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"...In Front of Our Eyes" — Herbert Blau has Died

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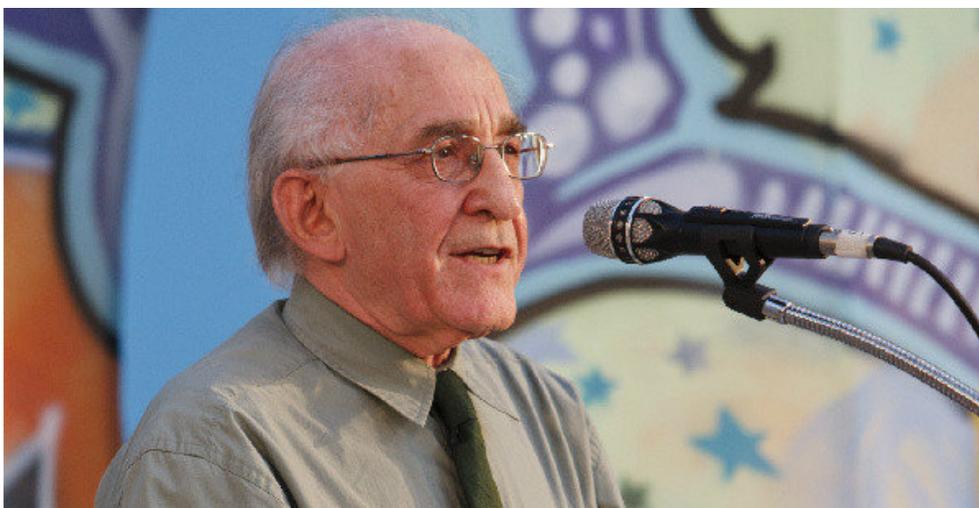
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Herbert Blau. Photograph: Steven A. Gunther

Herbert Blau, the important American theatre director, writer and educator, died last spring at the age of 87. His death occurred on what happened to have been his birthday, May 3; a coincidence, merely, no doubt... "a day like any other day," as Hamm, in Beckett's *Endgame*, might have "gloomily" proclaimed.

Blau had lived and worked in Seattle, WA, for the final twelve years of his long and rich life, teaching there at the University of Washington, and only retiring the year before after an astonishingly impressive 60 years of nearly uninterrupted teaching! I was fortunate, deeply so, to have been Blau's graduate student and research assistant in the late 1990's at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, in their Modern Studies program, a program that Blau, along with others, had established many years before as a pioneering center of theoretical and interdisciplinary teaching and research.

Of Beckett, Blau is well known as an early advocate and director of his work, most famously perhaps for having directed *Waiting for Godot* at the maximum-security prison of San Quentin, in California, in 1957. Not surprisingly, that prison production of *Godot* proved later on to be of real interest and curiosity to Beckett, perhaps because, within it, the play's durational demands and painful confinements were vividly materialized beyond mere metaphor; while its actors and captive audience members certainly knew a thing or two about waiting...endless waiting. This legendary prison production would later lead to Beckett's eventual extended work with the American actor Rick Cluchey, a prisoner and actor (soon to be released) from that early San Quentin production. Blau's production of *Godot* would also stand as a central event in Martin Esslin's now-classic 1961 publication, *Theatre of the Absurd*.

With Jules Irving, at their groundbreaking Actor's Workshop in San Francisco, Blau would be involved in the staging of other Beckett plays, many of them for the first time in the U.S.; these various productions would nearly always achieve an appropriate blend of controversy, noisy rejection and high acclaim. As both a director and writer, Blau was unquestionably a central force in establishing Beckett's reception and reputation in America (as well as beyond). Indeed, Beckett's work would remain—along with so much else in Blau's rich and deep repertoire of reference—vital throughout his life, both in the theatre and in the seminar room.

I began my own study with Blau in 1995, in Milwaukee, already an eager and obsessive reader of Beckett. And so it was with great pleasure to have Blau as my professor, as he spoke frequently of his work with Beckett, his productions of the various plays, his own extensive writings on the author, as well as his private time with the man. I think back now on memorable moments in the seminar room and Blau's often sudden and forceful recitation of beloved sections from Beckett's work; such as in *Endgame*, when the blinded Hamm frantically insists that he be placed directly in the center of the room. Blau, ferociously, would recite Hamm's lines, concluding with "put me right in the center"; proclaiming this command, Blau would slam his fist to the table, staring us all right in the eyes (and—making his point—scaring many of us half to death). That evening, Hamm's desired centering, however pointless for the blind Hamm, was made physically palpable, and unforgettable, through Blau's forceful rendering.

Or elsewhere, also in *Endgame* (what Blau, like many others, believed was Beckett's greatest work) the sad lines of resignation, where Hamm reminds Clov that, like it or not, it is our heads that must be used, thoughtfully, to manage, however fitfully, our way in the world: "Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" This insistence on the need, the *obligation*, to use the head (a head within which there was nonetheless "something dripping...A heart, a heart in my head") was always demanded by Blau in his directing, in his teaching, in his life that—with or without a cure—he daily led.

