

## Art, and the Art of Teaching

What do you read, my Lord? —Words, words, words . . .

### I

Of course a great artist can't be taught to be a great artist. Why then do we pore so eagerly over their biographies and autobiographical writing, the endless collections of letters (mostly un-illuminating), the scribbling in diaries? To find the mystery, how that work which survives, continues to delight decades or centuries later, was created. What is the relationship between life and art, we ask so stupidly. The secret why that otherwise ordinarily neurotic, pedestrian, unhappy or, perhaps more puzzling, that happy or well-adjusted person became a great novelist, or playwright, actor, or director. Or the great ones among the composers, dancers, painters, architects, and for that matter the chemists, the physicists, and biologists. All who transcend the ordinary, who lift competence and turn it into something else, performing a service, and presenting an unexpected gift.

And the luck of it, the circumstances—there was the time to do it, when it could happen—and who recognizes that, who promotes it, the connections. What if your first novel was published on the day of Pearl Harbor, as was Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*? Why was everyone crying at Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* in New York after 9/11? Since we can't even begin address those realities, let's talk about what we can

see—the teaching of art, of literature and the theater arts in the universities. Most of the theater artists who have written essays for this volume are serious teachers, as well as working artists.

The eternal questions posed by literature and brought to the stage have changed little:

What matter? Who goes there?<sup>1</sup>

Thy business? How goes it here? All dead.

That controlled uncertainty, the not knowing what is going to happen next is the essence of drama. All art springs from wondering. The common spring is that rush of pleasure, which brings the blood up and the tears.

## II

Chicago is in the middle of a theatrical renaissance, with a large diverse community of actors, playwrights, designers, and directors living here and making a living here. The simultaneous presence of Steppenwolf Theatre, Lookingglass Theatre, the Goodman Theatre, the Court Theatre, Victory Gardens, Writers' Theatre, as well as Hypocrites, Greasy Joan, the House Theatre, and many, many others, is living proof of this. The contributors to this volume are not all from Chicago nor are they all trained or associated with Northwestern University, although many of them work together and have long lasting associations, some of them going back to when they were students.

The academic theater tradition at Northwestern has always been text driven, literary—as Frank Galati, Mary Zimmerman, David Catlin, and Virgil Johnson describe—laying performance on unexpected texts, challenging the form by creating theater pieces from texts never designed to be staged. The Department of Theatre at Northwestern began as the Department of Reading Aloud, became, after several transformations, Performance Studies within the School of Speech, and now is embraced in the School of Communication. Literature requires that you speak back. Performances of actors dramatizing the reading of names in the phone book were legendary, a reminder that a gifted theater artist can impose emotion and structure, order and beauty on any series of words, in the

1. All *Hamlet* and *King Lear* quotations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare Kittredge Players Illustrated Edition* (Ginn & Co., 1958).



spaces between words, and in the absence and expectation of words. Unfortunately, the converse is also true, the attempted dramatization of the most poetic, thrilling words will fail when delivered on flat feet.

If the making art or science or invention cannot be taught, if the leap of the imagination must be spontaneous, the foundation can be laid. In the theater where the effort is always a group effort, the role of an individual teacher will always be tempered by the presence of the others necessary to make it happen. And this selection, attention, preparation for the moment is critical.

For literature, for fiction and poetry, there must be at the beginning a single person sitting down to put pen to paper, or to tap out what appears magically on a screen. To pick up a pen, or a piece of charcoal, is an act of hope. The making of art, the experience of art, seems to be inextricable from the need to live with others, to observe and be observed, in villages, towns and cities, the need to hear the news, to talk and whisper.

We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask them forgiveness. So we'll live,  
And pray and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out—  
And take upon 's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

Ten centuries later someone will see on a scroll unfurled the carefully drawn carriages carrying gentlemen in robes and the ladies with jewels in their hair, at their necks, as the procession makes its way down a highly stylized, angled projection of a walled road—to a wedding, a funeral of a consul, an offering to an oracle—and there will be the recognition of a portrait of how some people presented themselves to each other, and how they lived a long time ago in a distant place.

So when I moved to Chicago and became part of Northwestern University, it was a delight to find that our university not only had a long and distinguished history of teaching theater, but also provided an intellectual and institutional home to some of the most original and exciting theater artists practicing in America. Watching their work,

getting to know them, has been another education and is the inspiration for this volume.

### III

As a young person I walked into Vladimir Nabokov's Masterpieces of European Literature class and on the first day recognized that I was in the presence of an extraordinary intelligence. This was before *Lolita*, before *Conclusive Evidence*, the haunting memoir later retitled *Speak Memory*, which Nabokov remarked he called *Conclusive Evidence* because "it was conclusive evidence that I exist."

