

FOREWORD:
CONTROVERSY
& LESSONS
FROM THE STAGE



CASE STUDIES

by Morris Burns

In the teaching of Introduction to Theatre and Theatre History, plays are studied for their theatrical values: How well is the play constructed? Are the characters and their actions believable? How challenging are the roles to be played? The list of questions is endless. On a human level, the examinations of these plays frequently become case studies in which the causes of human behavior are considered and analyzed. Discussions can explore how certain acts might have been avoided and how the plays reflect or don't reflect the times in which they are set.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is an example of a script that prompts such a discussion. What causes Willy Loman's demise, his suicide at the end of the play? I have led many discussions of the play in my more than forty years as a university professor. A very memorable example of such a discussion took place in the early nineties when an eighteen-year-old female student admonished Linda Loman, Willy's wife, for not confronting him when she discovers his plan for taking his life. She asserted that Linda's inaction gave Willy permission to pursue his plan. At this point a woman in her early seventies who lived in the period of the play's setting, the 1940s, objected to the younger student's admonition. "You don't understand," she said. "In the time period of the play, a wife did not confront her husband about anything. He was a formidable presence who was above reproach." I could tell that the younger student did not want to believe this. The honesty of the senior's comments, however, made an indelible impression on all of us.

Another class discussion which led to insights on a vital issue took place after an Introduction to Theatre class was assigned to see a production of a play adapted from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As one might expect, the contents of this anti-slavery work set in mid-nineteenth century America stimulated a good amount of a discussion of racism in the America of 1993, the year of our class' meeting. A number of solutions to reduce racism were brought up—education, integrating neighborhoods, and making stronger efforts to integrate elementary schools. The discussion became fairly heated as pros and cons were exchanged.

Finally a nontraditional male who had fought in the Gulf War spoke up. He told us that the company he had fought with was racially mixed, with African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Caucasians. In boot camp they were always “on each other.” Racial slurs were constantly being exchanged. However once they hit the battlefield in Kuwait and the bullets started flying, all that “bullshit” stopped. They realized, he said, that they were dependent on the people next to them, no matter what their ethnicity, for their safety. The violence aimed at them had created harmony among them. He went on to assert that when the company withdrew from combat, the civility that existed between them in battle continued to define their relationships.

The silence that enveloped the class as this veteran shared his military experiences with racism was deafening. His words had sunk deeper than any lecture on the need for fairness in treating one another could have. It emphasized for me the importance of seizing the moment in class discussion and realizing that conflict in class discussions can lead to compelling insights.

Perhaps the most memorable experience I have had in which conflict in a learning environment occurred was when I directed a production of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a seventeenth century play dealing with greed and its destructive nature. The company consisted of some twenty-five performers and a running crew of seven, including a sizeable group of multi-racial students, although Caucasians far outnumbered everyone else. After our second performance, the female Mexican American member of our troupe came up to me: “Dr. Burns, I can no longer listen to the racist jokes and comments I have been hearing in the green room.” (The green room is an area where performers can sit and relax while waiting to go on stage.) I listened to her in a state of shock as she spoke. I had

never experienced anything like this before. I told her that I would deal with this situation before our next performance, which would take place the next evening. I then went to the male Mexican American member of the cast and asked him, if by chance, he had been in the green room that evening when a racist joke had been told. He had. His response to it was quite disheartening: "I have heard so many jokes like that before that it just rolled off my back."

The next evening I gathered the company together before the performance. As I addressed them, I could feel my anger rise: "Last night after the performance, Maria came up to me and told me she would no longer accept racist comments or the telling of racist jokes. I join her in saying that I too will no longer accept this kind of behavior from anyone in this company. Anyone who engages in this type of behavior will immediately be dismissed." You could hear a pin drop.

I am usually a very mild mannered person and am sure my display of anger was shocking. The silence induced by my comments was shattered when one of the Caucasian actors rose and in a contrite voice said: "I apologize. Naively, I did not think my joke was offensive. Please forgive my insensitivity." Not a word was spoken at this point, but the group's faces, including those of the offended parties, communicated an acceptance of the apology. There were no more reported incidents during the remaining half dozen performances.

I often think of the production of a play as an opportunity to mirror the "art of living" in the real world. The collaboration required to stage a play reflects the collaboration needed on the job, as well as successfully relating to one another in our day-to-day activities. Producing a play is a viable "rehearsal" for participation in life beyond the theatre. As this experience documented, sensitivity to the feelings of others is a prime requisite for getting along in life. The resolution of conflict in the confines of the theatre hopefully led to the avoidance of it in the outside world.

Conflict was an essential ingredient in the events I have described. Hopefully these examples can encourage us to embrace conflict and its resolution in the classroom as a catalyst for learning, and remind us that as teachers we can be instrumental in helping our students gain deeper insights into the human condition.

MORRIS BURNS is Emeritus Professor of Theatre at Colorado State University. For those seeking to use theatre as a teaching device, he recommends Bertolt Brecht's *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* and *A Short Organum for the Theatre*. He also recommends Augusto Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* and *The Theatre of the Oppressed*.