Though Blau had left the theatre many years before I knew him, there was in his seminar room always the sense that the theatre had never left him. Indeed, Blau would assert and demonstrate that his graduate seminars, especially when the work of Beckett was involved, were to be engaged always as a form of theatrical rehearsal, with a rigor directed toward the performance of thought and imagination. As such, there was to be pursued in that room the preparation for a play that would never be performed *except* in the mind's eye of those of us reading and thinking together (while exceeding, if done well, any actual performance upon a stage).

When the time came a few years back for Blau to publish his many brilliant writings on Beckett for the University of Michigan Press, he chose for its title *Sails of the Herring Fleet*. That title comes from a wonderful, if brief moment, again in *Endgame*, when Hamm, looking back to when he was a younger man, urges a "madman" to see before him something of the beauty in those distant sails floating out on the ocean:

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter—and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!

(Pause.)

He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.

That Blau would have chosen as the title for his book on Beckett this reference to the "loveliness" of the herring fleet, that nearly sublime moment of vivid recollection, is revealing of his attraction and love for Beckett and his work. For, shared between them was a complex and rigorous aesthetic and intellectual sensibility, and a longing for a beauty that, if seen at all, would likely be but briefly seen—a distant, fleeting "loveliness," that was no less lovely if fleeting, even if finally turned to "ashes."

Of such poignant vanishings, Blau describes further some of what compelled his enduring attraction to Beckett's work, in an interview included in *Sails of the Herring Fleet*. He states:

It seems to me that what really happens in Beckett, and what is most moving to me, happens in those moments when you are precipitously about to see something which, in the very activity of perception, *disappears*, as if in fact exhausted in the energy required for you to see it. Almost as if there were a dramatization of the Heisenbergian principle: the very instruments of perception dematerialize the object; that is, the instruments of perception get in the way. (*Herring* 153).

As both a theatre director and theoretician of theatre, Blau spent most of his professional life trying to realize something of this play of appearances and disappearances that he believed the theatre might theoretically offer. In pursuit of such nearly impossible perception, in his final book of collected essays on theatre and performance, *Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual*, Blau recounts a story from his early days as a director, and 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" (*Reality* 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 his 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 always insisted upon. As he affirmed again and again, it is the nature of that thought, as embodied object, as imperiled subject, which is most forcefully and consistently sought and engaged, especially in Beckett’s work. It is, however, the illusiveness of thought, its very uncertainty, perhaps even its impossibility, that was always returned to, 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” (*Artaud* 48).

Blau’s writing and teaching, turning as they always did every which way (and then some), was a forceful and vigilant manifestation of such a starting point, or such a desire to start thought. For it was, for Blau, at such primordial beginnings that the emotional memory of thought’s rigorous and violent approach was written upon the bodies of those performing, as thought’s corporeal “condition of possibility, and 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” (*Reality* 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 Marcel 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...” (168).

Over the decades, Blau proved himself again and again to be perhaps the most far-reaching and thoughtful of American theorists on Beckett, on theatre, on performance. But he was, inseparable from the thought, also one of its most rigorous and daring of writers, with a prose style that aggressively, theatrically performed that thought’s forceful emergence through his richly extending sentences. For instance, in a chapter from *Reality Principles*, 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. (*Reality* 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 which “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, frankly, Blau’s entire body of work—offers the promise (as well as, whether we want it or not, the moral responsibility) of a compassionate perception which, engaging “every brain cell,” must be thoughtfully earned. Otherwise, Blau implies, why bother at all; for anything less would likely result in platitudes of — let’s face it — brain-*less* repetition.

Blau both begins and ends *Reality Principles* with a question of real ontological gravity, in terms that Beckett would no doubt have shared, offering it perhaps as an answer to another question asked in an earlier chapter, “*Why theatre at all?*” (117). He responds by returning us, though, not to the brain alone but to that mortal body enframing it: “What is the theatre, 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; “theatre is thought” (11), Blau affirms, where one sees tenuously presented, in time, a body vanishing.

In a memoriam for Beckett, Blau wrote that the author "made it hard in mourning to mourn him, fittingly, in anything but his own words." And that seems just as fitting of Blau, who wrote so powerfully, for so many years of his life. Certain insights would recur in his writings, repetitions even; if you waited long enough, you'd hear them...read enough, you'd see them, such as, his conviction of the theatre, that, as already stated (and now repeated by me), "...the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes. If you're sufficiently patient, it will happen. You will see it, but it will not be visible." I sat in front of Blau in the seminar room in Milwaukee as he said a variation of these lines many times, and, powerful as it always was, each time it was followed by a dramatic silence, and then, an almost impish grin; Blau would look directly at us, as if challenging us to imagine, to see *just that*; he'd say, smiling, "if you just wait long enough."

Or, another recurring thought, of the theatre, Blau writes: "What is the theatre, but the body's long initiation in the mystery of its vanishings?" And *of that*, and of Blau... well, we can't say that we hadn't been warned, that we hadn't been initiated, hadn't been made to *think this through, to see this coming*.... Still, the vanishing remains mysterious and sad, deeply sad.... of the loss of a man, a great man, Herbert Blau, a man who, loved, will be deeply missed by so many.

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