

Women Beware Women

Censorship threatens freedom

Ian Tully-Barr

The production of *Women Beware Women* at Theatre Glendon last week, March 19-23, has generated a considerable amount of controversy. I feel strongly that it is important that the Glendon community be cognizant of the nature of this controversy so I would like to sketch it out and then comment upon it.

Howard Barker is one of the most prominent of England's radical political artists. He has a specific aesthetic of theatre that is clearly delineated in his *Arguments for a Theatre*. He has termed this aesthetic the Theatre of Catastrophe because it is centred on the concept that the horrors that one encounters in this world can serve to ennoble by forcing one to face the elemental truths of one's participation in the human drama. That is, on the concept

that tragedy of grotesque proportions will enable one to experience and develop one's essential humanity. That catastrophic events somehow free one from the illusions one clings to and bring truth.

Women Beware Women is an exploration of this theme. The catastrophic event that propels the themes in this play is the rape of a young woman who is at the apex of the political hierarchy of an absolutist state. The rape is portrayed as a violent political act perpetrated by a revolutionary.

The controversy referred to centres around outrage by members of the community that this work of art is being staged by Theatre Glendon. There seems to be a desire to suppress freedom of expression. There has been anti-Theatre Glendon graffiti in the washrooms and there were

rumours of a protest of the Friday night gala.

As far as I can tell the protest draws its impetus from nothing more than the very fact that there is a rape portrayed on stage. I fail to see how it could be anything else. The meaning of a theatre piece is created in a collective encounter between text, players and the individual audience member. To employ an action as a metaphoric device to generate a series of meanings in no way constitutes a moral comment on that action nor does that action in and of itself demand that a specific meaning be complex contextual background that of necessity includes both the performance per se and the worldview of the individual audience member. In this case the background provided by both the text and the performance is ambiguous in the extreme. Deliberately so.

It is Barker's intention to

lead people into a confrontation with their own feelings. To this end he deals with emotionally-laden topics. He attempts to manipulate the audience's reactions through theatrical techniques that create either empathy or alienation. An aware audience member goes through a process in which they monitor these reactions and reflect on their meaning vis à vis the stage action. This is what good theatre is. It is why it is socially valuable.

To mind this juvenile protest clearly illustrates the dangers of tyranny that so richly inform Barker's text. It is nothing less than intellectual terrorism. To suggest that an artist's expression be limited to safe topics or politically correct stances is both outrageous and a threat to the limited freedoms we enjoy by virtue of the toil, tears, sweat and blood of our ancestors. I find it quite insulting

that *anyone* would have the temerity to suggest that I need protection from ideas.

In conclusion, let me just share with the protestors some of the meanings that I drew from my encounter with this text. Sexual violence and political violence are part of the same continuum and are equally destructive. Any fixed ideology is decaying and spreading its poison through the body politic. Our only hope lies in individual freedoms. We must shed our illusions and seize our freedoms. We must resist tyranny in all its forms. There are more but I urge you to find a copy of the text (try Theatrebooks) and generate your own. Finally, two words for those with a bee in their bonnet over this show. Grow Up!

Women Beware Women

Freedom and responsibility

Sharon Lowry

Don Kugler, director of the Glendon play *Women Beware Women* and Phillip Rushton, the Western professor infamous for his theories on races, have something in common. They have both had their teaching defended on the basis of "Academic Freedom". Yes, *Academic Freedom*, the most high god of the ivory tower. Before everyone ceremoniously prostrates themselves in mention of this hallowed phrase, I'd like to make a few (perhaps "blasphemous") remarks.

Premièrement, on parle de la liberté académique de qui? Après avoir entendu l'expression "liberté académique" au moins des milliers de fois, je me suis aperçu que l'on parlait de la liberté académique des professeurs. On ne pense pas à la liberté académique des étudiant-e-s, surtout pas des étudiants(es) au premier niveau. Si on parle de liberté académique, en ce qui concerne le contenu raciste ou sexiste, par exemple, on parle de la liberté des professeurs de

l'enseigner, non pas de la liberté des étudiants(es) de décider si elles ou ils veulent l'apprendre.

Dans le cas de Kugler, les étudiants(es) se sont inscrits(es) dans un cours d'art dramatique, sans aucune idée de la pièce qu'ils allaient devoir présenter. Elles, ils ne savaient pas avant l'hiver que la pièce, choisie par Kugler, serait *Women Beware Women*. Elles, ils ne savaient pas que la pièce présenterait le viol comme étant une libération pour la victime. Lorsqu'elles, ils ont commencé à apprendre la pièce, elles, ils avaient déjà investi beaucoup de temps, d'argent et d'énergie dans le cours, et c'était trop tard pour l'abandonner. Le directeur a contrôlé non seulement le choix de la pièce, mais il a aussi beaucoup d'influence sur la scène, le "blocking", les costumes, la musique, et l'interprétation.

Pareillement, dans le cas de Rushton, les étudiants(es) qui se sont inscrits(es) ne savaient pas que Rushton allait qui enseigner cette section du cours; le nom d'un autre professeur était inscrit dans le plan de

cours. Pour quelques étudiants(es), la classe était obligatoire pour finir leur baccalauréat en psychologie et il n'y avait pas d'autres sections qui entraient dans ses horaires. Pour ne pas risquer l'obtention de leur diplôme et leur futur, les étudiants(es) sont obligés(es) d'écouter ses discours et d'écrire des essais et répondre aux examens que Rushton évalue. Les étudiants(es) savent que pour avoir une bonne note souvent, il faut adopter les opinions du professeur.

It's important to keep in mind whose academic freedom we're talking about when we're talking about academic freedom. It's also important to keep in mind just what we mean by academic freedom in the first place. Does academic freedom mean that a professor can teach that one plus one equals three? Worse, does academic freedom mean that professors can teach dangerous psychosocial myths?

We hear the phrase "academic freedom" often enough. But when is the last time you've heard the phrase "academic

responsibility"? Freedom without responsibility is licence to kill, physically and psychologically. Professors have a responsibility to their students, to their science, and to society at large.

The Canadian Charter of Human rights makes it clear that everyone has a right to equal opportunity...regardless of sex, race, age, etc. Students are included in this charter. It's

time to make the Charter a fact. Racist, sexist, agist, and other "-ist" teaching encourages discrimination and infringes on people's rights. If you are interested in discussing these issues, come out to a meeting with Academic Coalition for Equality at 4:30 pm March 26 in the Salon Garigue. Academic freedom - YES! Academic Racism and Sexism - NO! It's time to act.

■ Remerciements

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There are still others that can't be mentioned for lack of space. I have not forgotten you.

I can only wish that everyone else will have as great an experience as I had. This can only happen if everyone tries to give to others, to share with them who they are and what they want to do, and finally to act upon those goals in order to make a difference no matter how small.

To all of you that have done

this in the past, thank-you for taking part in shaping what I was into what I am today. To all the others who will do this in the future, I thank you in advance for those who will gain from your strength, your enthusiasm and your care.



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