

# eroticism

## THREE

••• There is a tension that goes all the way through a piece of music and never lets up. A long silver cord that one pulls on. Sometimes there's a little kink in the cord, but it never sags. There's always a force irresistibly pulling it from the first note to the last. You've got to get the audience from the first note.

(Alfred Brendel)

The role of attraction and eroticism in the theatre is rarely discussed and yet both are vital ingredients in the creative act and in the dynamics between audiences and the actors. In order to investigate the issues of attraction and eroticism, this chapter follows the archetypal pattern of a passionate relationship.

- . 1 Something or someone stops you in your tracks.
- . 2 You feel 'drawn' to it.
- 15 . 3 You sense its energy and power.
- . 4 It disorientates you.
- . 5 You make first contact; it responds.
- . 6 You experience extended intercourse
- . 7 You are changed irrevocably.

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### **1 Something or someone stops you in your tracks**

Not long ago while visiting the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, I encountered a gigantic painting by Anselm Kiefer entitled *Osiris and Isis*. My plans to visit the entire museum that day were sabotaged. I could not get past this one intense, attractive, vibrant, disturbing, undimissable canvas. I was confronted with the magnitude of its ideas, shapes, violence, movement and the endless vistas that opened up while encountering this work. Stopped in my tracks, I could not walk past it and go on to other paintings. I had to meet it, deal with it. It challenged me and it changed me.

30 What stops us in our tracks? I am rarely stopped by some-thing or someone I can instantly know. In fact, I have always been attracted to the challenge of getting to know what I cannot instantly categorize or dismiss, whether an actor's

presence, a painting, a piece of music, or a personal relationship. It is the journey towards the object of attraction that interests me. We stand in relation to one another. We long for the relationships that will change our vistas. Attraction is an invitation to an evanescent journey, to a new way of experiencing life or perceiving reality.

5 An authentic work of art embodies intense energy. It demands response. You can either avoid it, shut it out, or meet it and tussle. It contains attractive and complicated energy fields and a logic all its own. It does not create desire or movement in the receiver, rather it engenders what James Joyce labelled  
10 ‘aesthetic arrest’. You are stopped in your tracks. You cannot easily walk by it and go on with your life. You find yourself in *relation* to something that you cannot readily dismiss.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce differentiates *static* and *kinetic* art. He values static art and disparages kinetic art. I find his conception of  
15 static and kinetic challenging and helpful in thinking about what we put on the stage. Kinetic art moves you. Static art stops you. Pornography, for example, is kinetic—it can arouse you sexually. Advertising is kinetic art—it can induce you to buy. Political art is kinetic—it can move you to political action. Static art, on the other hand, stops you. It causes arrest. Much like the painting by Anselm  
20 Kiefer, it won’t let you easily walk by it. Static art offers a self-contained universe unified only in its complex, contradictory fields. It does not remind you of anything else. It does not create desire in you and it does not move you in an easy manner. You are stopped in your tracks by its unique power. When confronted with Cézanne’s great paintings of apples, for example, you do not  
25 desire to eat the apples. You are, rather, confronted by the appleness of the apples! The apples stop you in your tracks.

With *Osiris and Isis*, I was stopped by the magnitude of this particular painting’s inner drama. It invited me to engage with it. I was called to the adventure of a relationship.

30 In the first stage of a relationship, something or someone stops us in our tracks. Something is asked of us; a response is requested. The more valuable the potential relationship, the less able we are to dismiss the invitation.

The great experiences I have enjoyed in the theatre have always asked a lot of me. Sometimes I fear that I’m being asked more than I feel ready to give. But

the 'call to adventure' is unmistakable. I am invited on a journey. I am called upon to respond with the fullness of my being.

In the theatre, the way a show begins has everything to do with the quality of the journey. Do the first moments stop me in my tracks? And how do they do that?

5 As an audience, I can usually feel the promise of a remarkable theatre experience in the very first instants. How does it begin? What expectations are engendered initially, and then are those expectations fulfilled or broken? The best beginnings feel both surprising and inevitable. Perhaps it starts too abruptly, or it seems too quiet or loud or too fast or slow, but the way a production begins  
10 should already question the familiar range and my habitual perceptions. If I am lucky, I am stopped in my tracks.

