

[ I ] 94. *At Disallow* a troupe of *Gestures Drama* performers from the far South, wearing cuscorn hats, playing the *alba* and throwing cocineal-dyed sycamore seeds into the audience, introduced a new work called *The Gripping Tongue*. The prologue of this tempestuous drama of chin-chucking, scrotum-holding, and refined vocal dexterity centred around the looped consonants of the alphabet. It set in motion a plot that logically could only end in enforced silence. The audience could not anticipate how. Finally the long play drew to a close, and a servant with a snuffer on a long pole began to extinguish the candles. In the gathering dark, the chief performer on stage called for a volunteer from the audience. The willing spectator was promptly seized as he stepped on to the stage and his tongue was nailed to a board. The audience was appalled. The Blue Theatre-police rushed the stage. The chief performer, known in the subsequent trial as *the Hammerer*, was jailed. The theatre manager was fined and the theatre was closed for twenty-four hours. Notices were pinned up promising heavy fines and imprisonment for all such future offenders. The moaning victim with a bloody mouth proved not to be a true member of the audience but a planted performer, and three days later it was reported that a small boy playing among the theatre seats, had discovered a trick nail, two halves of a metal bolt connected to a springed hinge.

95. *Gestures Theatre*, subject to excesses of expression, and some said, to excess itself, became the subject of constant appraisal within its own terms and also in terms of general cultural and social affairs.

The ever-expanding familiarity with the habits, contents, concepts, language, grammar, syntax and characteristics of *Gestures Drama* amongst all sections of the population, also placed it in the special interests of the judiciary and of politics.

It could be said that, despite all the rules and regulations, self-imposed and imposed by legislation, *Gestures Theatre* was very alive and developing fast, though certainly not always in directions

applauded by everyone.

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There were three major arenas of concentration; an intellectual Gestures Drama, a burlesque Gestures Drama, stretching from farce to pornography, and a family entertainment Gestures Drama.

The first of these contained great refinements and often had as its subject matter the reworking of historical events based on the premise of “*if only ...*”. It deliberated on reversing or altering historical verdicts like the murder of the heir of Geppram Filo, and the impeaching of the impostor Leastring and the contrived evidence given at the trial of Marshal Hockinray, and the illegitimacy of Achim Olopper, and the false imprisonment of Panal Cutek. The structure of such dramas was often based on long and complex gestural dissertations. They were viewed by audiences kept deliberately small because of the requirement to be up close to the action to be certain of catching all the subtleties of eye and finger-tip activities. Self-reflexivity was strong and devices to demonstrate artifice were used with wit. There were many aristocrats, ambassadors and marshals as performers, bringing with them, from their social milieu, much play with gloves, long hair, platform shoes, ritualised eating with the left hand, eye-glasses, linen specific to the female anatomy, animal perfume, and at a later stage vocalisation through clenched teeth. They also played much with the colour blue which became essential for facial make-up, such that this type of theatre was often referred to by the critics as “*Blue-Faced-Theatre*”, by the cognoscenti as “*Ultramarining*”, and by the contemptuous as so much “*Wording*”.

The burlesque-to-erotics Gestures Drama often steered on a very narrow ground between acceptability and censored prosecution. It gained much of its publicity and subsequent income from acts calculated to irritate the censor. There was a persistent showing of the buttocks, the least gender-specific anatomical feature, which were often painted red in case anyone missed the point that the

[3] buttocks could be beaten. There was much pissing into wooden bowls by standing male performers and sometimes by standing female performers. It was argued, quite cogently, in various obscenity trials that this was satirical comment on the exorbitant fortunes and subsequent arrogant behaviour of the Bantry Conductors whose ammonia industry, needing copious supplies of urine, had a monopoly in the dyeing trade which made them inseparable allies of the great cloth manufacturing industrialists, the Squarean'all Ambassadors. These Ambassadors were easy targets for satire, not least because, as a group, they favoured very masculine women as wives, women with heavy musculature and excessive body-hair, and a tendency to go bald on the head at menopause. These women were by no means trans-sexuals or homosexuals, but it was forever jokingly said, that Squarean'all men would only marry women who could urinate standing up like a gentleman, ideally with one hand, the right hand, guiding the urine flow, and the other hand, the left hand, twirling the moustache, an activity referred to for a time, as "*blue soup-pissing*".

