

Out, Damned Overactors!

By Theodore Dalrymple

When I am in England, I rarely go to the cinema, largely because the taste of the English public is so low. Recently, however, I saw *Macbeth*, a feature film of a live theatrical performance. Suffice it to say that I have seen worse, even much worse.



But that is not to say a lot, considering the level to which productions of Shakespeare's plays have fallen. My wife, who is French, long ago pointed out that, while she could follow Shakespeare as enunciated by older actors, she found it more difficult to do so with the younger ones, whose vocal register goes from mumble to shout without passing through clarity, and who seem to enunciate unclearly, either from principle or incapacity.

In general, no Shakespearean production is now complete without at least one actor, and preferably more than one, throwing himself, or themselves, onto the ground in moments of high emotion. This cannot be in the name of realism, for even now, when people are so bad at controlling themselves, this is not a gesture that they often resort to. (The mothers of some of my young female Muslim patients apparently used to do so

when their daughters refused to marry the first cousin to whom, unbeknownst to them, they had long been betrothed, their mothers claiming that they were going to die of a heart attack unless obedience was forthcoming.)

Ralph Fiennes played Macbeth and Indira Varma Lady Macbeth, and hers was far the better performance; perhaps she was the better directed. Ralph Fiennes is, of course, a great star, but, having little knowledge of the workings of theater, I don't know how much of any deficiencies in a star's performance are attributable to the director and how much to the star him- or herself. Can a star of sufficient fame overawe or overrule a director?

Be that as it may, the tendency to keep the emotional pitch at a high level now seems general. This in itself tends to promote poor diction, for it is difficult to enunciate well at high emotional pitch for any but the briefest period. The first duty of an actor is to make himself understood, and not just by his tone of voice, such as a dog might understand (though *my* dog, of course, was a brilliant linguist-polyglot, in fact).

The actor's words must not only be decipherable, but their meaning should not be lost in a welter of distractingly extravagant gesture, all the more so where the meaning is subtle. No interpretation of Shakespeare can be final, but mode of delivery can destroy. It is a mistake to suppose that the poetry of the 17th century must be delivered with the intonations of a discussion in a bar at the present time.

Constant overemphasis, such as we encounter in so many productions nowadays, is inimical to subtlety and good judgment. Perhaps it is resorted to by actors and directors for fear that without it, the audience would become bored or fail to grasp the significance of what is being said, though in fact the opposite is the case. An overemphatic actor is like a drill sergeant who must break the raw recruits in. But

a drill sergeant's repertoire is necessarily limited.

The question, as is so often the case, is whether the supply creates the demand, or the demand the supply. Does overacting create people who are incapable of appreciating subtlety and the implicit rather than the explicit, or is it that an audience already incapable of appreciating subtlety and the implicit rather than the explicit calls forth such acting, because nothing else would please or mean anything to it?

Whatever the origin of the phenomenon, the relationship is now dialectical, or self-reinforcing. An expression that once would have been considered extravagant becomes first ordinary and then incomprehensibly muted. You must scream to be heard, let alone listened to.

Vehemence of expression is taken by very large numbers of people to be indicative of strength of feeling. Not far from where I write this, there is a bar where people aged between 20 and 40 gather on Friday and Saturday nights to have what they call a good time. They don't just laugh, they scream with laughter. I have spent much of my life laughing—the world, said Horace Walpole, is a tragedy to him who feels and a comedy to him who thinks—but I have never emitted such a sound, and to me their laughter has the edge of desperation: They are not so much finding something funny as persuading others, and perhaps themselves, that they do so, and that therefore they are enjoying themselves. In all this, actual enjoyment is lost.

The overemphasis of expression is quite general. An advertisement of a happy person must now show him with his mouth wide open as if in a scream of joy, or else punching the air, like a footballer who has just scored a goal. Quiet satisfaction is no satisfaction at all. Tennis players resort to uppercuts, as if combating a boxer visible only to them. The spectators at Wimbledon now exclaim or shout at every point like ill-brought-up children unable to control

themselves, which perhaps they were. As for political gestures, they include throwing soup at masterpieces in public galleries; the extravagance of the gesture supposedly signifies to others, and again perhaps to him or her who makes it, the depth of the concern behind it. In the beginning was the Gesture: The feeling will follow. As for thought, who needs it?

The internet and social media, theoretically perfect means for rational discussion, have promoted an epidemic of vehemence. Of course, I paint with a broad brush: Uniformity is not to be expected in media used by hundreds or even thousands of millions of people. But there is a tendency for people to resort to insult of an escalating violence very quickly, as if by their verbal aggression they are proving a real commitment to a cause such as justice, equality, protection of the environment, or even economic growth.

Of the use of a black actress to play the part of the physician in *Macbeth*, as if casting for a theater production were but an opportunity not to be missed for social engineering and indoctrination of an audience, I will not speak.

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