At the first lecture—and they were lectures, this was long before interactive teaching was in vogue—I sat myself down next to Mrs. Nabokov, the famous Vera, his scribe and muse, and copied down every word he said. I didn't know what else to do. She smiled and nodded approvingly at my scurrying pen. I treasured any notice either of them took of me. It was as if I had been conscripted into service in a strange nameless brigade. Yes, he delivered the same lectures for many years. Some academics criticized Nabokov for that, and for making easy fun of the Constance Garnett translations. Decades later I came to appreciate the crafted performance art those lectures were, even with the seemingly spontaneous digressions and offhand jokes scripted and repeated year after year, as was the assertion of the commonality of the goals of art and science.

When I announced with sophomoric certainty to the then chairman of the English Department at Cornell—Vladimir Nabokov was in the tiny, fractious Department of Comparative Literature—that I wanted to take every course Professor Nabokov taught, the chairman of the English Department replied: that would be a waste of time. There was another lesson, not lost on me and one that served me well. I may have been a greenhorn from California but I knew that was dead wrong.

My freshman English teacher, on the other hand, a recent graduate of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, later himself a well known novelist and poet, did not share the chairman's attitude: he directed me to find Nabokov's European novels in the library. So I had another reason to climb those slippery circular iron stairs in the stacks of the beautiful Cornell library tower. Later, I reviewed *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and sat in another class as Nabokov joked about *Lolita* jousting with *Doctor Zhivago* for first place on the *New York Times* best-seller list.



Much later when I was marooned and pregnant in Kampala, I spent hours on weekday afternoons in the tiny and then peaceful university library up the road and found there more pre-*Lolita* Nabokov novels, left as a gift perhaps by some long departed colonial professor of English who may have considered himself a writer. First editions of *Bend Sinister* and *Laughter in the Dark* were in the Makerere University library, I wrote Mrs. Nabokov, receiving months later a very polite reply from Montreux. This long before e-mail and when the international telegraph and telephone were unreliable and unavailable, and the spirits of my undergraduate days were far away.

But soft! Behold! Lo, where it comes again!  
I'll cross it though it blast me—Stay illusion!

...

Looks it not like the King.

I had earlier abandoned the search for the ghost of my own dead father in the libraries and halls of economics and banking, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, leaving, in the middle of a gray eastern winter, the graduate study of economics for the Iowa Writers Workshop to study, following my former freshman English teacher at Cornell, George P. Elliott. Indeed he became my workshop teacher, mentor, friend, and he gave me away at my wedding.

The Cornell English Department then and still publishes a distinguished literary journal, *Epoch*, which I worked on for four years, but the same small group showed up for readings by poets and fiction writers. There was a vibrant culture of undergraduate theater. At the Iowa Writers' Workshop an audience of three hundred people came to hear a poet. Cornell had a few excellent writers as teachers, mostly of Freshman English—this was when only two universities, Iowa and Stanford, offered a graduate fine arts degree in “creative” writing—but at Cornell we were the runts of the department, the people who didn't aspire to graduate school in English at Harvard or Columbia. This brings up another point for the teaching of theater, art, or science: critical mass.

The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop was an entirely different academic endeavor. The writers were important people at the university. The rivalry between the poets and the fiction writers on the softball field was legendary, with the macho poets usually victorious. The University of Iowa champion football and basketball teams were followed avidly in the workshop by students and faculty, and by my new husband. What was not discussed was that the black football and basketball players were

housed in separate dormitories. I only knew that because a black poet in the workshop told me, but I didn't know what to do or think about it.

At Iowa a very young Philip Roth, flush with the unexpected success of *Goodbye Columbus* and before the deluge of fame and outrage elicited by *Portnoy's Complaint*, taught a great books course of his own devising and introduced me to Isaac Babel, Italo Calvino, I. B. Singer. Philip Roth was passionate about the books, very married, and very much the protégé of Saul Bellow. Probably he was writing *Letting Go*, not that he talked about his own work, but he did talk amusingly, ironically about his life, his family, and about the curiosity of finding himself at twenty-six living with a stepdaughter at an adolescent stage he still remembered.

Philip Roth was very precise and careful about what we read, about himself, somewhat hypochondriacal, and with my workshop teacher we brought wine in a brown bag to the one steak restaurant and went in together on a purchase of some awful tasting dietary supplement which was to make us all thin. Only Philip Roth succeeded. Charming, serious about his service to the teaching of literature, Roth showed none of the darkness and steely sheen, which was to characterize some of his work after *When She Was Good*. Roth and Nabokov had the same view: a writer must read and identify only with the author, never with the characters. And, of course, don't waste time with any writer who isn't doing something that is worth your full attention.

