

CONVEYING THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION: A PERFORMANCE OF HAROLD PINTER'S *MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE*

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Abstract: This paper looks at a process I undertook to perform a production of Harold Pinter's short play, *Mountain Language* (Pinter, Harold 1930-2008), for Linguapax Asia 2008. The paper covers my reaction to the script, research into the story behind the origins of the play, contributions to the thought-process behind the presentation of the play, and finally, the methods behind the presentation, covering themes, acting, sets, costumes, lighting, and music.

Key Words: dialogue, discrimination, power, love, "benshi", communication

In June of 2008, I was approached by Linguapax Asia to direct an adaptation of Harold Pinter's short play *Mountain Language*, as part of the Linguapax Asia 2008 symposium on Language & Propaganda. As a university student, like many liberal-minded young adults, I admired Pinter, for his surrealism, for his unpredictability, for his playfully mischievous dialogue, but above all, for his unconcealed anger against government, against authority, and against any and all sort of prejudice that has ever existed on our planet – racial, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, you name it.

However, 7 years later, I found his style to be needlessly aggressive and downbeat, and, worst of all, juvenile. I found him to be a writer who, while undeniably gifted, never had the open mind to approach the positive aspects of humanity – love, compassion, and above all, tenderness, and his anger seemed to stem more from a desire to shock, rather than from a desire to educate an audience through the art of shock. In short, the mindset behind his plays seemed to be that of a precocious high-school student. Still, I was on board the project right from the get-go. The concept of putting on a short play for a symposium was intriguing to say the least, and ultimately, a short play entails a short time commitment.

The entire play takes place at a prison in an indeterminate time and location, but what we do know is that the prisoners are a group of people, referred to as "mountain people", who are forbidden from speaking their indigenous language, and endure a daily barrage of verbal, physical, and psychological abuse from the guards. At the end of the play, the ban is lifted, and the prisoners are given permission to once again speak their own language. An ecstatic PRISONER tells her visiting mother the good news, only to realize that she has forgotten how to speak the language. The play ends with the PRISONER falling onto the ground, in the words of the script, "gasping and shaking violently". The SERGEANT studies her and says "Look at this...you go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up".

It was an ending that could be compared to any number of scenarios of Western imperialism against non-Western cultures – be it the white Europeans against the Native Americans, the British against the Indians, and most recently, the U.S. aggression against Iraq. I looked at the year the play was published...1988. Naturally, I assumed this play was inspired by Pinter's anger against the Thatcher regime and their policies regarding immigration.

To my surprise, I found out that Pinter was inspired to write the play when he visited Turkey with fellow playwright Arthur Miller, and witnessed the discrimination and persecution faced by the Kurds at the hands of the Turks. Though Pinter explained in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* that "...this play is not about the Turks and the Kurds. I mean, throughout history, many languages have been banned—the Irish have suffered, the Welsh have suffered and the Urdu and the Estonians' language banned." (Harold Pinter: 1988). The dialogue does contain some then identifiably contemporary British or Western cultural references, thereby showing its applicability to the Great Britain of 1988, but as stated earlier, there is no clear location or time setting. The way I saw it, creating an abstract place and time allowed Pinter to give the message that this play isn't targeted towards any specific culture, but rather towards the practice of banning language.

This gave me a great deal of freedom to explore staging and characters, and as luck would have it, half the people who auditioned for the show were Japanese actors with a weak to fair command of English. While it wasn't my original intention, given the resources I had at hand, I opted to cast all the Japanese actors, with one exception, as prisoners and visitors, and have the "forbidden language" be Japanese. The remaining Japanese actor was cast as one of the guards, and one of the Western actors was cast as a visitor, specifically, the wife of a prisoner, because, after all, every culture consists of the "Uncle Tom" who joins the dominant side, and the native individual, usually a woman, who is considered a "traitor" for marrying into the minority and as such, treated with as much, if not more, disdain. Some of the dialogue was re-written, as quintessentially English dialogue from 1988 would just sound silly when spoken in a contemporary American or Japanese accent.

