

American Culture a cop out

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I was recently privileged to spend a year in the United States, most of it in New York, courtesy of an arts fellowship scheme set up to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution. My year ran out three days after the occupation of the US Embassy compound in Tehran.

Returning for a short visit in January, the change was striking. Itsy little shops in Greenwich Village (the kind of places that disprove Marx's assertion that a commodity cannot have an exchange value without possessing a use value) were doing a brisk trade not only in Ayotollah dartboards, but also in lapel badges with slogans like 'Stand Up for America'. One could overhear, in equally itchy Upper West Side bistroteques, arty-looking types solemnly informing each other, over their spinach quiche and cheesecake, that the time had come to get over there and whip some ass. Less anecdotally, Edward Kennedy's campaign to unseat President Carter, all over bar the shouting in November, lay slowly roasting on the pyre of a re-awakened, belligerent American nationalism.

What had happened? I was not, now, in

the patriotic heartland, in the conservative South or the John Wayne West. I was in *New York*, in the heart of sophisticated, radical Manhattan, the powerhouse of a culture that had, among other things, provided much of the emotional glue for the movement that had destroyed — one had hoped for all time — the pro-football tradition of American foreign policy.

The waning of radicalism

The truth, of course, is that whatever radicalism the literary and artistic culture of New York may have had in the 1960s, has now more or less drained away. There is an old aphorism to the effect that America is the only country in the world to have passed from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilisation. The present metropolitan decadence of the United States has been extensively discussed. The journalist Tom Wolfe charted its growth in a famous 1976 article in which he dubbed the seventies as 'The "Me" Decade'. And the writer Christopher Lasch developed the theme in his recent book *The Culture of Narcissism*, in a trenchant (if occasionally

monkish) broadside at 'the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self, a culture in which the only injunction is 'to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity', a society peopled by individuals 'haunted not by guilt but by anxiety'.

There is evidence for Lasch's thesis wherever you look in New York: in the bookshops, where 'self-help' books with titles like *Looking After Number One* and *Winning Through Intimidation* front the display cases; at Plato's Retreat, where 'swinging singles' pay \$30 for the privilege of public sex with either their dates or complete strangers; the psychiatric obsession ('the successful parent is one who raises a child who can pay for his own analysis'). The culture that grows on this medium can be energetic and vibrant, in its bravura and excess; it can also be unbearably bland and mawkish. The new American cinema contains much work of the former character. Most of the produce of the New York theatre falls into the latter category.

Broadway theatre

It took me quite a long time to work out what was odd about Broadway theatre. The truth is to be found in the newspaper listings. During my time in New York, over a twelve month period, shows opened and closed with often bewildering speed. But, at any one time, a majority of the works on offer had as



their subject matter the entertainment industry itself. Most of the musical shows were about musical shows, whether set in the present era (*A Chorus Line*, *Beatlemania*), or in the past (*Sugar Babies*, *The 1940 Radio Hour*); if not about shows, they were about showmen, either real (*Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Eubie*) or fictional (*They're Playing Our Song*); even the hit stage thriller (*Deathtrap*) is about a writer of hit stage thrillers; and the top comedy (*Chapter Two*) about a writer married to an actress. The huge mirrors at the back of the set of *A Chorus Line* were not there — one realised — so that the audience could look at itself. It was the show itself that had turned inwards, observing, in serious and grandiose detail, its own navel.

What I believe the American theatre is confronting is not the traditional artistic problem of what to say and how to say it, but of what should not be said and how to avoid saying it. It's not as easy as it looks. Even musicals have words and plots, and it is interesting that the greatest performance growth area in New York is dance, which has no words, and that the most popular piece of Broadway choreography is a show by Bob Fosse, titled (and consisting of) *Dancin'*, which has no plot. Verbal forms, however, have to find ways to drain their words of meaning of their plots of substance, and (like Hollywood in the 1930s) have fallen back on creating a fantasy world out of their own processes; a world with its own stories, its own characters and its own rules, which can function independently of the society around them.