#### IV

Some five years later, pregnant with a third child, I was back in Chicago, having lived in Kampala, Uganda, for two years where I worked for the astonishing African literary magazine *Transition*. I wrote a note asking Saul Bellow for a part time job—enclosing a review essay of mine on new American fiction from *Transition*, which argued that *Herzog* was the best of an usually rich crop of new novels coming out with a new identity for themselves and American literature. He hired me for a few dollars an hour for a few hours a week—I only paid my babysitter a dollar an hour—to wade through the hundreds of letters he had received in response to *Herzog*, a book which was a homage to the epistolary novel, and thus the solipsistic circle was complete.

Bellow was teaching then, at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, like Nabokov perched in a usual academic place.



I did not take or sit in on any of his classes. I was interested in what they were reading, though, and who the students were. He was having them read Theodore Dreiser, a writer whom I did not come to appreciate until returning to Chicago thirty years later. Bellow didn't seem to take his teaching very seriously; and he was puzzled as to why his students had so little sympathy or interest in Dreiser's work, which suited his own dark mood at the time. Soon he was having me read Tanazaki and Mishima and Graham Greene, and writers I had never heard of who wrote one good book and disappeared.

Bellow had not yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature and was pleased and amused by his fame and relatively recent prosperity. He would have laughed at Woody Allen's remark to Studs Terkel: "Having money just means you fail with a higher class of woman." He was grappling with a new public self, shedding his old identity and a wife, and enjoying it all but troubled by whom to serve now that he was a success, as became clear in *The Dean's December* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

Bellow had written a play and had disastrous experiences with the theater. When I was there, he traveled for a day to a university performance of his play, *The Last Analysis*, a theatrical presentation of his preoccupations in *Herzog*, only to find the show had been cancelled and no one had bothered to call and tell him. This to a man who, no matter what, wrote everyday from eight in the morning until noon.

Once again, while considerably absorbed in my own teeming life, I knew immediately that I was in the presence of an extraordinary and original intelligence, someone who cut to the quick, and had an unerring nose for the genuine. He was always in pursuit of a goal, and in service of some higher good, but what? He knew what kind of a man he himself was, too, not just from narcissistic self-reflection. To be in his orbit was itself an education. He was never not thinking like a writer, and if he turned his attention to you or your work, it was a searchlight shining right in your face.

Who's there? Nay answer me! Stand and unfold yourself.

For me, then, the best part may have been that I could climb, huffing and puffing, to his tiny fourth floor Committee on Social Thought office at the University of Chicago, a few afternoons a week, and drink in some silence and have the room to myself, before he would sometimes come and we would go through the motions of going through the huge pile of mail on the tables and floor. They were both a metaphor and a reality, the letters in response to letters, which were themselves

imaginary responses in an epistolary novel. The then later real response, or lack of response we crafted was the tangible, intangible bubble of art. That year Bellow never did give any of those letters to the University of Chicago Library, although eventually most ended up in the archives. I read through hundreds of the letters, and they became another part of my education: how readers respond to what novelists write.

Many women, complete strangers, wrote and invited him for lunch or coffee, with a not very veiled invitation for more! Some were from old friends, many from other writers, some from literary critics—he had little use for those, saying he only paid attention to what other writers said about writing—and some from old lovers or companions who wrote in amazement, he said, to ask if he was the same (unwritten: unsuccessful, ordinary) person they had known years ago. That refrain would be reprised later as well. Part of my job was fielding random enquiries, and I met more writers, such as John Berryman, who came to town as a visiting fireman, and Cy Colter, who became a friend, improbably picked up with thirty years later in Chicago.

## V

Later, during another stint in East Africa, while living in Kenya, I was hired to be a ghost writer and editor for another powerful, enigmatic man, Bildad Kaggia, the Mau Mau leader in the forest in the 1950s, a defendant in the notorious Kapanguria Trial where he, Jomo Kenyatta, and the others were all sentenced to die on the basis of evidence concocted by the British. Kaggia had decided to write an autobiography, and his editor, an Englishman at East African Publishing, hired me to write the book. For want of the seven pounds (the value of a cow) his father was unwilling to pay, Kaggia never went to the high school for Africans attended by the next several presidents of Kenya and most of the African members of Parliament. Instead he lied about his age, joined the British Expeditionary Force, and was sent to Palestine. Kaggia's life story had more real drama than could be contained in any novel or play and, even in its simple factual retelling, was an astounding narrative.

Thou art a scholar; Speak to it, Horatio.  
Looks it not like the King? Mark it, Horatio  
Most Like. It harrows me with fear and wonder



It would be spoke to.  
Question it, Horatio.

We would sit on a park bench, Kaggia and I—by that time he walked with difficulty with a cane—whether for reasons of security or privacy or convenience, I never knew. I would sit with my pencil and pad, and he would talk looking straight ahead with his hands folded on top of his cane. Kaggia would tell me the stories of what happened to him and what he did, and I would write down every thing he said. Once again, I found myself pressed into a strange service. The stories were extraordinary, but I never doubted they were true.

