits.

Now, there are many kinds of theater. A company called Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind performs a brand of theater they call “non-illusory,” in which the actors play themselves and no effort is made to create verisimilitude. (The question of whether the word “themselves” should be in quotations in the previous sentence I’ll leave to stronger minds than mine.) The plays are true right

then and there and are not intended to duplicate an imagined reality. In companies like Second City or The Groundlings, comic actors perform fictional scenes with a large degree of improvisation. People make all kinds of theater. For the purposes of this essay, however, when I say “live theater” I am referring to performances of scripted works in which the general tendency is to adhere to the script and present the audience with roughly the same show every night.

What is the worldview of such theater? If an Estes painting is, for the sake of argument, an image of constraint, and a Pollock is an image of freedom, what is the live theater of Chekhov? What is the live theater of Mamet? And what vision of human freedom, in general, is live theater transmitting as a form? Is it a celebration of human freedom or a mourning of cosmic constraint? The obvious answer is it's both: but to what degree freedom is celebrated in live theater and to what degree constraint is mourned and, conversely, to what degree freedom is mourned and constraint celebrated, and what those ratios say about the human experience, are different and, to me, interesting questions.

I'm a playwright, and I've written a number of plays that can be seen as messages about cosmic constraint and the limits of human freedom. In “Recent Tragic Events,” for example, an audience member flips a coin—with the help of the stage manager—before the play, and the audience is told that the result of the coin flip will determine a number of plot movements within Act One: each time something occurs which was determined by the flip of the coin, the audience is told, a bell-like tone will sound: and, indeed, all through Act One the action is punctuated by the sounding of the bell-like tone. At the top of Act Two, however, the stage manager addresses the audience once more, reveals herself as an actress, and informs the audience that everything happened in Act One according to the published script and that the coin flip was a scam. There was no chance and no freedom. She then invites the audience to watch Act Two keeping continually aware of the fact that there is only one way the action can unfold. Considering the fact that, within the plot of the play, a life hangs in the balance, it's a bracing reminder.

Similarly, my play “Grace” opens with a triple-murder-suicide, and then goes back in time to show the audience how the characters came to that sorry end. (Tellingly, the play opens and closes with the line “You can't” in response to the line, “I want to go back.”) Several times during the course of the play, the characters go backwards in time and then forwards again for a few pages, each time duplicating the actions of the previous moments without variation. The message is delivered over and over again that no matter how much we *feel* we could go back and do things differently, we can't. But near the end of the play,

one of the characters undergoes a change of heart that feels like the kind of thing that turns people away from bad choices, and for a few minutes the audience thinks: “Oh. It's not going to end that terrible way, is it? Thank God.” But then it all happens the way it happened at the beginning, leaving the audience (I hope) to respond to the implicit question: “What *is* this weird capacity you have for thinking things can turn out any other way than the way you were shown, word for word, they would turn out?”

Obviously, plays like these transmit explicit messages about human freedom and cosmic constraint, and they use the determinism inherent in the practice of live theater to do so. The message tends to be something like: “Human beings are free, but not very; and their freedom mostly consists in being able to choose how to think and feel about what will happen *no matter what*; acknowledging these limitations together, as an audience, provides consolation.” Other playwrights, obviously, have less or no explicit interest in these issues, and they write plays about princes dealing with complex legacies, sisters living in the Russian countryside, lovers in roadside motels, or salesmen conspiring in close quarters. But their plays quite often lead to moments where the protagonists either say out loud, or imply with their actions, some version of: “This play cannot go any other way than the way it's going!” And this announcement is usually followed by a clarifying of confusions followed by an attendant relaxation of tension, and the viewer gets the pleasant sense they are headed for the curtain. In plays with a lot of dramatic action, this moment happens near the end of Act One; in more contemplative plays, it happens late in the final act. The net effect is essentially the same, though: the audience is made to understand that the play (and, implicitly, life itself) is a largely deterministic system, and that they have gathered in the theater to mourn and celebrate, to varying degrees, that fact; for, of course, both anxiety and absolution are activated by such a proclamation. When confronted, in a work of art, by the mostly deterministic systems in which we move, we feel more sharply the cosmic constraint, which results, to some degree, in a feeling of anxiety—“No matter how hard I try, I will never be an artist!”—but we also, within the frame of that constraint, find a pathway to freedom in the conceptual leap to: “I don't have to try to be an artist anymore! It's not possible!” Being in the same room with other human beings who, through an act of self-conscious pretending, release in their bodies the energies of these cosmic confessions of finitude, can be transformative. Any actor who has played Oedipus, Lear, Masha or Teach knows this: to stand on a stage before a voluntary audience and enact a moment of infinite humility before the massive determinism of a dramatic situation that, because it is scripted, cannot be altered or out-manuevered, is to perform a priestly role in a secular setting. To bear the pain

and glory of that ultimate predicament *in effigy*, as it were, is electrifying work.

But mustn't we acknowledge then, having seen this effect take place over and over again, for centuries, admit to ourselves that the resonances occasioned by these moments attest with almost scientific accuracy to the nature of life itself?

Of course, the question of whether human beings possess free will has been debated for centuries, with no conclusive answer in sight. As far as I'm concerned, the question always inaugurates what I would call a "fake conversation." If the goal of the conversation is to find out what another person believes or if the goal is to state what you yourself believe, then I suppose it has relational value, but when no conclusive answer can ever be arrived at, to carry on a conversation with the tone and vehemence of a genuine search for certainty always feels to me like bad magic.

