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Visual Metaphors, Theatres and Courts

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There was, earlier this winter, a great deal of ribald talk about a scene in the National Theatre's production of Howard Brenton's play *The Romans in Britain*. There is likely to be more talk of the same sort now that the Secretary of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association is proceeding with her suit against Mr Michael Bogdanov for procuring the commission of an act of gross indecency between Mr Peter Sproule and Mr Greg Hills on 19th December last. And all this talk will doubtless be excited by public interest in Mr Timothy Sainsbury's Indecency Displays Bill and the Government's promise to assist the progress of that Bill through Parliament. We are, it seems, again about to debate the meaning of 'indecency'.

Though Sir Peter Hall has not followed the distasteful example of another theatre director, I would yet like to suggest that *The Romans* and indecency should be considered with the Old Vic production of *Macbeth* in mind.

I had secured my ticket for that *Macbeth* some weeks before the production opened, so I was not required to join the line of those who had been excited by the critical notices which quickly made Mr Brian Forbes' production and Mr Peter O'Toole's performance notorious. The opportunities for happiness, or even a little pleasure, are not so common in my life that I would easily forego a performance of any of Shakespeare's plays, and among them, *Macbeth* has especial claims. Once, when quite a small boy, I surprised the greatest Macbeth of my time rehearsing to himself across the lawn: 'Learning me lines, dear laddie', Godfrey Tearle admitted with a flourish. And later, in my last year at school, I

was, if not the greatest Lady Macbeth of my time, at any rate good enough for Nugent Monck to say a few superlative words. There were things in the Old Vic production to remind me of both these performances. The Waterloo Road set with flats and steps was much like that the art master had built us. And there was around Mr O'Toole such a darkness as had so enveloped that old Stratford *Macbeth* that Diana Wynyard had had a very nasty fall on stage. On the night I was at the Old Vic, however, there were no accidental falls. Newspapermen complained that the stage was blacked between scenes to no purpose. They had noticed that flats and steps had stayed the same. They had not asked themselves enough questions about the imagery of croaking raven, rooky woods and midnight hags. Mr Forbes suggested by his lighting scheme that the events of the play issue out of the dark and retreat back into it. The scenes are not separated by blackouts, rather they are mere interludes in the constant night. In this production the witches from the dark became entirely credible. They inhabited a world that was near us. Those who waited in the darkened theatre for something to occur were made uneasy by the immediacy of the reference to a brief candle being snuffed out. Once believe that murky hell is around us and the final scene played in fierce light with a clear view of the tyrant's head can truly become an occasion of thankfulness. The blacked-out minutes had done their work. This was a visual metaphor which perfectly conveyed a meaning of the play.

There was an aural metaphor, too. The strange patterns of Mr O'Toole's verse speaking gradually revealed themselves in their clanking heaviness as a metaphor of exhausting battle, until, at the end, syllable and sword clash hit together. The lines had become formal presentments of the final blows. Perhaps Mr Forbes did not persuade them that he had an idea, and the metaphor passed as mere accident. Whomsoever must be blamed on this particular occasion, the reception of *Macbeth* at least suggested that the journalists were generally unable to appreciate the director's endeavour to discern an appropriate metaphor of a play. This inability was exposed quite nakedly in their reporting of Mr Brenton's play.

I had booked early, too, for the National Theatre's production of *The Romans in Britain* on the principle that any play which has Julius Caesar amongst its characters is, especially when that intelligent actor Mr Michael Bryant is to play the part, very likely to be interesting. Better, at any rate, than all those present dreary pieces about semi-detached persons or their kitchen-sink predecessors. So there I was, at one of the early performances, in the midst of another notorious affair. I was not at all averse to repeating my acci-

dental *coup*. A seminar on Luther in my room, or a conversation about the possibility of getting more than 6% in a corridor, might equally be diversified by an offhand reference to the naked men at the National. And I anticipated something at least enough sensational to stir my blood a little. By the close of the evening I was having to tell myself that, if I had to admit I had left early, the undergraduates might think I'd found the play too strong by half, when actually it had seemed literally too long by half. The second part of the piece was merely a dull mess of glib and perverted politics. But before the interval there had at least been one aural and one visual metaphor of immense power. Mr Bryant had little to do, but, just before the interval, after he had gone clanking out in roman gear, leaving Britain to its own disorders, there was a tremendous noise of a helicopter hovering low across the width of the Olivier auditorium, and suddenly Caesar had returned in modern general's battle dress to order the gunning of some offensive celts. This aural metaphor had at one sound presented all that threat of imperialism against which Mr Brenton was making his protest. After this it was an anticlimactic waste of everyone's time to wait out the second part of the play with its turgid stuff about the British in today's Ireland. The visual metaphor, which is now the subject of Mrs Whitehouse's suit, did not have quite the effect, on the night I went to the play, suggested by prurient accounts and illustrations in the newspapers, so it may, perhaps, be of use to describe the action here. On a hot afternoon three young Celts who have been splashing in the river after a game of primitive soccer, climb back on to the bank to be suddenly confronted by three Roman soldiers. The Celts are wet and naked. The Romans are so heavily armoured that it is almost possible to think of them as machines of war. The Celts are young lads, one of them, more sensitive than his brothers, undergoing the prolonged discipline of initiation into the priesthood. The Romans are old barrack lags with no thought of the gods. The audience has learnt to recognise each young Celt individually. The Romans all look the same. They stand as a single shocking threat to the cheerful boys. The scene is so managed (more, I would think, by the skills of Mr Bogdanov than those of Mr Brenton, so Mrs Whitehouse's solicitor has shewn a nice judgment in pursuing the director), that everyone in the theatre must be aware of the fragility of our human grasp upon self-respect. There could be no useful resistance to such anonymous power. The audience was forced to watch as one Celt was crushed to death between two Roman shields. The young priest lay stunned upon the ground and a Roman, who had been in Persia and picked up some strange habits, prepared to rape him. The sense of the scene was at this

moment very much like that in Auden's *Shield of Achilles*

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same
Lay in the hands of others they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came;
What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

The effect in the theatre constituted a public demonstration, if any now be needed, of the classic claim that each element in a work of art must be understood within its total context. Though we had all been promised we should see something not quite proper and had all, therefore, been prepared to react discreetly to a single sequence in the performance, no one in the audience seemed to be aware of any such isolatable incident. No one tittered. The play was presenting here, and almost only here, a matter which deserved careful consideration by sensitive and intelligent folk. The incident was so far significant for the audience not because the actors were working naked, not because they were exhibiting an attempted rape, not because there was a threat of sodomy on stage, though at the re-telling any one of these might seem startling enough to compel attention, but because at their coming together as elements in the action of the play each of us was confronted with his own capacities to suffer and to destroy.

But then, again in classic fashion, came the moment of peripety. The horror became itself a cause for hope. The soldier was suddenly defeated. His victim lay stretched out for violation but the Roman could not manage the rape. The soldier defeated himself. He was reduced to making scared demands that his comrade would not tell tales in the hut which would ruin his reputation for persian prowess. The effect of the scene now was to encourage a quite unreasonable conviction that human beings are not always at the disposal of the strong, the violent, and the spoiler. So now we could all laugh. Mr Bogdanov had here, perhaps, betrayed Mr Brenton. The distorting guff of the play's political message was far too small to contain so large a confidence in our human future. I no more thought of imperialism than of indecency.

I hope, therefore, that Mrs Whitehouse will fail in this business and those responsible for a fine visual metaphor go free, but I'd not mind at all if she should succeed in procuring the arraignment of Mr Brenton for Low Treason.