
LETTERS

THE EDITOR:

Marc Estrin's guerrilla theatre pieces "from the American Playground" [T44] seem in many ways an extreme corruption of radical thought, an introduction of manipulative techniques into a theatre which presumably is working against manipulation of human bodies and spirits. If duping school children—in their own interests, of course—is the means necessary to Mr. Estrin's ends, we're in trouble.

*Martin Trueblood
Madison, Wisconsin*

IN REPLY:

The practice of guerrilla theatre has been severely criticized by many who feel it is unethical to trick people, to misrepresent, to engage under false premises. Certainly there is manipulation involved in the Convention or the Classroom Piece. My position is simply this: although it is dangerous ground to tread, I feel we, as would-be movers of the status quo, must come up with a workable ethics of manipulation. At this point, American sensibilities are just too deadened to respond to objective presentation of "the facts." We must become artists in awakening, and this may require manipulation.

But not all manipulation is necessarily evil. Manipulation by Madison Ave., manipulation by the press, yes. But the manipulation in the Classroom Piece? We are dealing here, I think, with a different sort of thing. What distinguishes them?

The critical measure is option, degree of freedom. The critical question: does the

"audience" emerge from the experience with more options or less? Have the degrees of freedom been increased or decreased? The guideline I have formulated for myself is: *if people emerge with more options, more freedom, go ahead and do it. If people emerge with fewer, watch out—it's fascism.*

When the students emerge from the Classroom Piece they have more options than when they went in. They can choose to behave the same way, they can become more violently conservative, or open up in the intended direction. The piece simply acts to break up a bottleneck. But when we don't get the news about the war or about the poisoning of the environment, when we are forced by psycho-sexual threat to smoke a Marlboro or drive a GTO, we have fewer options. *Here* is where the evil is; it would be a grave mistake to equate the two manipulations.

Sometimes the line between more and less freedom is very fine, and my ethical guideline would advise: tread cautiously, and rely on your sense of life vs. death. For this is another, more nebulous, but most important difference: we are oriented toward life, they, toward death. The truth in this simple statement will withstand all liberal, relativist nit-picking.

Doing guerrilla theatre is creating the new world. For the performers, the life style which the art demands—the love and trust in others, the economic nonparticipation, the constant exercise of socially creative imagination—is living the revolution. For the audience, the experiencing of situations which might be true creates the conditions whereby they may *become* true. They are living social change. Sometimes the truth revealed is merely the flowering of latent evil in the situation. But often, only the flowering of evil can lead to its extirpation.

*Marc Estrin
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