The third area of Gestures Drama was orienteered towards family entertainment and was characterised by much holding of hands, cheek kissing, communal eating and dormitory sleeping, and the wearing of padded clothing which had a sense of anticipating a perpetual winter that had to be defeated, but might also have been a very strong reaction to any indications or usages of nudity. There was also the curious and soon necessary event of the "*Long good-bye*". Ten minutes of leave-taking by any character exiting the stage became essential, and much applauded if it managed to touch the heart. Commentators said it originated from the very prevalent anxiety of the plague years when such was the swiftness of a plague death it was never certain when two family members would ever see one another again, and a good good-bye was essential.

Outside these three dominant Gestures Drama genres, there were

at various times, other possible subject-agendas, but they did not prosper well outside local areas. Catchamole describes what he calls a mystical genre of Gestures Theatre which specialised in after-dark performances that played on audiences' collective superstitions and helped to develop artificial lighting technologies as a by-product.

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Another genre was largely based on the theme of the procession as a metaphor for sequence, chronology and time, and often dealt with social hierarchies and pecking orders, and the way communities were structured from emperor to slave. Since the companies involved were often small, it developed great ingenuities in getting one actor to play many parts in sequence very rapidly, itself a comment on social mutabilities. In some parts of the Eastern Patch, it became very popular such that stage architecture was adapted to better suit its requirements, making the stage shallow but very wide, with many hidden doors so that performers could make quick exits and entrances to change costumes and characters. Sometimes to make a procession appear longer the stage was constructed in two storeys. It was also intellectually fascinated in not giving definitive performances and consequently offered constant variations on its theme, apparently being supportive of one thesis one evening, only to disagree with it the next, making comment on the fickleness of opinion. It was not strong on narrative and only really admired by practitioners within the theatre who demanded forever increasing refinements, and by those addicted to ideas of steady state behaviour, a sort of permanent theatre that never stopped. One procession performance at Nanvivet continued for three days, minutely recreating a society in a state of fashionable change, the product of fifty years reduced to seventy-seven hours, that starting walking slowly along the narrow stage dressed elaborately in red talking in the female language of Grostate, and finished walking dressed in black, talking in the masculine language of Hetrophe, very slowing

[5] changing from one state to the other, button by button, shoe-buckle by shoe-buckle, preposition by preposition, adjective by adjective.

*96. A Southern Gestures Drama company erected a white canvas tent in an empty green meadow near Bifolding and offered three short plays on the themes of Midwifery, Acupuncture and Barbering.*

The Moderator's Blue Police were alerted on account of the company's cuscorn hats and the chin-chucking habit, certain indications, as they saw it, of dissension. Ten officers of the Blue Police made moves to sit on the edge of the stage when a woman gave milk from her breast to an elderly man dressed as a philosopher, but they were not prepared for the events of the start of the third play when the theatre troupe master called for a volunteer from the audience to urinate in a silver bowl on stage and have his head barbered. A volunteer duly appeared, and, as he provided the urine, they swiftly cut off his arm with a curved knife, throwing the amputated limb into the auditorium. The audience screamed and shouted and howled. The Blue Police rushed into the auditorium to recover the arm, but it was not found.

The actor holding the curved knife was jailed for two years and the theatre was closed for a season. The amputee was later discovered to be a theatre employee. The severed arm was eventually discovered covered in flies. Although the facts were kept secret until after the trial of the theatre manager, the arm was proved to have been made of wax, and had been smeared with honey. It was also later reported that the milk came from a cow and the urine was a very dry white wine. Both milk and wine were drunk to celebrate a successful deception.

*97. The seven Ambassadors of the Squarean'all, all related for three generations by blood and marriage, and all in some way financed by the large fortunes made through the manufacture of cloth, began to see a great value for themselves in a very public association with Gestures Drama.*