Sometimes I would ask him questions, and sometimes he would answer. Other times he would be silent in response. Then I would go home and type up what he told me, add some connections, edit it, and the next week he would read it, correct it. I would ask more questions, and we would go down another path. More typing, more editing. No computers, no e-mail, no word processing. Just writing and editing and typing, and copying and copying again. A book, a life story emerged. I did turn the experience into fiction, writing what now seems an unsatisfactory short story titled “The First Secretary.”

The publisher who paid me five hundred dollars found the book Kaggia and I produced so readable that he delayed its publication, probably fearing it would jeopardize the status of then president (and former codefendant with Kaggia) Jomo Kenyatta, an African leader who seems benign by current standards. Kaggia had planned that the book would launch his own campaign for president, as the only Kikuyu challenger to Kenyatta, and perhaps that was what the publisher feared. He would be king.

Then suddenly Kaggia withdrew his candidacy and from political life and would answer no questions. This mysterious stepping back from a rather small man who had faced down armed policemen on his doorstep, been thrown into jail by the Kenyans under the same laws as the British used to imprison him, had been beaten and shot, and yet always remained undeterred by threats to his own life and those of his wife and children. He was driven to serve, maniacally selfless.

Bits and pieces of the book were published over the years in bowdlerized form, and then only outside of Kenya. I learned another lesson: I had written the book, but didn't own it, and it was about someone else's life. There was interest in publishing an English edition of a biography of Kaggia in America, but I didn't have the rights to sell the book we

had written, although Bildad Kaggia wanted an American edition. The book couldn't be published in America, and never was, although it would have found readers in America in the 1970s. Those rights had been long ago signed away to the Englishman.

## VI

Not long after Joyce Carol Oates and her husband Ray Smith, and the *Ontario Review*, had arrived at Princeton, I sent them a piece of short fiction in an interoffice envelope, which prompted Joyce Carol Oates to call my husband at his Princeton University office and say that they wanted to publish his story. Soon we were pals and going for dinner and having parties together. Most of us were university teachers with great freedom, leisure, money, exceptional students, and a life that allowed for social activity, travel, and talk. Joyce Carol Oates herself had the reputation of being a serious and dedicated teacher of writing. Over the years I was to watch, with a sharp intake of breath, that enormous intelligence and long artistic reach transform, sometimes with little disguise, the material of the lives of our friends into novels, plays, and stories. To witness this was startling and amusing and sometimes infuriating, especially since I had always fiercely maintained that as a fiction writer I never wanted to write stories or novels about the lives and loves of people in suburban university towns like Princeton, New Jersey. This was just what Joyce Carol Oates was doing with great glee and aplomb. Certainly I wasn't doing it, although later the book I published with Ontario Review Press did include some forays in that direction.

To see Joyce Carol Oates apparently effortlessly recreate with stunning sophistication the world in which we were at that moment living was arresting, and a challenge, even to observe. There was the hilarious and sometimes hurtful *roman à clef* aspect, and then the larger question of whether that really was us, and our community. I always felt as amusing, as apt, as sharply satirical as her portraits were, she held something back in order to continue to live amongst us. Nor did it feel as if love was the moderating reason for this restraint, although her being a woman was evident everywhere.

He was a man, take him for all in all.

Surely we deserved harsher scrutiny, to be taken to task for falling short in the moral measurement she applied with such fierce precision in



those novels about uneducated people in upstate New York in the 1950s, the America of her childhood. She was not deceived, even if taken in by this clever, self-congratulatory group, which took itself and its importance far too seriously. We always knew all the answers, had always been rewarded for that by ourselves and others, and we never were at a loss for words. Even our infrequent self-criticism was entertaining and full of wit.

It would have elicited more than a barking laugh of recognition if her unerring moral compass had been allowed to point and stayed fixed upon that privileged little island in America, made possible by an extraordinarily wealthy university, where we so pompously sat. What if she had considered the responsibility we took or didn't take for our lives there? I suspect I too would have held my punches had I chosen us for the subject of my fiction, and perhaps that is why I looked elsewhere, and why she was braver. For to look closely would have required a harsher judgment, and perhaps a change.

## VII

By this time, I had gone to law school, partly because I wasn't earning enough money working—at a job I hated—or writing fiction no one seemed to want to buy or read, and there was nowhere in Princeton at that time where a woman with a degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop could teach writing. As my husband pointed out, I needed to get a real job. Soon, perhaps not soon enough, I was in the thick of it as a public defender, drowning in the conundrums and contradictions of the criminal law, but soon teaching too, first at the University of California at Berkeley—with great pleasure since it was where my father had been a professor, and I could sense his ghost at the unchanged faculty club where the moose was still on the wall—then at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law, and at Princeton.