A good actor stops me in my tracks too. The quality of their stillness or movement or speaking is hard to dismiss. Although I am not aware of what it is that they are doing to generate this magnetic presence, I know that I cannot look  
15 away. I cannot walk on.

What is the actor doing to stop me in my tracks? She or he sets up a complex inner landscape and attempts to remain present within it. The actor simultaneously actualizes the many languages of the stage, including time, space, text, action, character and story. The accomplishment is an extraordinary  
20 feat of juggling many things at once. The act of speaking becomes dramatic because of the change that occurs inside the person who is present, in the moment, engaged in speech. And I, too, am present there, in relationship to this person juggling.

tension	napětí, pnutí
to let up	polevit, ustat
cord	motouz, šňůra
kink	smyčka, vlnka
to sag	prohýbat se, prověsit se
vital	životně důležitý
pattern	vzor
irrevocably	neodvolatelně, nezměnitelně
vibrant	pulzující životem, jasný
undismissable	nezapomenutelný, nezahrnutelný
canvas	plátno
magnitude	velikost, rozsah
vistas	pohledy
evanescent	mizící, prchavý

to perceive	vnímat
authentic	autentický
to embody	ztělesňovat
to shut sth or sb out	nepřipouštět si
to tussle	zápasit, rvát se
to contain	obsahovat
to disparage	znevažovat
conception	představa, pojetí
to arouse	podnítit, vzbuzovat
to induce	vyvolat, způsobit
contradictory	rozporuplný
inner	vnitřní
to dismiss	zavrhnout
instant	okamžik, moment
to engender	vyvolat, navodit
familiar range	známe končiny
habitual	obvyklý
stillness	nehybnost

## 2 You feel 'drawn' to it

We are each incomplete. We are drawn towards the other in search of completeness. We sense the potential closing of a circle. And this sensation, this potential, lies at the very heart of what draws us to the theatre.

5 *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines attraction as (1) 'the action of a body in drawing another towards itself by some physical force such as gravity, magnetism'. (2) 'The action of causing people or animals to come nearer by influencing their conscious actions, providing favourable conditions'. (3) 'The  
10 action or capacity of eliciting interest, affection, sympathy'. (4) 'Drawing forth a response'. Also, 'A force acting mutually between particles of matter, tending to draw them together, and resisting their separation'.

I once met a man aboard a ship on the Mediterranean. We were both leaning against the railing watching the water pile up below us. He told me about his  
15 life's work and his great interest in the essential human attraction to dramatic intersections of the natural elements. He suggested that human beings are attracted, physically and emotionally, towards places where the elements meet: where earth meets water, and water meets air, and air meets fire, etc.

I have experienced the sensation of being drawn towards the edge of a cliff to experience the sea battering up below, or towards a clearing in the woods where  
20 I might glimpse a mountain against the sky. It is a deeply intrinsic physical attraction that moves me towards the places where the elements meet.

In art and in theatre I am also drawn to the places where the elements meet. I crave an arena that embraces the exquisite tension of opposing and attracting forces. An encounter with a painting like *Osiris and Isis*, or being in the  
25 proximity of an exciting actor engaged in the act of juggling time and space simultaneously, ignites in me an attraction that is undeniable. I am drawn towards them, not in their familiarity, but in their unfamiliarity.

A theatre critic once suggested that the American fear of art is actually a  
30 puritanical fear of the sexual encounter. But erotic tension between the stage and the beholder is part of what makes the theatre experience so attractive. The theatre is a place where it is possible to meet one another in an energetic space unmediated by technology. The sensory stimulation allowed in theatre, authorized by its very form, allows the corporeal imagination to exercise itself.

Eroticism is excitation, sensory excitation, caused by human sensual stimuli. Erotic tension between actors and audience is part of the recipe for effective drama. The attraction of the theatre is the promise of a proximity with actors in a place where the corporeal imagination might experience extended intercourse.

