

in print

The Persistence of Guilt

By James Reston Jr.

Robert Brustein is the Protean master of all aspects of stagecraft, from acting to directing to producing to criticism and scholarship, and because of his high reputation and unique position in the American theatre, one approaches his new collection of reviews and essays with high expectations. Above all, we know that his love for the theatre and its people will inform all his opinions.

It could be argued, though, that this very love and breadth undercuts his credibility as a critic—that somehow his straddling the

fence between criticism and product makes him suspect on both sides. With his lifetime of achievements, he has transcended these traditional separations and makes them appear arbitrary. Brustein has arrived at that where not only can he render wise judgments across the landscape of the national and international theatre, but he can also use the theatre as a springboard to think about American society and American culture.

In this latter process, he moves into one of his most important roles: as an advocate for the theatre. We all want to believe that theatre matters. Brustein proves it.

Dumbocracy in America is a mélange of reviews, essays and theatrical profiles. Ironically, for anyone except the most stalwart insider, the latter two categories are by far the more interesting sections. In fact, to throw together a parcel of old reviews is a kind of vanity, and such attic-rummaging rarely works in book form. Old reviews are like old newspaper columns—sketches in the sand, as one old columnist put it. Their time has come and gone.

So in the section called "Performances," one has to wade through an awful lot of old news to find the sparkling Brustein lines. One looks forward to them. About an apparently sexy Raul Julia performance in *Othello*, Brustein writes, "For all his genuine intelligence and dignified presence, Julia

never managed to lift the play out of the boudoir." Or about *Miss Saigon* and the appearance of a helicopter on stage, he writes, "Not since the chandelier floated down from the flies in *Phantom of the Opera* have music, mayhem and machinery been merged in such riotous excess." And about Dustin Hoffman as Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*, he writes, "He leaves no signature on the role.... Hoffman has curiously chosen to give an elocutionary performance. But he lacks the vocal equipment.... [The actor] bleeds all color out of the part, turning Shylock into Willy Loman with a skullcap in a costume version of *Death of a Salesman*."

To use stage imagery, these lines are fine moments, but they do not salvage the evening.

Uncoupling politics and art

What does last beyond the wash of did, and I wish there were more of them. Whether Brustein is taking on political correctness as the disqualifier of the artistic impulse, debunking multiculturalism, reporting on the "arts wars," or uncoupling the junction between politics and art, the author is piercing, devastating and passionate. "High art in America is a dying animal," Brustein writes wistfully, "and dying along with it are our hopes for a still significant American civilization."

He is surely right in arguing that multiculturalism has skewed artistic standards, most poignantly for the best minority artists. To Brustein this is a voluntary return to segregation, a thought which is in itself bracing. He is insightful about the "crypto-Maoist roots" of political correctness and blames the legacy of the 1960s. "If there was a time when intellectuals could fight for social justice and high art simultaneously, when it was possible to study both Trotsky and Joyce at the same time," Brustein writes, "that time is no more." (I will allow that argument for now, but whether for all time social protest and art can never again be joined, I doubt.)

Thus, Brustein lends his weight to the growing backlash toward artificial race and gender philanthropy. He joins a widening circle of critics, including the late writer for *Time* magazine, William A. Henry III. In a just-published, posthumous work, *In Defense of Elitism*, Henry blasts the "swamp of egalitarianism" in the arts, the celebration of normalcy, complaining of a litmus test for the ideological propriety of any given artistic enterprise. The problem, of course, is that arts institutions, including Brustein's American Repertory Theatre, depend upon the financial support of corporations, foundations and the national endowments, and their sensitivity to race, gender and ethnic diversity in funding is not likely to change soon.

The most delicious essay in the Brustein collection is "Embarrassment of Riches," his wicked and courageous counterattack on former *New York Times* drama critic Frank Rich. Brustein writes knows full well how difficult it is to bring a piece of theatre alive. He stands at the gate yet another time as the grizzled guardian of a precious art form. Perhaps only Brustein could have written this essay...and gotten away with it. The rest of the theatre world, he asserts, was "cowed" by Rich and the *Times*.

