

International Theatre Institute ITI

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Eugène Ionesco 1976

"In 1959, when I had the honour and pleasure of being invited by the International Theatre Institute to take part in its Congress in Helsinki, I spoke about the New Theatre, which is now no longer new and which at that time was known as the Avant-garde Theatre. I concluded my message by saying: the avant-garde is freedom. This definition, or proclamation, was regarded by most of the representatives of both eastern and western countries as being subversive and dangerous. Since then, a great deal has changed. In those days, men of the theatre still restricted themselves either to bourgeois realism or to a more or less socialist realism and were afraid of imagination. Realism of one kind or another still prevails in drawing-room theatre and in the ideological theatre but all the new and interesting developments during the past fifteen years or more have transcended various forms of realism and constraint. Many of us have condemned realism for the simple reason that reality is not realistic and because realism is just one school, style and convention among others and has also condemned the ideological theatre because the ideological theatre is itself a constraint, a prison, and the prisoner of ideas, doctrines and assumptions towards which the playwright is not allowed to adopt a critical attitude.

Truth is to be found in the imagination. The theatre of the imagination is a theatre of genuine truth and is genuinely documentary. No document is ever honest or free for the simple reason that it is slanted in order to serve a particular purpose. The imagination cannot lie. It reveals our psychology, our abiding or passing anxieties, the concerns of man in every age and of the present time, the depths of the human soul. A person who does not dream is a sick person. Dreams perform an essential function and the function of the imagination is no less essential. An artist whose freedom of imagination is threatened becomes alienated. The great revolutionaries and their precursors were dreamers - by which I mean Utopians. But as soon as Utopianism becomes a state, an obligation, a law, it turns into a nightmare. The dream, as one great psychologist has said, is a drama of which we are simultaneously author, actor and spectator. The theatre is a construction of the unfettered imagination. Every one of us needs to be an inventor. It is the joy of invention which has induced me to write plays. To use one's imagination and powers of invention is not an aristocratic pastime. Each one of us is a potential artist. The popular, committed, slanted, regulated Theatre, decreed by the representatives of the State, by politicians is not popular theatre but an unpopular, concentration camp theatre. The popular theatre is the theatre of the imagination, the truly free theatre. Political ideologists have been keen to take over the theatre as a tool which they can use to their own advantage. But art is not, or ought not to be, a matter for the State. Any restriction on creative spontaneity is a sin against

the human spirit. The State is not synonymous with society but politicians want to use and supervise theatrical creation for propaganda purposes. Indeed, the theatre is potentially an ideal tool of propaganda, of what is termed 'political education', that is to say of misdirection and brainwashing. Politicians should merely be the servants of art and of dramatic art in particular. They should not control it and, above all, should not censor it. Their sole task should be to make it possible for art and especially dramatic art to develop freely. But imagination frightens them.

This is why government censorship is rife in certain countries. Woe betide governments which are afraid of the opposition; they are unsure of themselves. Certain governments in other countries, particularly in the West are more liberal than the opposition and it is the opposition which imposes censorship; the representatives of this kind of opposition have a taste for power, a passion for dictatorship and for enforcing conformism. They bring direct moral pressure to bear and use ideological and moral blackmail. In many cases such pundits are more hidebound and intolerant than their governments, with the result that artists in such countries are therefore driven to self-censorship. Woe betide the oppositions which are afraid of anti-oppositions and woe to those artists who, in the name of so-called revolutionary or counter-revolutionary ideologies, obstruct creative emancipation and the free flowering of the imagination; the individual citizen is at liberty to bestow his political allegiance as he sees fit. But as an artist who tends to challenge everything, he must remain free. This is why it is a matter of urgency for dramatic artists and authors in all countries to depoliticize the theatre or rather to pay no heed either to the State or to the pundits who wish to secure their allegiance.

Art, as the saying goes, knows no frontiers. The theatre should have no frontiers either. Transcending ideological divergencies, caste, race, national outlook and individual countries, the theatre should be a universal country, the meeting place of all men who share the same anguish and the same hopes revealed by the imagination, and should be neither arbitrary nor realistic but an expression of our identity, our continuity and our oneness.

No orders to creators! No instructions from governments! "