- 5 Erotic tension between actors happens more than anyone can imagine. In the exquisite pressure of time and space, actors are caught up in a very human drama—the drama of co-presence. In rehearsal and in front of the public, this copresence, this space between actors, must necessarily be charged.

10 Erotic tension between a director and an actor can be an indispensable contribution to a good rehearsal process. As a director, I do not encourage physical consummation of this erotic tension, but I do believe that the tension is an important ingredient in the recipe for engaging theatre. En route to rehearsal I want the sensation of heading towards an exciting, romantic, turbulent rendezvous. A rehearsal should feel like a date. Both as a director and as an  
15 audience member, I want to find the actors attractive, uncategorizable and undismissable. The best productions I have directed issue from a rehearsal process charged with erotic interest.

### 3 You sense its energy and power

••• The art of performance depends on the relationship between the musician and the audience. In the concert hall, each motionless listener is part of the performance. The concentration of the player charges the electric tension in the auditorium and returns to him magnified... The audience grows together and becomes a group. There's the impression of a journey undertaken together and a goal achieved.

(Alfred Brendel)

A great actor, like a great striptease artist, withholds more than she or he shows. Artists, as they mature, come closer to the great wisdom found in the potent combination of physical containment and emotional expansion. Restraint is key. Take the moment and all of its complexities; concentrate it, let it cook, and then contain it. This concentration and restraint generates energy in the actor and interest in the audience. Zeami, the Japanese originator of Noh drama, suggested that the actor should always withhold a certain percentage of her or his passion.

••• When you feel ten in your heart, express seven...

An actor's special gift is the ability to resist, to hold back, to tame, to keep energy in, to concentrate. With this compression, the actor plays with the spectators' kinesthetic sensibilities and prevents them from predicting what is about to happen. In every moment, the aim is to conceal the predetermined structure and the outcome from the spectator.

This ability to stimulate the audience to crave, to experience desire rather than sating it, is part of the actor's art. I always feel that the best actors possess a secret that they enjoy keeping from me. The spectator should be drawn to the stage like a

detective hot on the trail of a crime. The actor chooses when to hide and when to reveal.

As I sit in an audience during a play, I am always acutely, sometimes painfully, aware of the creative tension or the lack of tension between actors and audience. The theatre is what happens between spectator and actor. The dynamics between an actor and the audience constitutes a creative relationship that is at once intimate and distanced and which is very different from daily life. The

relationship is circular. The actor is completely dependent upon the creative potential of each audience member and must be able to adjust and respond to whatever ensues. The actor initiates and the audience completes the circle with their imagination, memory and creative sensibilities. Without a receiver, there is no experience.

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When I go to the theatre, I want to sense the energy and power of the event. And I want to be considered part of the act. I want to be in a relationship. And I want something to happen.



#### 4 It disorientates you

Art, like life, is understood through experience, not explanations. As theatre artists, we cannot create an experience for an audience; rather, our job is to set up the circumstances in which an experience might occur. Artists are always  
5 dependent upon the person at the receiving end of their work. The South African playwright Athol Fugard said that he writes with hope because of the person at the other end of his writing. We issue an invitation. We hope that we have left enough clues so that the audience will pick up the trail where we leave off.

10 Every great journey begins with disorientation. Children naturally spin one another blindfolded before an adventure. Alice falls down a rabbit-hole and changes size or travels through a looking-glass to enter her wonderland. We all, audience and artists alike, have to allow for a little personal disorientation to pave the way for experience.

15 I am afraid of falling. I spent years studying the Japanese martial art Aikido because of the amount of time one must spend upside down in the training. I try to welcome the disorientation as a necessary practice for my work in rehearsal. I know that I must learn to welcome disorientation and imbalance. I know that the attempt to find balance from an imbalanced state is always productive and interesting and yields rich results. I try to welcome the disorientation in order to  
20 allow for real love.

Falling in love is disorientating because the boundaries between new lovers are not fixed. In order to fall in love, we have to let go of our daily habits. In order to be touched, we have to be willing not to know what the touch is going to feel like. A great theatre event is also disorientating because the boundaries between  
25 who is giving and who is receiving are not distinct. An exciting artist plays with our expectations and with our memory. This interchange allows for the living interactive art experience.