Undoubtedly when his indictment first appeared in 1992, riotous (and anonymous) cheering filled the wings. Brustein attacks Rich for the excessive power he exercised and goes so far as to assert that this singular concentration of power "systematically destroyed the New York theatre." That is heavy stuff and probably overwrought. Even if one knows nothing about the

personalities or the issues or where the right of the matter ultimately lies, this essay is worth reading for the sheer pleasure of seeing a big-shot critic excoriated and exposed.

I am not as keen about Brustein's lead essay on the Theatre of Guilt, for he is vague about how he is using the term "guilt," and it smacks of labeling. Is the essayist being merely descriptive, or is he



DUMBOCRACY IN AMERICA: STUDIES IN THE THEATRE OF GUILT, 1987-1994

by Robert Brustein, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago. 256 pps, \$26 cloth.

"What's wrong with guilt, expiation and punishment? I thought these were great and noble themes."

putting down a vast segment of 20th-century drama? The Theatre of Guilt, he tells us, has dominated mainstream American drama for a very long time, forcing audiences to deal with an endless cycle of guilt, expiation and punishment. (What's wrong with that? I thought these were great and noble themes.) Victims rather than true tragic figures are center stage and, as a result, we see too much of the police precinct or the courtroom as a stage setting. Arthur Miller is criticized for his "blame-and-guilt plays," and Tennessee Williams "was unable to imagine a universe without victims at the center."

Questions of conscience

When Brustein quotes a line from Miller's play *Incident at Vichy*, "I don't want your guilt, I want your responsibility," he then quips, "In truth, he really wants both." What is Brustein's point? Are not guilt and responsibility part of the same continuum? What is so unworthy about such material

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in the theatre? It sounds like just another slap at political liberals and sentimentalists. But isn't Brustein himself a liberal? In the next breath, he scorches "neocons" and Jesse Helms.

Guilt, as I understand it, flows from promises broken or responsibilities unmet or commitment dishonored. The heart of the matter is conscience, but Brustein is bewilderingly cryptic about theatrical characters who struggle with questions of conscience. Shame is also introduced: "Insofar as shame is public, it can lead to action far more effectively than guilt, which sinks you in impotence." I suppose that he is talking here about political action rather than theatre, but the message is muddled. Lest the playwright risk the curse of practicing Brustein's Theatre of Guilt, it appears that he or she should stay away from shame in drawing a character's motivation. As they say in Washington, we need a presidential clarification.

But when he writes about his relation-

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ships over the years, Brustein is on solid, comfortable ground. His profiles are warm and interesting. They include a tribute to Joe Papp, with whom he had maintained an admiring but formal acquaintance—they were very different types, as the author acknowledges—and a revealing portrait of Brustein's early days in the circle of Lionel Trilling at Columbia. On the subject of acting method, this section also contains a fascinating comparison of Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud.

But again, it is the sheer pleasure of Brustein's wit that is not to be missed in such pieces as his treatment of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings as a piece of theatrical farce. Brustein has been treating political events as theatre for years, and having great fun doing so. Here, as always, the results are wonderful.

James Reston Jr. is the author, most recently, of Galileo: A Life, published last May by HarperCollins.

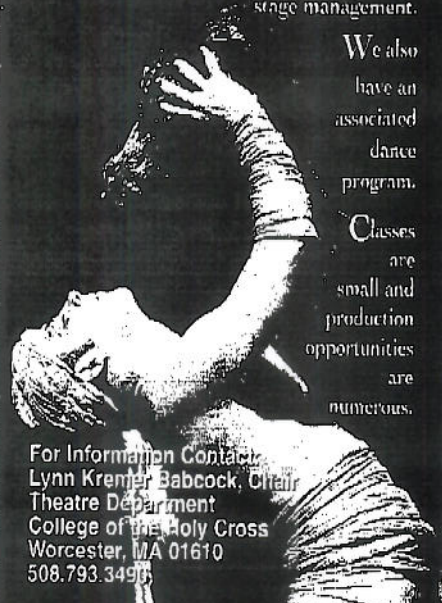
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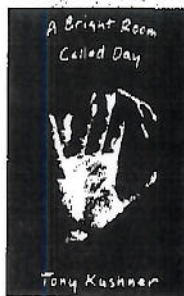
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