Unexceptionable

There are messages, of course, or at least assumptions. The point is that they are designed to be almost impossible to disagree with. The Californian writer Joan Didion has made the point that political discussion in Hollywood tends to consist of the repetition of the incontrovertible: 'political ideas are reduced to choices between the good (equality is good) and the bad (genocide is bad)' in the context of 'the peculiar vanity of perceiving social life as a problem to be solved by the good will of individuals'. The same is eminently true of Broadway. Racial and sexual discrimination are Bad Things — a message that tends, however, to be presented in a highly mechanical, formal way (in *A Chorus Line* the dancer who loses his job by pulling his Achilles tendon is both gay and Puerto Rican, thus, as it were, crippling two minorities with one stumble). But as soon as sexism or racism (class doesn't ever come into it) becomes seen as a social rather than an individual phenomenon it is unacceptable. A Broadway musical happily titled *A Broadway*

Musical closed on its first night partly because it wasn't very good, partly because (I like to think) it blew the gaffe on the content of the rest of Broadway, but mostly because its plot — concerning a Jewish impressario setting up an exploitative black musical — edged slightly too close to controversy. And the much discussed wave of actual black shows have been dominated by musical revues paying tribute to the individual talent of black composers and singers (Eubie Blake, Fats Waller). Finally, and most endemically of all, optimism is Good. In the musical *Annie* — the hottest ticket on Broadway for some years — the central relationship is between a 60 year old man and a 12 year old girl, so instead of half the songs being in praise of romantic love (the usual proportion), there are no less than seven songs in praise of the optimistic frame of mind. They contain lines like 'the sun will come out tomorrow' and 'you're never fully dressed without a smile'. Who can argue with such truisms. They provoke wild applause.

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Applause is the key. Applause is to shows without content what the male ejaculation is to sex without passion. It is the only reason for being there. At £12 for an orchestra seat, one can see why audiences want to convince themselves they've had a good time. But there is something forced, something desperate about applause in the American theatre (Stephen Sondheim has seen to it in his musical *Sweeney Todd* that neither the first nor the last entrances of his principal characters contains any musical or dramatic cue for applause; never mind, the audience is determined to applaud anyway, and comes near to forcing the orchestra to stop playing). This type of applause is, I believe, a relieved, collective 'thank you' for an evening without controversy, an evening of shared enthusiasm for unarguable sentiment, an evening during which it has been possible to believe that the sun will indeed come out tomorrow. Anything which provokes, anything which *divides* the audience (the effect Brecht strove so hard for) would disrupt that final moment of communal release.

The cinema

Not all American verbal performance is like the American theatre. The cinema, as we know, is vibrant and often serious. While I

was in America, there were two New York shows about the Vietnam experience: one was a crude, cabaret version of Michael Herr's documentary book *Despatches*, the other was a dreary, tiresome and often offensive play about sexual relations between American troops and an old Vietnamese woman. During the same period, of course, there were a clutch of important and serious films about that experience: *Coming Home*, *Dog Soldiers*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*. There was also a film which intervened even more directly into the mainstream of American political life: *The China Syndrome*, with its chillingly prescient representation of the kind of nuclear crisis that was to happen, for real, at Harrisburg.

But even in the cinema, there is this draining incapacity to see social events socially. Every one of those five movies has at its centre a classical American hero (or, in one case, heroine), out of odds with the world around him/her, superior and heroic by virtue of his/her distance from the vulgar mob. The most striking, perhaps, is the character played by Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now*, constantly gazing in wide-eyed alarm at the behaviour of the yahoo-like private soldiers around him; most saddening is the cheap parody of the anti-nuclear campaign in *The China Syndrome*: we are to be protected from mass radiation, apparently, not by a mass movement but by the individual efforts of crusading journalists played by Jane Fonda.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that artists and writers tend to overestimate culture as a symptom or even a cause of the state of nations. But it does seem that there is a connection between a society in which the theatrical arts resolutely refuse to see any social content in contemporary events — either through a philosophy of rampant individualism or through the rejection of politics altogether — and a country which may, only eight years after its defeat in Vietnam, elect the most belligerent, the most mindlessly imperialist Presidential candidate since Barry Goldwater. American culture has copped out of history; and it is a warning to those of us concerned with our own culture here. D