••• There is no limit to the horizon, and no ‘method’, no experiment, even of the wildest —is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence.

30 ‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss.

(Virginia Woolf)

I want to use the theatre to question the limits and boundaries of human experience. In every play I direct I want to question my formal, aesthetic, structural and narrative assumptions. I want to allow for necessary personal disorientation in order to make contact with the material and the people  
5 involved. And I want to include disorientation as a thread in the fabric of every production.

## 5 You make first contact; it responds

The virtuoso pianist Alfred Brendel, in an interview for the *New Yorker*, described the role of the audience in his concerts.

5 ●● The public sometimes thinks an artist is a television set—something comes out, nothing goes back. They don't realize that if they can hear me, then I can hear them—their coughs, the electronic beeps from their wristwatches, the squeaking of their shoes.

10 A performance has fluid rhythm that changes with each audience it touches. An actor can feel an audience as palpably as the audience can feel the actors. The late Ron Vawter, an actor with the

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15 Wooster Group, told me that he could feel the intelligence of an audience and he found it distressing that European audiences are far more intelligent than American audiences.

20 Quantum physics teaches us that the act of observation alters the thing observed. To observe is to disturb. 'To observe' is not a passive verb. As a director I have learned that the quality of my observation and attention can determine the outcome of a process. Under the right circumstances the audience's observation and attention can significantly affect the quality of an actor's performance. Actors can respond to an audience's powers of observation. It is the contact/response cycle at the heart of live performance that makes being there so extraordinary.

25 ●● One doesn't stop learning. I've learned how to control certain silences. They depend not just on what you play, but on how you look. After the last chord of Opus 111, I don't move, I don't take my hands away from the keyboard, because directly I stir they applaud. Each time I play the Beethoven cycle, the silence gets longer, because I know how to relate to it, I know how to sit still.

(Alfred Brendel)

30 Several years ago I returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts to attend the final performance of my production of Kaufman and Hart's *Once in a Lifetime* at the

American Repertory Theater. I asked Christine Estabrook, the actress playing the comedic role of the gossip columnist, how the performances had been received by the audiences.

5 ‘Oh,’ she answered, ‘there have been good audiences and bad audiences.’ ‘What do you mean?’ I asked. ‘Well, some of our audiences have had bad timing. Some laugh too long and some laugh just the right amount of time.’

10 After opening night, once the director, the playwright and the designers have gone away, the actor is left with a very particular daily dilemma: the quality of the relationship between the stage and the seats. The actor stands backstage and listens to the audience before making an entrance. The reception is palpable. Listening to the listening, the actor makes adjustments in the speed of an entrance, the intensity of the first line spoken or the length of a pause. An actor learns when to hold back and when to open up based on the agility of the audience.

15 Occasionally, in preparation for a concert, Alfred Brendel invited his neighbour and friend A. Alvarez to his home in London to listen to him play the piano. The first time Alvarez accepted the invitation, he worried that Brendel expected criticism or feedback, but soon he understood the invitation. Alvarez would arrive in Brendel’s home to find a chair sitting next to the piano. ‘What I  
20 assume,’ writes Alvarez, ‘is that he wants a sympathetic and attentive presence in the room, simply to complete the artistic circle.’

The audience is engaged in a collaboration of silence which makes possible the extended intercourse of performance.

## 6 You experience extended intercourse

Attention is a tension. Attention is a tension between an object and the observer or a tension between people. It is a listening. Attention is a tension over time.

5 As a director, my biggest contribution to a production, and the only real gift I can offer to an actor, is my attention. What counts most is the quality of my attention. From what part of myself am I attending? Am I attending with desire for success, or am I attending with interest in the present moment? Am I hopeful for the best in an actor or do I want to prove my superiority? A good actor can instantly discern the quality of my attention, my interest. There is a sensitive  
10 life-line between us. If this line is compromised, the actor feels it. If it is cheapened by my own ego or desire or lack of patience, the line between us is degraded.