To give the prisoners and visitors, who I lumped into the overall category of "victim", an idea of how they should feel in this play, I had them watch Michael Haneke's 1997 film *Funny Games*, which revolves around an upper-class nuclear family who for no discernible reason are held hostage in their own summer home by two violent teenagers. Much of the horror of the film comes in watching how powerless the family is against their tormentors. I wanted the actors to convey the same sense of defeat for the entire duration of the show.

Another tactic was to tell the "prisoners" one thing and the guards, who I lumped into the category of "authority", another. In one scene, for example, I told two victims that a guard would be whacking his nightstick against their chair a couple times during the scene. What I didn't tell them was when he would do it. This kept the victims on edge the whole time, never knowing when "the blow" would come. As the saying goes, "the anticipation of fear is worse than fear itself". Some of the best suspense and horror films ever made have made full use of this tactic, and I opted to do the same.

Now that I had the dichotomy of “victim” and “authority” established, the next step was to humanize what I thought was a play that, in true Pinter style, was heavy on metaphor and light on love. A tragedy is always more tragic when it is revealed how much love there is behind the tragedy. While the victims are under oppression, they still retain hope – the hope that they will be released from prison and reunited with their loved ones. It is only when this love is removed – in the wife’s case, through the murder of her husband, and in the second prisoner’s case, through her mother having forgotten her language – that the victims lose all hope. If it wasn’t made clear that the victims are driven to survive by love, the ending, where they lose that love, wouldn’t be anywhere near as devastating to the audience.

However, what is even more tragic than a loved one who is killed, is a loved one who can no longer communicate with her child, and it is in the ending, where this is revealed to be the case, that the play shows just how indispensable communication by language is as a tool for understanding and survival, but above all, for love – what I consider to be the principal foundation of human interaction. Take away the ability to communicate between two loved ones, and you take away the love.

Prior to directing the play, I was fortunate to have seen a silent movie narrated by a “benshi”. During the age of silent film, theaters in the United States featured live organ accompaniment, while in Japan, the films were narrated, and all character voices spoken, by one individual, known as a “benshi” (which translates directly into “orator”). Today, there are only a handful of professional benshi who tour around Japan narrating special screenings of silent film classics. I attended one of these screenings in July, 2008 at Waseda University, narrated by one of the nation’s most renowned benshi, Ms. Midori Sawato. The film was D.W. Griffith’s *Hearts of the World*, a wartime propaganda film made in 1918 at the request of the British Government to change the neutral mindset of the American public during World War I.

The first 2 hours and 20 minutes played as an entertaining, albeit dated epic adventure, and I was impressed by how much more lifelike the film felt through the voices provided by Ms. Sawato. However, the true power of Ms. Sawato came in the final 10 minutes, when her voice single-handedly changed the ending, focus, and ultimately, message, of the entire film. While what we saw on screen during these final 10 minutes were low-angle shots of proud Allied soldiers lifting their rifles into the air, celebrating their victory over Germany, Sawato’s narration condemned war as a needless act which only causes pain and conflict and separates loved ones from their families, and that we as people must learn never to solve conflicts through violence ever again.

Then the film was over. I was stunned. I realized that benshi weren’t mere narrators of film, they were storytellers who had the power to decide how they wished to convey the meaning and message of what was playing on the screen, making it their very own work of art in the process. Thanks to the communicative strength of one individual, an unabashedly jingoistic, pro-war film became a vehemently anti-war film. The juxtaposition of pro-war images with anti-war narration only made her message all the more powerful, and allowed me to realize the sheer strength of spoken communication. If this ability were taken away from people, they would truly be powerless, literally without a voice.

Now that I had what I consider the most crucial aspects of the play down, characters and motivation, it was time to move on to atmosphere. I will go over the four aspects of stage atmosphere -- set, costumes, lighting, and music, briefly below:

Largely through not having a budget, and due to the play taking place on the same stage where a number of speakers for the symposium would be making their presentations from, we simply used what was already in the venue – this amounted to a counter containing electrical equipment, the back of which served as the backstage area for Stage Left, and a one-man sofa, which was planted on Stage Right and covered with a curtain, only to be uncovered in one scene where the SERGEANT is speaking to the YOUNG WOMAN. While the set was the result of a lack of time and resources on our end, given the setting of the play (a prison in an unspecified time and location), the sparse setting contributed perfectly to the metaphorical atmosphere.