If I had gone to law school to find subject, I had found it—ironically first while on leave from law school in Nigeria—although I still didn't know what to do with it. All the teaching turned into the teaching of writing, and the practice turned into the writing of legal reports and articles and academic papers. By then I was writing in, for, and about the law for a professional audience, and that went on for years. In Nigeria I started down a path of doing research on homicide, murder, and capital punishment—with a five-year detour for rape and incest—and there was

enough in the law for several writing lives. In fact other writers were starting to take my material. I now think I spent too much time writing for that professional audience.

## VIII

Why do we question whether the practice of art can be taught? The practice of law, of medicine, are taught, as is the practice of performance and composition of music, and the quality and content of this teaching is appropriately guarded by the professions. Astronomy is taught, as is engineering, and all of the arts of invention and building. Anyone would be ridiculed who set out to build a computer or a car without looking at what has been done before—isn't that what teaching is, looking at what has gone before?

The essays in this volume are written by artists who are sometimes teachers. The ability to teach someone to play, to draw, to build something, to test a theory, or to write a poem is a great gift. The principle remains the same across the disciplines: to learn to accomplish a complicated human task, the best way is to watch or listen or talk to people who know how to do it well. You can teach someone how to ride a horse, and lay out the rules of Olympic competition, but that wordless communication between horse and rider—and the luck of it, that rider and horse are both healthy, the track firm—that may, after years of training, win a gold can not be taught. However, no one believes that some one should just mount a horse and head for the jumps.

Some artists will be articulate and willing and capable of teaching about what they do, others will not want to or have that ability, choosing not to pierce the protective veil between their work and the talking about it whose existence we all recognize. Some can talk about the game or the ride, but not do it, and mostly they should not be teachers.

## IX

And so I was writing about crime, capital punishment, hangings, and lethal injections, and counting murders and studying homicide—having started down that path as a law student while in Nigeria—but not writing murder mysteries and not writing a novel about a woman who was a public defender, in a state where the death penalty was just reenacted, a



woman who found no answers to all of the hard questions. Perhaps if I had believed in psychoanalysis I would have figured out why I could not, or would not, write directly about the life I was then living. It was certainly interesting enough, it was full of the stuff of high and low drama, even eerily comic, too full of melodrama, and the existing dramatizations frequently trivialized, marginalized, and cheapened the fact that real people had been killed and real people were going to prison, or death row. There was real work to be done there. So why did it feel like a betrayal to write about what I was experiencing straight on? How could I write a work of fiction when a real person's life was at stake, although I still put myself squarely in Nabokov's camp with those who believe that art should not be in the service of any but itself.

As I published more articles and editorials and books about murder and the death penalty, and increasingly played a public role involving lots of writing and research, my commentary turned away from the scholarly legal questions. Meanwhile the technical research, the proportionality review analysis, was ever changing, hugely challenging, and becoming of interest to the Supreme Court of New Jersey and to other courts and legal observers. My writings were now solicited, and their authorities were raked over by an ever-changing squadron of law student editors. Then, as the commercial legal publishing business outsourced, communication was with faint, accented voices with foreign questions—Is F.B.I. a common acronym?—from India, or the unidentifiable countries where the copyediting was done, but where that work would never be read.

And I was always enjoying and learning from my teaching, ostensibly about the law but always about writing, who was writing, what did they have to say, and how did it fit it with what you wanted to write. And how do you reach the audience you need to reach? Not surprisingly, there were many writers and would-be writers in the law. Many of my students in the law schools wanted to be writers, and some of them were. When the academic writing was doing its job of persuading people in the right places, or not, and the legal cases and their supporting writings were doing their work, making their way, or not, through the court system, at that point I knew I had to return to serious writing, not just continue writing in, for, and about the law, for a professional audience of lawyers and judges.

I knew I had to return to fiction because what I wanted to write about—the murderous, destructive heart of man, the web of human interactions we spin, the cruelty and compassion and love between

us—these could not be encompassed within the strictures or forms of writing acceptable to the legal profession. The stories I wanted to tell, what I had to say about the law, authority, about who has the privilege to tell whom how to behave, that could not be told within the confines of my adopted profession. In legal journals and books I said what I thought and felt about murder, rape, incest, the application of the law, who made it, who enforced it, about legalized executions and the death penalty, and I did so with increasing force and freedom, especially to my students.

That straight-ahead commentary or expression of opinion did not do the job. It wasn't that I couldn't say what I felt, because I could and did, but I could not express the complicated contradictory nature of my thoughts and feelings outside of the structure of a work of art. Only by transforming these into an imagined world could the truth be told.