A South African actress described a bad rehearsal with a director whose quality of attention was compromised. She looked up from the stage during a difficult  
15 scene to find the director riding an exercise bicycle *and* eating popcorn while he watched her work.

The image of this man on his exercise bike is disturbing to me because a director's primary task is the opposite of narcissism. A director's job is to be connected to the stage, physically, imaginatively and emotionally. The director  
20 tries to be the best possible audience. The late William Ball, the founding Artistic Director of ACT/San Francisco, wrote in his book *A Sense of Direction*

that he considers an audience heroic because they choose to spend two hours not thinking about themselves. A director should attend to an actor as the most discriminate and attentive audience member.

25 The quality attention one offers in rehearsal is the key to a fertile process. The rehearsal is a microcosm of the extended intercourse of attention offered by an audience. It is a place of potential rapture. In a rehearsal room, like making love, the outside world is excluded. It is a process of arousal, heightened sensation, alive nerve endings and sudden pinnacles. It is an extreme event separate from  
30 our daily lives and it is a place to meet one another.

A production is also only that possibility. It is a time set aside from daily life in which something might occur. We issue invitations to a party where there is the potential for extended intercourse.

## 7 You are changed irrevocably

A passionate relationship transpires when the quality of attention to it reaches a boiling point. The eroticism is created by the tension of attention and the attention is generated by interest. And interest is not something that can be  
5 faked. Not really.

All the journeys that have transpired in my life have been animated by interest. Something or someone has stopped me in my tracks. Interest, that thing that cannot really be faked, is an invitation to adventure. It has always been disorientating to do, but I have had to act on these

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interests. Somehow I know that in order to keep on working as an artist, I have to keep on changing. And this means that when interest is piqued, I must follow or die. And I know that I will have to hang on tight for the ride. These rides have  
15 changed me irrevocably.

The primary tool in a creative process is interest. To be true to one's interest, to pursue it successfully, one's body is the best barometer. The heart races. The pulse soars. Interest can be your guide. It always points you in the right direction. It defines the quality, energy and content of your work. You cannot  
20 feign or fake interest or choose to be interested in something because it is prescribed. It is never prescribed. It is discovered. When you sense this quickening you must act immediately. You must follow that interest and hold on tight.

At the moments when interest is piqued, when you find yourself stopped in your  
25 tracks, you will find yourself instantaneously at a crossroad. At this crossroad the definitions and assumptions that shaped and guided you to the present moment disintegrate; all that remains is a feeling of disorientation, an unbridled excitement, a sensation of being drawn out, an *interest*.

If the interest is genuine and large enough and if it is pursued with tenacity and  
30 generosity, the boomerang effect is resounding. Interest returns volley to affect your life and inevitably alter it. You must be available and attentive to the doors that open unexpectedly. You cannot wait. The doors close fast. It will change

your life. It will give you adventures you never expected. You must be true to it and it will be true to you.

The interest lives in between us and the object of our interest. In this moment we live in-between. We travel outward to make contact with the other. The word  
5 interest is derived from the Latin *interesse* which is the combination of *inter* (between) and *esse* (to be): to be between. The state of interest is a liminal experience—the sensation of a threshold. Interest is personal and temporal. It changes, it vacillates and should be attended to in every moment because it is a guide.

10 Interest is my guide in choosing a play to direct and it is my guide through rehearsal. I try to be aware, at any particular moment, of what I am really interested in. It is a light sensitivity and yet is my connection to the process. Sometimes what I am interested in has not been planned and yet, despite the possible disruption, I must follow it.

15 The interest in someone or something always engenders response and the ensuing intercourse of interaction can change us for ever. Great plays endure through time because they address critical human issues that are still vital to a culture. When we reach out to a play, when we make contact, we create a relationship with those issues. Interest is our guide. Interest arouses attention.

20 Attention arouses the object of our attention. We interact with interest and attention to these themes and they respond. And in this interaction, something happens that changes us. Our task is to find forms in which the interaction might inhabit the present moment. Our hope is that it will be perceivable to others who will be stopped in their tracks, sensing its energy and power.