The costumes were again kept simple and to the point, the key being to create three distinct groups of people – the guards, the prisoners, and the visitors. The guards wore standard black slacks and white shirts, with the tie and jacket signifying the levels of the guards' hierarchy. For example, the GUARD wears only a shirt and pants, the SERGEANT wears a shirt, pants, and tie, and the OFFICER wears a shirt, pants, tie, and jacket. The OFFICER disappears after the first scene, and for the remainder of the play, the only authority figures who are present are the GUARD and the SERGEANT. Thus, from the SERGEANT's second appearance onwards, I had him wear a jacket, implying that he's taken over the OFFICER's post in the prison.

Both prisoners wore blue jumpsuits, as they look naturally confining to me. For the visitors, I had the actors choose from their own wardrobe, only requesting the colors be dark and the style formal, making it look like each time they visited their loved ones in prison, they looked as if they were attending a funeral.

Third, and most difficult, were the lights. Given the constraints on set and costumes, I wanted to make the most of the light and music to create atmospheres of surrealism, dread, love, peace, and finally, despair. This involved dividing the primary hues into white, red, and blue. White conveyed the harsh reality of the location, blue was the establishing color of the YOUNG WOMAN, who is lit in this color whenever she is standing or sitting still on stage. Red is the color of the YOUNG MAN, husband of the YOUNG WOMAN. The only time the YOUNG MAN appears on stage is with a burlap hood over his head, right before he is executed. Essentially, from the minute the YOUNG MAN is on stage, he knows, and accepts, that he will never be reunited with his wife again. The second use of blue was for the ELDERLY WOMAN and PRISONER, who are lit in this color in the two moments they have together. When enveloped by this calming hue, the harsh reality of their current situation vanishes around them, and they are simply content being in each other's company fantasizing about a reunion that will ultimately never take place. Whenever any authority figure confronts the two, the blue suddenly vanishes and is replaced with white light, signaling a harsh awakening to reality.

In addition to the colors, I made use of narrowing lights to create a more constrictive environment on stage. For example, in Scene 1, the OFFICER and SERGEANT question

the YOUNG WOMAN, their behavior becoming more and more sexually and psychologically aggressive over the course of the scene. I had the lighting operator gradually narrow the light on the three actors as the scene progresses, creating an increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere for the YOUNG WOMAN and the audience. Through such uses of filters and expansions and contractions of light, I was able to create the entire visual atmosphere of the play.

Finally, there is what I consider to be the most important aspect of atmosphere for stage and cinema – music. Some of the most respected directors in film have been commended for their careful selection of music, and I believe this is no different for the stage. Everytime I read a script, whether as an actor or director, I keep thinking to myself what type of music would be best for the scene I am reading.

For this play, as I developed a greater understanding of the settings, characters, and their situations, I opted to create a soundtrack of music to be played in-between scenes. I usually avoid playing music over dialogue, as it proves to be more distracting than effective, but I do use it extensively at the beginning and end of the play, in-between scenes, and for stretches where characters are on stage but are not saying anything. Just like anything else, you cannot have too much music or too much silence. A balance must be created that best fits the mood of the scene that is being acted out.

I also believe in using music to set a subconscious mood for audience members walking in to see a show. Thus, for every show I have directed, I've compiled a 30-minute soundtrack of songs, covering the range of settings and emotions depicted in the play, and play it at a low but listenable volume, thus "preparing" the audience for what they are about to see. I have been criticized for using this technique, because "nobody listens to that stuff anyway", but honestly, I believe they do, subconsciously, and when the play begins, the pre-show music has helped their minds focus on what they are about to see.

In the end, I was delighted to be able to use multiple tools of communication – lighting, music, costume, voice, emotions, and dialogue – to put on a play about the importance of communication, about how communication is the glue that binds us as a society and as a people, and how if this was taken away from us, that bind would unravel almost immediately. Ultimately, regardless of whether the audience liked it or hated it, I just hope something, an image, a song, a performance, a line of dialogue, anything, was conveyed to them. That is communication.

REFERENCES

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“Would you look at that...you go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up.”



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