I continued to teach law because the protected space of the classroom allowed for an openness of communication not present in other spheres of my life, not within the family where the urgencies of love and the need to protect and preserve structured interactions, not at the office where the collective commitment to our joint effort required everyone to ignore certain obvious and painful truths, nor among my friends where another agenda—maintaining the silhouette of community—took precedent.

When I was ready to move back into fiction writing, after years of studying and writing about the law, practicing law, teaching legal subjects, and puzzling over legal conundrums (mostly just the human inability to admit a mistake, when the technicalities were unraveled) I knew I needed to retool. It had been a long time since the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. And while I had some friends who were writers, I didn't have an artistic community of trusted colleagues where I could try out new ideas, the kind of necessary, supportive community which several of the theater artists describe in this volume.

## X

Theater brought me back to fiction. I went to plays, read plays, thought about plays, and started to read with a playwright's eye, especially after participating in an extraordinary class taught at Princeton by Jean-Claude van Italie, himself a highly original playwright. The class was an undergraduate class in playwriting, which meant the nine of us wrote



every week, dramatizing interactions from our lives, tiny scenes, baby steps, and we read them aloud and talked about what we were trying to accomplish with the writing and acting. Some of the students in the class were already accomplished actors and writers, and some had directed plays. After teaching law for more than a decade, to be in this class was a true and enlightening educational experience, a stepping from air into water.

After that class, and then another one, I wrote a couple of plays which it took me some time to realize were not very good plays, and that was useful because it bounced me right back into fiction where I was at home. The class only met once a week, but I thought about it a lot in between the meetings. I could not have gone to a similar course in beginning fiction writing. The most important thing about the class was that it disarmed me, and put me back into that part of my brain where imaginative work could begin. This gifted teacher created a protected place where art could happen, and I was able to write fiction again. And, as a side benefit, I had a new and life-long interest and appreciation for the art of the playwright and the complicated time-structured beauty of the art of the theater.

## XI

And so I wrote *Technician*, a short novel about a young man from Trenton, New Jersey, who through a series of circumstances applies for and gets the newly created job of execution technician with the state of New Jersey. I wrote this novel because the proposed regulations for the job of execution technician started appearing along with other proposed administrative regulations on my desk at the Department of the Public Advocate, not long after New Jersey reenacted the death penalty in 1982. Then I was spending all of my professional time writing about proportionality review in New Jersey, a factual and legal inquiry into who of those eligible were prosecuted for capital murder, when the law made many more eligible for the death penalty than were actually charged or sentenced to death.

This enterprise generated hundreds of pages of opinions of the Supreme Court of New Jersey, not to mention the legal briefs filed by the Office of the Public Advocate, the Attorney General, the thousands of pages of published research, and at least a thousand footnotes in legal journals, most written by me. Each footnote entry, each period, comma

and capitalization, and source in each footnote scrutinized by successive generations of law review editors at various law schools. The last such article, written a year ago for a special conference on the role of doctors in executions, circled back to my literary preoccupations in *Technician*: the use of bureaucratic procedures and language to obfuscate and confuse when the state is doing something it wants to camouflage or lie about.

I wrote *Technician* because the legal, professional discourse was too limited, too hidebound, too restricted to allow for the telling of the story I had to tell. Of course brutality, cruelty, and inhumanity were not new topics in the law or literature. Nor was murder on the order of a state something new. But the level of bureaucratic overlay, if not new, felt different. The law was masquerading as something else, as the law carried out this mandate. And no one was calling it out. It was all reality, all the time. And there was no art there. The crudity, the admitted brutality of hanging or the electric chair seemed more honest than the lethal injection administered anonymously behind a curtain to a man strapped on a gurney. Only the larger, freer form of narrative fiction could accommodate such a perspective.

The law prides itself on its objectivity, its ability to rise above decisions based upon feelings or emotion, although emotion is everywhere in the law, especially in criminal law; the emotions of repression, rage, anger, hatred, and revenge are rampant. The hatred wafts off the page of some court opinions. It is not that the law is unemotional; it is that the expression of emotion in the law must be presented as “nonemotion,” or as “objective.” When a guard beats a prisoner in a cell, we know that is wrong, and we even have a word for it and a statutory formulation of the wrong. It might even result in a criminal prosecution. Here a someone in a white coat was being instructed to play doctor, kill, and then be signed on as a state employee, with benefits, vacation, and Social Security. Who would that someone be?

Ironically, all those academic articles, the hundreds of pages of opinions from the Supreme Court of New Jersey which always went out of their way to declare the statute constitutional, and the scholarly and technical work of the New Jersey Proportionality Review Project probably did influence the legislators to repeal the New Jersey capital punishment statute more than twenty-five years later. Proportionality review delayed the reimposition of executions in New Jersey, and consequently legislators and policy makers could take a step back and evaluate what they had done and be able to move at a propitious



moment—to take the jump—when everyone was temporarily sick of all of the debates and the violence and spilled blood of a recent hideous murder was not momentarily in the news.

