

The Theatre of Peace

Introduction to Peace Plays volume one. 1985.

On Whitehall, there is a theatre with a famous history. It was once the home of 'British Farce', but some years back the curtain fell on its vicars with their falling trousers for the last time. It rose again to reveal women in even greater states of undress, who in turn were sacrificed on the altar of greed to make way for the real money spinner — a theatre that now proudly bears the name of 'The Theatre of War'.

In October 1983, I was on the part of that giant CND march which passed this theatre on its way to Hyde Park. On top of the building opposite was a small group of clowns (not, I suspect, subsidised by the Arts Council but by an even more secret organisation) blasting out the theme songs of anti-red hatred, and trying to sell their mindless brand of patriotism that can only comprehend a national identity by violent opposition to another.

But I can't deny they affected me. Wedged in between those two theatres of war with the whole dead weight of the rest of Whitehall supporting them, I found myself suddenly unable to move, as despair at their killing stupidity struck me. I didn't know what to do. When that panic hits you like the SAS what do you do? It's difficult sometimes just to keep breathing, never mind discover a positive action.

I think I might have just frozen there, if it wasn't for the mass movement around me that I'd forgotten, who gently took me and my child along with it. And as I moved on, I saw the march as the helicopter cameras might have seen it, as a vast dragon of anger and hope, weaving its way through the sharp edges of the streets of London, like the dragon that had surrounded the camp at Greenham a few months before. And I felt we had all become a living example of 'The Theatre of Peace'.

Of course it's easy to bandy the word PEACE around. The producers of the arms industry employ it all the time, and even given they can only find B-movie actors or elocution trained dummies to mouth their speeches, still their definition of the word comes across loud and clear. Peace, under our present leaders, is a sterile state of passivity, where the people are to flinch from every cloud in the fear that in its belly it carries worse than raindrops to fall upon our heads. Peace in their mouths is as trapped as the word love in a porno movie. It's time to release it, before they make not only it, but all of us, totally perverted, if not ultimately impotent.

The dictionaries categorise Peace only as a noun, a static state, a period of absence — 'Peace is freedom *from* or cessation *of* war'. War, interestingly, is both a noun and a verb. It is an activity. Something one can do.

All this makes Peace sound as exciting as a Sunday run by the Lord's Day Observance Society, and I, for one, am not campaigning for that. But things liven up considerably if we check back on the word's derivation. Peace, it transpires, is, cognate with *pangere*, *pact* — to fix'. So, apparently, it was once seen as an active state. Once upon a time, it was once understood differently. There is a verb fighting to get out of there. And of course, of late. many people have come to realise this, have begun to claim Peace for the entire week, as their place of work, as their very state of being.

Such a radical stance brings a certain traditional reaction. In the theatre, as elsewhere, we can see it well enough, from the efforts by Education Ministers and others to block Peace Plays in schools through to the Minister of Defence's attempts to close down the highly successful run at the Greenham Common Theatre. And in addition to this, of course, they are engaged in a mass campaign of promotion to sell us their Theatre of War. It's a farce, true, but as all pros know, farce is a deadly serious business, and none more so than this, for if things go bad, and it 'bombs' we may end up rolling uncontrollably in the aisles but it won't be through a fit of laughter.

We are now engaged in a greater debate than just saying NO to nuclear weapons, and there is a central obligation to articulate and affirm a radically different concept of life. For that to be possible we have to not only understand more deeply the causes that have brought us to this eleventh hour but also the essential aspirations and desires that might lead us creatively beyond it. And in this I believe the theatre can play a very significant part, and it's a part it is beginning to respond to in an exciting fashion.

The last few years have seen a remarkable growth in the number of peace plays and also a new audience prepared to risk often appalling theatrical conditions to see them. The Peace Play Register (published by the Theatre Writers Union) lists over three hundred plays of all shapes and sizes and this number is increasing daily. Having read a good selection of them, I fear most would not satisfy the National critic who last year bemoaned the absence of the 'Great Peace Play'. Whilst in no way wishing to deprive him of this splendid work, I worry that if we all frown and search diligently for the proverbial four leafed clover, we could fail to step back and marvel at the sheer breadth of ground covered by the bank of clover. There is something final about the notion of the 'Great Peace Play' and if there's something we can all agree on, Final Solutions are to be opposed. Let us all beware the day the Evening Standard offers an award for the 'Best Peace Play'.

Certain types of Peace Plays do, of course, get published. Largely those associated with the type of work done at the Royal Court, the National Theatre or the RSC, but there is as yet no volume that begins to show the wider scope of the work, going on in schools, studios, in street festivals, or at the very fence of Greenham itself. That has been a key factor in my selection of these pieces.

If any of you feel that all Peace Plays are grey depressing sagas set in nuclear bunkers (the sort of play to which you might lend your moral support but not your physical presence) then you might find the diversity of response here surprising. Although I suspect the starting point of these plays is all FEAR, it is not a fear that wishes to hide itself away, and it draws its strength from that human characteristic that William Faulkner aptly defines as 'I decline to accept the end of man.' And now we must clearly add woman. (Even more clearly in the light of the fact that the large majority of the playwrights in this volume are women).

I hope the range of these plays will take your breath away, and perhaps even inspire you to consider the theatre language as part of your work for Peace. For the Theatre of Peace, be that Greenham, or Greenpeace, or the local rep company, has the language to discover images of truth that the impresarios of the Theatre of War want suppressed.

But we mustn't be conned into thinking Peace is merely an 'issue' and that 1983, or any other year, was its year. Peace is not an issue but an active verb. And the Theatre of Peace is something we all should be involved in, if we are going to peace together a future.

Otherwise there won't be one. The curtain will have fallen.

Clearly the problem is so fundamental that it now stands as a challenge to us all as creative beings to dream and bring into shape a world that does not yet exist. As Gabriel Garcia Marquez's wrote in his speech to the Nobel Peace Foundation:

Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of a utopia of a very different kind. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.
(Transl. from the Spanish by Marina Castaneda.)

One last thought: it's amazing how clover can take over even the most well controlled lawn, isn't it?

Stephen Lowe *London 1985*