

Going, Going, Gone!

An Editorial by Margaret Webster
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The stage direction reads simply: He sits. But he is in the costume of 1760, with full-skirted uniform coat, and he is wearing a sword and carrying a tricorne. He is to sit on a high-backed wooden chair, with arms.

If anyone is under the impression that this is simple, he had better try and see.

I did. I had to help an actor to do it. Of course, I had seen it done a hundred times, with ease, grace and authority, in the theatres of England and France. Eventually my eyes remembered and my mind reconstructed the necessary mechanics: how to not let the skirts of the coat bunch up; not to squash or drop the hat; not to get the sword entangled with either the chair legs or your own; and to seem perfectly natural and at ease. But I wasn't very adroit, of course. I should have done better with an actress wearing a hoop skirt and carrying a fan, because I was taught these things when I was young by older actresses who "knew how".

Of all costume, that of the eighteenth century is probably the trickiest to wear and can seem either the most exquisite or the most clumsy and alien. But every period has its own problems. Does anyone think it "comes natural" to sit down in a crinoline without letting it bounce up above your knees? Or to throw a cloak around you so that it looks pictorial, does not impede your movements, and fulfills its proper function - which is to keep you warm? It should be easy for a man to wear "white tie and tails" with elegance. But is it? Any woman can surely walk up three steps and turn round, even if she is wearing a floor-length robe with a train. But can she? I have seen a highly gifted actress, already a young star in contemporary plays, utterly defeated in her first Shakespearean effort by the danger and dread that, to her, surrounded this very elementary operation.

You cannot learn how to do these things from pictures, because the pictures are static; nor from books, because the words describe movement only very clumsily. You cannot somehow give birth to these accomplishments by feeling a lot - or even by being "psyched". You can only be shown. The arts of "carrying" and handling costume with an air of owning it, of making it serve you, as something at once useful and beautiful, are inherited. They have been handed down from one generation of actors to another in unbroken succession from the time when they were contemporary usages of society.

If the succession stops, it stops for good. If these skills are lost, they will stay lost. Well and truly lost. Who in the American theatre is left to hand on this inheritance? And how are they going to show the young American actors and singers of today, who have rarely - in most cases never - seen a polished professional technician demonstrate or display these classic crafts?

In the theatre, I think of only four real artists in this particular field - Dennis King, Brian Aherne, Joseph Schildkraut and Eva LeGallienne; all of whom will, I am sure, forgive me for suggesting that they are no longer in their very first youth. Our resources, you see, are diminishing very fast. But to watch Mr. Aherne bow to his lady (in *The Beaux Strategem*), or Miss LeGallienne propel an immense Elizabethan farthingale, with rage and majesty, across a stage full of furniture (in *Mary Stuart*) was alone with the price of admission. And I have seen Mr. King demonstrate the routine of taking snuff with a mathematical precision of superb delicacy and rightness. There may well be others whose names do not come at once to mind; but very few of them.

There are, of course, brilliant teachers of these arts in ballet, notably George Ballanchine and Agnes deMille. But in the dance the object of the exercise is somewhat different; it is more formalized and less functional. Ezio Pinza was a superb exemplar in opera, and some European singers still retain the tradition. But in America it is all but dead.

The little that remains could be made enough, however. The artists I have named - and the others I

have probably omitted - should be induced to make a series of demonstrations on film. The shots would have to be devised carefully, and a script of running commentary added, almost certainly including passages of dialogue from the appropriate plays, to give the action sense and purpose. Close-up and slow motion should be used; not fancy sets or expensive lighting; the right furniture - and naturally, the right costumes. The costumes are plentifully available from one source or another. Any organization, professional or amateur, should be able to hire sixteen-millimeter film, or to buy a print. It need not be a very costly or grandiose undertaking. A series of short film sequences could be built up bit by bit. But soon. The essentials are simple. But they are vastly important, and time marches on.

You can, of course, maintain that these things are not, in fact, essential any more; that they are no longer part of the American theatre scene. In that case you must be prepared to maintain, also, that we should banish from the theatre and opera repertory everything that cannot be played in blue jeans and sneakers, with the peculiar and arrogant gracelessness of today. (That, too, will become a period art very soon.) Unless we agree to jettison the whole repertoire of the past, we must set to work to play it properly, with style and truth, too - for style is nothing but the external expression of truth. To play the characters of these plays and operas convincingly, actors must look them, which is a part of being them. They cannot, as Shaw puts it, "fudge along" like a set of crude and self-conscious amateurs. They must not simply feel like George Washington, while openly proclaiming the unreality of that general by being totally unable to sheathe his sword without missing the scabbard three times in a row.

There are plenty of people who, for their own sake, should be interested in promoting the salvage operation I have suggested, and equally, in helping to pay for it. The American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) should be interested; so should the American Educational Theatre Association (AETA) and the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre and Academy of Stratford, Connecticut, and the American Theatre Wing and other schools of drama and opera. The Actors Studio, paradoxical as it may seem, should be very much interested indeed. The Ford Foundation, already most perceptively concerned with the preservation of good theatre, could finance the whole thing with one tiny lift of its mighty eyebrows.

Plenty of theatre ills are now irremediable. This one is not. This danger can be averted - but not for long. Rescue these skills, please, somebody, before they vanish forever.