Art makes nothing happen, and I agree with Bruce Norris's stricture that art should delight and do no more. I find myself simultaneously nodding in agreement with Anna Shapiro's exhortation that the teaching of theater should at least be relevant to the world we live in, and with Bruce Norris's passionate plea that it not be relevant to anything but itself. A lot of art went into presenting those facts and arguments to decision makers and the public in New Jersey. It is paradoxical that some of the greatest art concerns itself with matters of profound morality and yet art mostly stumbles when it carries a message.

I wrote *Technician* because my heart was chilled by imagining an actual person, someone whom I might know, applying for the job whose supposedly objective specifications were neatly displayed in numbered paragraphs on the blue, mimeographed sheets of proposed regulations from the New Jersey Department of Corrections on my desk. Some days I would just stare back at them. There was no place to ask certain questions at that desk in my professional role, and so I asked them of myself in the course of writing the novel: what kind of a person would apply for that job? It was too easy to imagine a brute or a sadist, although there were always those in the system, so I imagined an ordinary person who might find himself applying for that job.

While writing *Technician* I didn't anticipate that psychological and sociological research, as well as the reality of twenty-five years of post-*Furman* experience with state-mandated executions by lethal injection, would support my imagined view that it was just such ordinary people who did apply for those jobs, and, if it came to it, did carry out the executions, often with a mind-numbing lack of preparation or comprehension. Not only were executions going to be done according to fake scientific instructions, but those instructions would be bungled, misunderstood, or ignored. Ordinary people, people like you and me, were going to do this and do it badly. And if this didn't matter, then nothing mattered. The scenes of executions were gruesome, bizarre, and grimly comic. The reality was that imagined in *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Laughter in the Dark*, all written more than fifty years earlier.

I didn't want to think about this conundrum within the confines of the law or another academic discipline—sociology, anthropology, psychology—although I admired what they did and saw the similarity between that work and my preoccupations. I wanted to write about what

laws like those imposing capital punishment did to the people whose job it was to carry them out—not the police officers, not the prosecutors or defense attorneys, or even the judges, they had already been turned into stock characters in the entertainment culture—but the people who got up in the morning and went to work and found this was now their job. Actually, people like me. What did this do to the human spirit, and what did it do to the law itself? After all, the law is inseparable from the people who enact it and enforce it.

Already, just the fact of those blue regulations staring back at me was making me feel creepy, as was that I was spending almost every waking minute, and increasingly my nightmares, with thoughts and images of murder, capital punishment, and executions, as I was worrying about who, if anyone, should be killed by the state. It got so I could not walk out into the employee parking lot after dark. I began to notice that the defense attorneys who spent years representing murderers in capital cases tended to be either serious, practicing Catholics or religious Jews. But I had a job to do, too, and that job was trying to persuade a very reasonable court to at least wait to execute people, most of whom had without doubt committed unprovoked, inexcusable acts of murder, with intentionality, brutality, and cruelty, people who deserved to be called evil, if that word had any meaning. And this was something else, which could not be said at the office.

So I spent many months over the course of several years writing and revising *Technician*, until I could do no more with it, even though I was far from happy with it. No one wanted to publish it, but then I started getting notes from editors saying things such as, “This didn’t win the prize, but two of the judges thought it should have.” Eventually the piece did get published in *TriQuarterly* and by the Ontario Review Press. Now *Technician* is taught in some law school classes.

*Technician* accomplished several other tasks for me as a writer, in addition to pointing me away from the audience of courts and lawyers: It was an artistic tribute and nod of gratitude to Saul Bellow. The novel’s structure was modeled upon *Seize the Day*, my favorite of Bellow’s works. There seemed something fitting in attempting to lay that anguishing subject matter over a borrowed structure of great elegance. *Technician* was also a portrait of Trenton, New Jersey, the city where for fifteen years I worked but did not live, and a portrait of some of the people I worked with who lived there and considered the city their home. I did my best to avoid the melodrama everywhere in the subject. I didn’t care if anyone else noticed that *Technician* followed the formal design of *Seize the*



*Day*; that was a satisfaction and a guidance for me alone. The art itself is an answer, even when it is frustratingly imperfect. I didn't realize that writing about Trenton was to be a warm up for writing about Chicago.

## XII

I was brought back to a place where I could write fiction by a class on playwriting. Perhaps that is all that teaching in the arts has to do, or can do, create a space in the heart or head where something can grow, remind everyone in the room that art does matter, even when, or especially when, so many things are making noise and creating distractions as they crash down around us. By putting the teaching of the art of theater, and the art of writing, squarely in the university and art school curriculum we reaffirm that art is as necessary as physics, as important as history.

