

THOUGHTS ON DIRECTING WILLIAM CONGREVE'S MASTERPIECE, *THE WAY OF THE WORLD*

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KNOW THE CONTEXT, DISCOVER THE MOTIVES

We say in our statement of artistic mission, "World's End Theatre owes a great debt of gratitude to the writers of these works." To put that in plainer English, we exist to serve the writer.

To serve the writer, we have to understand the mind of the writer, and to do that, we have to do our best to understand the life of the writer; the context of the time, the nation, the culture in which the writer felt it imperative to write this play. Just as every character in a play has a motive or intention, so the writer of the play has a motive for writing it. It's ESSENTIAL that we discover the motives of any writer if we're to discover a true rendering of his work.

THE CONTEXT OF THE WAY OF THE WORLD

In order to begin to unlock a complex script like *The Way of the World*, it's vital to understand the context of the time in which it was written and first produced. If we fail to do that, we will fall back on trying to explain the play through the prism of our own experience, which would be a fatal error, as our culture is so very different from the one that gave birth to William Congreve. This doesn't mean the play is irrelevant to us – far from it. But the only way to finding its true relevance is through a true understanding of its text, as opposed to a bad translation of the text, as processed through our own ignorance of the age which produced it.

A brief chronology of some significant events that shaped the world this script depicts:

- September 1642 - Theatres ordered closed. This practice continues.
- January 1649 - Charles I found guilty of high treason, as a "tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy". Beheaded. The nation becomes a Puritan military

state led by Cromwell. Make-up, colorful dresses, Christmas banned (except for prayer -- no parties, no feasting). Theatres were completely shut down for a decade. Acting and theatre production were crimes punished by flogging and prison; watching a play was punished with high fines. Many actors became criminals as a result, the chief businesses being gambling and prostitution.

- 1658 - Cromwell dies.
- 1660 - Charles II crowned king. Monarchy returns to power – but so does Parliament. This is an important distinction – the King and Parliament returned at the same time. One of Charles II's first acts is to license two theatre companies – and makes it legal (and imperative) that women play the female roles. This is groundbreaking; women go from being treated as chattel (or whores) to being given a voice in the most public venue of all. The pendulum swings in the opposing direction -- sex is pushed. Charles was known as the Merrie Monarch, a "rake", a man of great wit and many lovers, and as such, he serves as the model for all the heroes of the first period of Restoration comedies. Had 12 bastard children he acknowledged, by various mistresses -- at least 2 of them were actresses, Nell Gwyn and Mary "Moll" Davis. Nell was considered the greatest actress of the age, and the first real "people's princess." Her mother was a whore and a bawd who died in a ditch, but her son, Charles Beauclerk, was created Duke of St. Albans. His descendent is Charles Beauclerk, the author of *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*, who is a de Vere on his father's side, and the author of *Nell Gwyn, Mistress to a King*, a landmark book on the Restoration period.
- Charles II reigns until 1685.
- 1670 – William Congreve is born, and the formative years of his life are under the reign of Charles II.
- 1685 – Charles dies and his brother James II becomes king, a Catholic, not well-liked.
- 1688 - Glorious Revolution; James II overthrown by his daughter Mary II and her husband/cousin William III, who reign as co-sovereigns. Unprecedented. Never

happened since.

- 1698 - Jeremy Collier, theatre critic, publishes *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, attacking plays of William Congreve and John Vanbrugh. It's not exactly short; 300 pages long, attacking theatre for fostering immorality. He was a quasi-bishop and refused to swear allegiance to William and Mary. His book is ridiculed in *Way of the World*.
- 1700 - *The Way of the World* first produced. Reception is cool. Restoration is on the wane. This is a tremendously important point. In many ways, this play is the last Restoration comedy. It's the end of an era, and like many works that arrive as the cultural wave is falling, it contains the full weight and power of the totality of the era, even though, at first glance, it may all appear to be only so much foam.

As you can imagine, there is a great deal more detail to plumb in the history of Restoration England (and both Stuart and Tudor England that came before it), but suffice it to say a man like Congreve was born into a place and time where there were MASSIVE pendulum swings between Puritanical behavior and licentious behavior, from the top level of society on down. And where the theatre was a POWERFUL instrument, which was true from its birth as a commercial medium of the masses, under Elizabeth I.

