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Review of Herbert Blau's Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual

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Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual. By Herbert Blau. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011; 300 pp. \$85.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper, e-book available.

In his most recent book of collected essays on theatre and performance, the esteemed scholar and theatre director Herbert Blau (who died on 3 May 2013 at age 87) recounts a story from his early days as a director of an actor's lament with his rehearsed role, "I don't feel this, I'm not feeling this at all." To which Blau forcefully replied, "I couldn't care less what you feel, or don't, feelings are cheap! *I only care what you think.* What we're doing here is *thinking*, trying to understand" (143). In a chapter entitled "The Emotional Memory of Directing," Blau is looking back from a distance of decades onto memories of emotions, always directed toward theatre's own unique vantage onto thought, its corporeal manifestations, its bodily obligations, and "[...] the ontological fact that the one performing [...] is dying in front of your eyes" (114).

The *fact* of this witnessed dying, the very *thought* of it, is not (contrary to what one might gather from Blau's response to the struggling actor) an unfeeling or uncaring one, but instead a carefully directed response that was to demand of actors, audiences, and readers alike the rigors of reflection, a not-so-cheap cost to the concentration—the kind of thinking, the "trying to understand" that Blau has always insisted upon. As he affirms again and again in this book of

essays collected primarily from keynote and memorial lectures, it is the nature of that thought, as embodied object, as imperiled subject, that is most forcefully and consistently sought and engaged. Moving between Beckett and Brecht, Genet and Ionesco, to the more recent work of the Viennese Actionists, Orlan, and Stelarc, it is the illusiveness of thought, its very uncertainty, perhaps even its impossibility, that is constantly returned to in this book's brilliant analysis, with Blau having acceded to Artaud's terrifying proclamation that "no matter which way you turn your head, you have not even *started* to think" (1965:48).

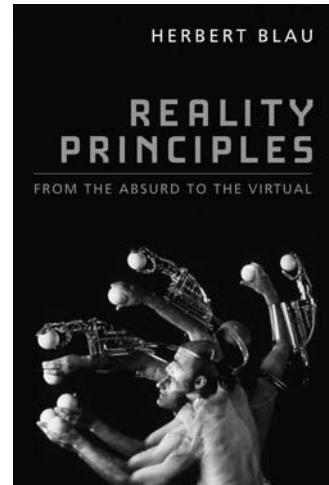
Each chapter of Blau's book, turning as it does every which way (and then some), is a forceful and vigilant manifestation of such a starting point, or such a desire to *start* thought. For it is at such primordial beginnings that the emotional memory of thought's rigorous and violent approach is written upon the bodies of those performing, as thought's corporeal "condition of possibility, [...] which as always remains to be *seen*" (148).

And what Blau would ask of his actors and his many students, he would also ask of his readers: to think at the "extremity of thought" (67) of a theatre imagined within the always turbulent cultural and historical contexts that extend beyond the stage and out into that larger life of the everyday world from which all thought affirms its lived emergence and condition. As Proust's narrator, grieving for his grandmother, similarly asserts of thought's necessity: "we truly know only what we are obliged to re-create by thought, what everyday life keeps hidden from us..." (Proust 2004:168).

We are reminded by Blau how events in the world, and the often violent and hidden processes of history have forcefully determined the manner in which theatre is to be thought about at all, from the "theater of the absurd" and the Cold War (with which this book begins); to our own more recent War on Terror, and its responses to 9/11 and Ground Zero (to which the remaining chapters are chronologically linked); and finally (in its concluding chapters), through questions of presence, liveness, and mortality, to the renewed affirmations of what Walter Benjamin described as "the most forgotten alien land [that] is one's own body" ([1968] 1992:132). Because for Blau, it is (and was) always that vulnerable and fleeting form before us that, regardless of its various mediations, remained the forgotten referent of the newly mediated stages of virtual theatre. For, if that body's reality is repressed, Blau knew only too well of its inevitable and violent return to any scene that—virtual or otherwise, theatrical or not—would unthinkingly dare to ignore it.

Over the decades, Blau proved himself again and again to be one of the most far-reaching and thoughtful of American theorists on theatre and performance. But he was, inseparable from the theory, also one of its most rigorous and daring writers, with a prose form that aggressively, theatrically performed each thought's forceful emergence through his often richly extending sentences. For instance, in a chapter entitled "Art and Crisis," one that addresses responses to events arising from 9/11, Blau artfully unfolds within a single sentence a taut analysis that implicates the thinker in the thought, the thought in the process of its own inscription, as well as the individual who is then inscribed into the crisis examined:

If one wants anything at all from art in a time of crisis (and I'm not always sure that we do) it is—at the nerve ends of thought where thought escapes us, causing us to pursue it, thus enlivening thought—the activity of perception that is something like moral rigor, demanding from every brain cell even more thought, acceding to the indisputable when it's there, though it's not very likely to be, and seeing with the utmost compassion, at the limit of endurance, what we'd mostly rather not. (207)



There is in the very materiality of this singular sentence an instance of thought's own self-reflexive representation, a performative exhilaration in its clausal extensions that mirror the extensions of thought, while *causing thought*, and that "at the limit of endurance" culminate in a seeing of "utmost compassion." When Blau had earlier demanded of his actors to *feel* less and *think* more, this one sentence and this entire book offers the promise (as well as, whether we want it or not, the moral responsibility) of a compassionate perception that, engaging "every brain cell," must be thoughtfully earned. Otherwise, Blau implies, why bother at all; anything less would likely result in platitudes of—let's face it—brain-*less* repetition.

Blau begins and ends this book with a question of real ontological gravity, "Why theater at all?"—offering it perhaps as an answer to another question asked in an earlier chapter (117). He responds by returning us not to the brain alone but to that mortal body enframing it: "What is the theater, but the body's long initiation in the mystery of its vanishings?" (273). For it was, always, the theatre for Blau that effectively offered the thought of *that*, of that which is vanishing, and of the theatre's own peculiar vantage onto such a site of disappearance; "theater is thought" (11), Blau affirms, where one sees tenuously presented, in time, a body vanishing, dying in front of your eyes.

— Clark Lunberry

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