What schools and universities can do for artists is provide a safe haven, a quiet harbor where artists are nourished and protected. The most important role the university can play is in supporting those parts of the institution where the arts and their disciplines are valued, as well as practiced. Sometimes such institutions are exclusive, or repressive. In recent times, the American research university has been highly competitive, broad-based, internationally oriented, open to all views, all people devoted to learning and teaching. Therein lies its strength. All great civilizations have had as their foundation the library, the storehouse of knowledge, a place where the culture is respectfully preserved so that it may survive to the next generation, and, it is hoped, the next and the next and the next generation. The Internet hasn't changed that obligation.

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was the Library at Alexandria. One of the wonders of our world is the computer and its miraculous connections. It is a game changer, just like penicillin and the birth control pill. But there still must be something to put in the library, no matter its physical confines. The need to preserve a record of who we are, how we lived, and what we believed and thought is primordial, unchanged. Technology alone can't do that without thought. The mindless archiving of the feed of the daily television news, or the preservation of everyone's e-mail is no solution. The most primitive societies make art; the most sophisticated, luxury driven, spoiled societies make art; need art; teach art.

The record of a civilization may come down to us as 55,000 Chinese scrolls walled up in one of a thousand Buddhist caves in Dunhuang in the western desert of China on the silk road. The testament that a culture leaves may be in crumbling books in trunks in Timbuktu. It may be in the photograph of a dancer in air, or in the retelling of a story whose ending everyone knows. New forms have to be created for new ideas, and for old ones. Or how will we capture the attention of an audience?

The challenge now for fiction writers, poets, and theater artists is to pull people's eyes and attention away from their screens, from the incessant clicks and beeps and those hard-edged images on the screen of the tiny phone. An audience is more than one person paying attention at the same time, unless it is the solitary reader. The magic of the Internet includes the hypnotizing blur of those tireless bouncing cartoons, and the bottomless well of pornography.

The Internet has and will continue to generate new forms of art, and theater artists and novelists will and do use these new images and technologies. The new-found possibility of reaching an audience of millions with the old and the new art is breathtaking. But the ability to reach people is not enough; someone has to have something to say that others want to see or hear.

Perhaps the Internet will force commercial television out of the mire of its obsessive trivialization and make it into the great educational medium it has never become. Why should anyone continue to be trapped by advertisements, when more entertaining content somewhere else can be found with a click? Just as our communal behavior has been forever altered by our interaction with these machines, so our art, and our teaching of it, is irrevocably changed and challenged. New art has been born in the new medium, just as our social behavior has been collectively and individually altered by our relationship with computers. Still, the basic human need for beauty, love, reflection, transcendence, meaning is unchanged. We remain beings who stare out the window and into one another's eyes, looking for the still point in the turning world.

Published books will survive, surprisingly, as books, for high culture, for low culture, for teaching and for history and politics. Books are efficient containers for culture, information, thought, and art. They last, they are easy to carry around. They can't be adulterated. And with a minimum of effort they have been and can continue to be preserved for hundreds of years. Writing will survive, drawing and singing will survive, even as the distribution of music and images and words is forever changed.



If art is going to survive, people do have to stop killing one another, on the small and large scale, and beating up on one another, on the small and large scale, and learn to look at each other and ask who is there. We never have stopped killing one another. The urge to kill seems as fundamental as the others, although heavily gendered. Every study of homicide over every century and society shows men killing men as the dominant pattern, in peace and war. While we can analyze how and why and understand some part of that, we don't seem to be able to stop. We are the richest people to ever inhabit the earth, there are more of us to take care of than ever before, yet we have so few answers.

### XIII

The real questions cannot be asked or answered alone, and they are asked most powerfully when we listen knowing that others are listening with us at the same time, in a darkened space, or in the quiet of a class. Then there comes that sense—irrational, foolish, evanescent—that we are serving something outside of ourselves, although artists don't like to talk about that either.

How now? What art thou?

A man, sir.

What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?

I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little, to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose, and to eat no fish.

What art thou?

A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the King.

If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he's for a king, that art poor enough. What wouldst thou?

Service.

Who wouldst thou serve?

You.

Dost thou know me, fellow?

No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.

What's that?

Authority.

What services canst thou do?

I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it and deliver a plain message bluntly. That which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in, and the best of me is diligence. . . .

The essays here are reflections upon the art of the theater, adaptation, performance, writing, and life in the theater by some of the most innovative artists working today. They have been pushed and prodded into putting their thoughts into this unfamiliar form, the unstructured essay. This volume is testament to the vitality of theater in America, and to the vigor and discipline of the teaching theater arts in the university. It is a record of service, tradition, and innovation, and a tribute to the teaching arts. We would be so very much poorer without their diligence.