

“Prospero’s Isle “

by Christopher Fettes - co-founder of the Drama Centre London

This was the foreword from the prospectus of the original Drama Centre London, founded in 1963.

*Actor A: **Anyone in front to-night?***

*Actor B: **Not a soul.***

... Merely 1,200 members of the paying public. What do they require of you?

... Escape? If so, from what? A temporary relief from the burden of boredom, frustration, bad conscience, fatigue? From the intolerable strain of conforming to the requirements of a world ruled by daft and often unexamined conventions, concerned only with work and making money? A meaning? A purpose? A survival kit for the city’s jungle? A walk on the wild side? The regeneration of the blighted spirit? The need for roots? A sense of identity? The memory - if not the promise - of a just society? Night-land? Dreamtime?

Before you undertake a training for the theatre, you would do well to ponder this daunting shopping list. For so Promethean an undertaking, do you have what it takes? Make no mistake: if to your enchanted eye the actor appears as a fire-bearer, he is by the very same token, the eagle’s prey. The theatre is not where we eat, but where we are eaten.

Closer to home: an alarming proportion of those who seek entry to a drama school do so without ever taking the time to ask themselves what they ask of their training, what their present grasp of the subject clearly lacks, what a school can or should offer, what distinguishes one from the next. Such answers as we are afforded seem largely grounded on unexamined assumptions. Yet good, bad or indifferent, a drama school will leave its mark on a student for a lifetime. The more so in our age when the eclipse of the repertory system denies the actor the opportunity of a proper apprenticeship. Sir Henry Irving believed that the education of an actor took seven to nine years. Now it is crammed into three. This prospectus is therefore an attempt to give you some idea as to the kind of training the Drama Centre provides. It needs to be supplemented. Try to meet actors and actresses who have trained here. Talk to the current students who will usually buy you a cup of coffee in the canteen and whose representatives sit on the entrance committee and who are responsible for the administration of discipline. Don’t listen to rubbish souped up by those who never came here or failed to get in. Be warned: It’s tough. That’s because the standards are high. If you are better suited to the education corps, don’t join the Royal Marines. Like sport, it’s elitist. You don’t have to go for gold, but it’s part of a democratic society that the greatest rewards are open to anyone who has the ambition to pursue them. Absurdly enough, we don’t believe in the gentrification of the British Stage.

What is an actor? There are those who feel themselves privileged, set apart from ordinary folk by the possession of some exceptional power. This aberration is known to psychoanalysis as ‘the castration complex’ and is nothing to boast about. We like to think of it as a craft, concerned not so much with advertising that you experience emotions as with making things. Sometimes it is even permissible to think of it as an art form, since then what we make are vehicles of meaning or ideas. Far from constituting an escape, we prefer to see art as a way of conveying information about the real world and the hazards and vicissitudes that confront ordinary people in their dealings with that world. That is why it is important not to start your training too soon. Art school or the life of a rock star offer no comparison. You need to have seen and pondered carefully what lies beyond the confines of school and home, to have achieved the adulthood necessary to the depth and complexity of professional

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relationships. Don't go to a school like the Drama Centre if you don't already know quite a bit about the world and yourself. And don't go there if you don't think it is your duty to make people ask themselves difficult questions and face up to daunting and sometimes pessimistic answers.

The aim of the Drama Centre, very broadly, is to provide the student actor with a systematic approach to the problems of acting, leading to an eventual control over their personal resources, many of whom are subconscious in their origin and, for that reason, not susceptible to conscious control; to equip them, not with the license to 'do their own thing', but with the freedom that derives from a proper self respect and the eventual mastery of their imaginative resources. It tries to develop their own individuality, often buried beneath the overlay of having to 'conform' whilst preparing them for the disciplines of what is essentially a collective mode of existence. It introduces them to 'the classic tradition', for the maintenance of which they may one day be responsible, and to some notion of the modern stage. Its final goal is very simple: to teach the actor how to work by himself. It sounds very dull. A school can do no more. It should attempt no less.

But if such freedom sounds alluring - and why not? - you will not have enjoyed too much of it hitherto - again be warned. Remember the price that Faustus paid for the actor's art of calling up the dead. All this truck with masks and faces can prove dangerous. Up to a point acting is about putting things on, voices, faces, pudenda trailing in the dust. But it also consists in taking things off, stripping away the artifice, the pretence until you stand revealed, not in the glory of the naked flesh, but in the piteous inadequacy of the spirit, weak, horribly vulnerable, sometimes unspeakably vile. The theatre is an arena in which we go naked to confront our adversary. And the adversary is a fraternal lookalike. The task of making and unmaking your identity may initially seem alluring. 'Let's pretend'. But the energies flag, powers fail, the burden of criticism is lethal. *Morituri te salutant*. This is why discipline plays so vitally an important role, why there is such a premium on what Stanislavski describes as the soldierly virtues of courage, loyalty, patience and endurance - before all else - respect for the work, but also respect for yourself and the restrictions that are laid upon you as a being of complex and delicate sensibilities; respect too for all those others - not merely actors and actresses - engaged in the task of creation - who are no less vulnerable than we and many times more gifted.

The soul is a vast domain and, for those who would trespass across its boundaries, a training resembles not so much an education as an initiation with the resonance of terror which the term conveys. This is brought home all the more by the fact that the majority of those who undertake the pilgrimage to the far country, the desert isle, the zone, in some cases the heart of darkness, are between the ages of nineteen and twenty one and for them the sojourn will simultaneously constitute a termination of the essentially profane condition of childhood and the onset - not only of physical and intellectual, but, above all - of some approximation of emotional maturity, an awakening to the knowledge of transcendent realities, of a role to be played in the sacred history of the race. It happens. From time to time. Not success but ripeness is all. So, if all else fails and the heavens fall - as is their nature to do so - and all the warnings you ever received as to the precarious nature of life in so overcrowded and unnecessary a profession should never be allowed to pass unheeded - there's a much bigger future in just having a family - something altogether without any value, may, in a few instances, still be snatched from the smouldering ashes to which you, like others in the long tradition, have been reduced.

Christopher Fettes.