A TRAUMATIC IDENTITY CRISIS OF STATE

The best way to describe what the English in the late 17th century were living through is a TRAUMATIC identity crisis not just of leadership but of ethos, of self, played out at a national level. Who is she, my nation, this England? Who therefore am I, as an Englishman or Englishwoman? Am I a Puritan? A hedonist? A Catholic? A Protestant? A whore? An actress? The mistress of a King? This was an identity crisis writ so large that it existed at a national level – and in a way, that's what makes theatre so powerful, as it tells stories of the individual but at the same time tells the stories of the nation-state itself.

Living through this, Congreve writes a play in which there's a character called Mr.

Fainall (All is Feigned), and in which elaborate political plots (pointedly NOT taking place in an actual political arena) are carried out by both Fainall and his opposite number, Mirabell (which means "wonderful"). At stake are not simply reputation but MONEY and TERRITORY and POWER (accrued from either SEX or MONEY/TERRITORY). The undercurrent throughout all of this, rarely spoken of directly, but felt unquestionably, is LOVE.

At the center of the play is a crisis of state. Plots are afoot to overthrow the putative monarch, Lady Wishfort, from both sides. Note that she is female, aging, unable to admit her advanced age and still desperate to appear beautiful...yes, Elizabeth's impact as Gloriana Regina was still very much felt 100 years after her death, though of course all English monarchs must have keenly felt some insecurity about their monarchy after Charles I got his head chopped off in his own castle, and after Mary II routed her own father to make his crown hers and her husband's.

It's hardly a coincidence that William and Mary ruled in tandem and Mirabell and Millamant spend pages laying out their definition of marriage. The play is hugely concerned with what a good marriage is, not just for emotional or personal reasons, but because the cues the English were getting from their rulers as to that question were, to say the least, confusing and contradictory. Charles II had 12 illegitimate children, and yet he was able to travel with his wife, his mistress and his bastard kids in the same coach!

Marriage is about LOVE – and there was no greater love than that between Charles II and Nell Gwyn, though they were never officially husband and wife. But marriage is also deeply political – this isn't my opinion, this is the matter the play explores to a remarkable extent. Marriage is about MONEY and TERRITORY and POWER (SEXUAL POWER as well as power created through MONEY OR TERRITORY). What is really going on in the play is a struggle between the rule of law versus the rule of the monarch, or rule of will. Fainall and Wishfort both represent rule by will, but Mirabell and Millamant are able to teach Wishfort of the error of this course. This was the emerging Whig point of view, a constitutional monarchy where parliament held sway ALONGSIDE the king or queen. Charles II himself was a modern ruler with

ideas about personal happiness and responsibility that would sound very much at home in a modern democracy of today. Mrs. Millamant (and to be clear, she is not married; single women were called “Mrs” rather than “Miss”, because that was short for “mistress”, or a synonym for prostitute) describes her ideal marital state and it’s that of an actress in the period, a free woman...or Queen Mary II. We cannot say enough about how the emerging voice and political power of women are essential to understanding the power of women in this story.

Congreve is more understated than in his other works as far as language goes, avoiding the Divine name, and being less saucy generally (so say the scholars), but the work has a dark view of the world, and yet a deterministic point of view -- people, when shifting for themselves, can triumph. This, again, is what so many of Charles II’s acts conveyed: the development of the individual and his or her rights.

But none of this is happening in some idyllic, philosophical realm. This all stems from the beheading of a King, a bloody Civil War, and less than forty years later, another bloody uprising to force a shift in leadership. The play is about navigating treacherous waters, in a world in which loss of name, money and life were commonplace.

THE SOLUTION IS THEATRE

So, there was an ongoing crisis of identity for the English soul, if you will, and Congreve in writing this terribly witty, well-paced, sexy romp is ALSO writing with a deep purpose: to USE THEATRE to unify the disparate ends on the swinging pendulum, and his path here is through the unification of the married couple in the plot.

The play is very much, therefore, an appeal to recognize all that we share if we are to survive, precisely the same issue St. Paul raises in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians.

Now, I stressed above that Congreve is USING THEATRE not just in form, but in content. In other words, he’s written a PLAY about PLAYING. The overriding metaphor of this play IS the theatre itself, which of course, was, second to the monarchy, the most powerful force in shaping the culture of the age.