Why can no resolution to the question ever be arrived at? Because in order to prove free will, one would have to be able to live the same moment of choosing twice, and choose differently within that duplicated moment. But we all know the river of time never stops flowing, so there's no way of testing any hypotheses about free will. Any conversation about free will is doomed to be only and ever just that: a conversation.

That being said, much can be profitably verbalized about how free or constrained life *feels*. The subjective sensation of having what *feels* like a free choice set before you; the experience of the texture of the actual act of choosing, whether it's real or not; the sensations of satisfaction or regret that follow close on the heels of choices that *feel* freely made: these are all very real sensations and real *feelings*, and for live theater to create resonance and meaning for the audience, there need be no final certainty about the reality of free will: there need only be basic agreement about how free or constrained life *feels*. And if live theater and its historical efficacy as an art form are to be trusted, we have to assume that life feels to most people mostly quite constraining, and very rarely free.

Playwrights, after all, write about characters in predicaments: people hemmed from within or without by circumstance: and then those characters push through the predicaments toward partial ruin or partial reward, or, rarely, they remain perpetually in the predicament, and the perpetual nature of the predicament *becomes* the subject matter. But whatever freedom playwrights afford their characters, the characters' freedom arises only in response to predicaments: is enacted within its own unique predicament (that of the contours of their own character, i.e., "I could lie and get out of this, but unfortunately, I can't choose to lie"): and finally ends in either a fresh predicament or in a temporary release from contingency which we know will soon be invaded by a fresh predicament.

Live theater's bread and butter is what Heidegger called "the constraint of Being." The characters in most plays move with very little freedom through highly constraining situations, and usually make only one extravagantly free-*looking* act per play. Most of the activity in most plays can be ascribed to character, which means it *isn't* free activity and it doesn't even *look* free. Most characters do *exactly what they would do*: they can't help it. It's only when a character does something outside what even they expect would be possible for them to do that the mirage of objectively-seen freedom begins to appear.

For the most part, live theater sends this message: *we're free, but not very much, and to activate even that small degree of freedom takes a lot of courage and luck*. Which is why it's so pleasant when the actors in a play break character: it gives the audience a brief relief from the highly constrained worldview live theater quietly transmits. It says: *there is a reality beyond this highly constrained construct in which we are all very free*.

What to make of the pleasure such a momentary rupture affords?

What kind of world are we living in?

What kind of world *are* we living in?

We all have our own answers to that question, and this is mine: we live in a world where our feelings, tastes, ambitions, habits and drives were formed in us before we were old enough to recognize them as something separate from and pasted onto "reality." We live in a world where we spend most of our time dealing with the effects of causes that preceded us, and preemptively preparing for effects we know we're currently causing: this leaves very little time to freely act, *sui generis*, in the here and now, if such freedom is even possible. Most of all, we live in a world where death is unavoidable; where most of our instinctive behaviors, masked by cultural specificities, have to do with forgetting or delaying our awareness of that fact. Caught between the wall of our own certain death and the crashing tidal wave of the past, we are between a rock and a very hard place.

Set into this matrix of pre-determined and continually reinforced contingency, however, are a few jewel-like moments where what *looks* and *feels* like pure freedom shine, where the constraints of life fall away, either by accident or by design, and another way of being is disclosed. The essential but perhaps tired example of such a moment is when one person gives up their life to save another's. (Of course, blind egotism often fuels such decisions; but when it doesn't, when the decision to sacrifice oneself is largely altruistic, we sense an infinite freedom.) Also, in the virtuosic leaps of imagination we see enacted in various art forms, we sense the horizonless freedom of minds at pure play. And in small ways every

day (often very small) we see people around us choose against self-interest and, more importantly, against their own characters, in the service of what seems to be an intrepid, investigative modality with mysterious purposes of its own.

(Undoubtedly, some readers will grow either dizzy or bored as I mix metaphors here, or nonsensically ascribe purposes to ways of being which have no intentionality: but I am a firm believer in the idea that language, like light near the singularity of a black hole, bends into complicated shapes when it gets close to the truth.)

The essential point is this: as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”—and whether the spring of that dear freshness, that puny, potent feeling we call “freedom” is, as Hopkins believed, divine, or whether it is simply a natural layer of our animal experience the depth of which results in it being seen only rarely, when circumstances break open the more common surfaces upon which we move and by which we’re supported, matters less than that *the feeling happens*. Live theater is one method we have evolved as a species of examining that feeling: celebrating the fact of its

existence and mourning the rareness with which it occurs. In live theater, we see our highly constrained predicament played out, as an act of pure pleasure within the parenthesis of imaginative effort: it is thus rendered visible, bearable, and beautiful.

When Richard Harris sat down on the edge of the stage and riffed, in rough language, on the problems of staying adequately drunk and adequately in control, he did slightly more than entertain. He functioned in that moment as a sign, in the semiotic sense of the word: a sign that indicated this: *Don’t be fooled by how real the constraints of life may seem to be. There is another way. You just have to stop, sit down, and BE.*

We feel very little free.

Live theater makes that very little freedom feel like just enough.

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