Look at how the play begins. The conclusion of a game...and so the stage is set for all the games that are to come. But then, in what is only the third line in the script, Mirabell says, "I'll play on to entertain you." In the context, he's talking about playing cards. But we all know Congreve, a master wit, is making a pun on "play" and "entertain." From the start, he signals to us that words will mean more than one thing, and that everything will be written in the language of the actor, the entertainer, the maker of plays – for whom words ALWAYS mean more than one thing.

The theatre is both a manifestation of free speech and a manifestation of lies. Theatre in Restoration England affected statecraft, and was used for political ends; politicians and monarchs used the tools of theatre in their statecraft. Charles II was, to all contemporary accounts including the magnificently detailed Diary of Samuel Pepys, the consummate actor; you never really knew what he was thinking. Charles Beauclerk calls him "a master at disguising his feelings." In many ways, he was playing the role of the King for his subjects' benefit. And his greatest lover was an actress. The way of the world, from the start of the Restoration through to its cultural change as the 18th century dawned, was unquestionably a way theatrical in a world theatrical.

THERE IS NO CONCEPT BEYOND THE PLAY

Understanding all of this, we can understand then that in order to give true breath and life to this play, we have to first of all include the audience. We must redefine our relationship to them, starting by banishing all realistic conventions that reinforce a fourth wall. Any moment, every moment, is an opportunity to share the play with the audience, by looking at them directly, by sharing space with them, by connecting with them physically. Nothing is private. Or rather, ALL is private – but privately shared between actor and audience, the two groups making up a great public "privy council," a union of leaders and subjects, of the monarch and the commoner, of the beheaders and the beheaded.

It's far too premature to speak of style or period, or to call either one a concept – especially when our only concept should be to understand the deep truths hidden in the

script. It's also too soon to begin any concrete articulation of a scenography, especially in the absence of a design team. I'm certainly not trying to avoid engaging questions as to the specific look of the production; as anyone familiar with my directing work knows, I am quite specific. And once the design team is assembled, we'll begin to talk about all these things and I have every confidence based not only on my experience but on the power of this script, that we will find a truthful physical rendering of these words.

But one thing I am certain about is that the way to manifesting this play is through laying bare the theatricality of everything in it, every scripted con game, every lie, every masked pretense, false identity, every mention of paint and wigs and costuming, the undeniable flood of theatrical references that begin with "I'll play on to entertain you."

So I would suggest we begin by making it absolutely clear that this is all a great piece of theatre. Pull back the curtains to reveal the dressing rooms. And don't cram all sixteen cast members back into those two rooms, but make mirrors and lights and make-up and costumes part of the set itself – so that everything is AT ONCE ARTIFICE AND REVELATION. As the scenes begin, the actors can rise from the make-up tables and start, and other actors can pull curtains to conceal themselves, or perhaps not real curtains, but paintings of curtains. Perhaps both.

As the play builds, and lies and truths compound upon each other, the tension mounting, the plot driving forward, the cons building, so too can the layers of artifice continue to be imposed physically, so that we SEE with stark simplicity that all is an act, all is theatre. For the second act that takes place in St. James Park, the only scenes set outdoors in the entire interior play, perhaps we will have the audience rise and exit the theatre proper to come out of doors – but not to view a naturalistic vision of the outside, as we presented in *The Seagull*. Perhaps they can sit/stand on the deck of the theatre, while servants hold up proscenium drawn "curtains" as frames around the actors as they play out their intrigues – so that even out of doors we are never outside the theatrical viewpoint.

Or perhaps we'll try these ideas and none of them will quite work, but they will lead us to better ways to realize Congreve's motive and intent in writing this great work.

For it is above all my approach to bring our collective knowledge, our deductive powers, our instincts and inspirations to bear so that we can, as Congreve says in the concluding verse lines of the play, “shining features in one portrait blend.”

This is truly just a brief look at an extremely complex period – politically, socially and culturally – that served as the fertile inspiration for Congreve. But like a teasing glimpse of an actor’s face peeking from behind a curtain, I hope it gives you an idea of how much more there is to be explored, so long as we explore and engage the truths of the Way of the World in which *The Way of the World* was written.