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DOCTRINES OF AFFECTION

FROM STUDIO TO STAGE

Cossee
Amsterdam

For Emil, Ida and Marlowe

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One

Getting it Wrong

Pilot light

In the sitting room of the house of my early childhood, there was a gramophone in a custom-built cabinet. Open one door, and there was the turntable with its long spindle, where several records could be placed on top of each other. A brown Bakelite arm would swing into position at the start of a record, and when it was finished, would swing out of the way, wait for the next record to be released down the spindle, then jerk back to the first hissing grooves of the record. Open the door on the other side of the cabinet, and there were records stacked upright next to each other. They were constantly replayed. Years later, identified as Beethoven's *Archduke Trio* or *Carmen*. Papagena was there and the Trout Quintet. Between the doors of the cabinet, there was a blank wooden panel (presumably hiding the amplifier). In the middle of this was a peppercorn-sized, faceted pilot light that would glow when the set was switched on, and the valves had warmed up.

An older cousin (he must have been nine, and I was four or five) convinced me that if you looked carefully into the pilot light, you could see the miniature orchestra with all the players performing the music you heard coming from the cabinet. I peered hard at the tiny light, squinting, almost persuading myself I could just see the musicians. But then realised that this was rubbish, impossible. A tiny orchestra was conceivable, I could almost see them, but what I could not imagine was how the orchestra hidden behind the panels of the gramophone could know which record had been placed on the turntable, and so what music they had to play.

A few years later, the same cousin told me that in the war, Jews were taken to have a shower, but gas came out of the showers, and they all died. Having been almost fooled once before, I was wary. This was ridiculous. If gas and not water came out of the showers, all the Jews had to do was to switch off the tap. How stupid did he think I was? He also told me, the same cousin, how children were made, but I was on my guard. This wasn't only ridiculous, it was crude and dangerous. He wanted me to tell this to my parents, so I would get into trouble for being disgusting. I wasn't falling for that one either.

My sister was the pianist in the family. When I was ten years old, I had piano lessons for a year. I did not progress beyond the most basic exercises. I mainly remember the smell of wet dog from the collie that lay next to the piano during my lessons.

From a Chinese restaurant, I brought home plastic chopsticks and conducted the gramophone records as they played. If I couldn't play the piano, at least I could conduct with verve and great feeling. When I was fifteen and asked what I thought I would do when an adult, I replied that I would be a conductor of operas. But then I was told that, to be a conductor, you had to be able to read music. I had not thought of that, and had to recalibrate. A life in music was taken off the agenda.

Once more unto the breach (dear friends, once more)

"Boys, I'm sorry to say that the cowboy film we were going to show you was not available. However, luckily, I was able to get hold of a very interesting documentary about potato farming in Bulgaria." There would be a groan from the fifteen or so boys assembled for my birthday party. "Oh, Mr

Kentridge,” they called, “you tried that on us – you tried the same joke on us last year.”

At birthday parties, there would always be the battle with the hired projector, trying to feed the 16mm film onto the sprockets behind the lens, leaving the correct loop of film, clicking the gate behind the lens shut, making the second loop, catching the loose end of the film and finding the almost-invisible slot in the take-up reel, winding the film on so there was sufficient tension, and then switching on the motor – first click – and lamp – second click. Happy to avoid the volcanic bubbling that appeared on the wall if the lamp was put on before the motor; the heat could melt the film emulsion in a second.

Paintings had been removed to clear the sitting-room wall for the projection. The curtains would be drawn – it was never dark enough at these afternoon birthday parties – and the film would begin. But what was the nature of the enthusiastic racism that accompanied these showings? A cheer each time the cowboy shot an Indian off his horse, each time Tarzan evaded the spears thrown by the Hollywood African savages. Certainly, it was not a specifically Johannesburg or South African response (though it fitted so easily with our legislated prejudice). From the perspective of white South Africa and white Hollywood, any adversary of the hero, John Wayne or Johnny Weissmuller, deserved destruction. Our Johannesburg whoops of delight were not unique.

My parents had wealthy friends. Among the many signs of their wealth was their having a screen that could be pulled down from the ceiling of their living room, and their own projector. There would be film evenings. I’m sure they showed many different films, but I can only remember them showing two, many times over. The Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera* and Laurence Olivier as Shakespeare’s Henry V. I’m sure they did show other Marx Brothers films, the delight of Chico’s piano playing, the tedium of Harpo’s

harp playing. But regularly we would turn up for another showing of *A Night at the Opera*. Once a year, at least, we would return to Olivier's pudding-bowl haircut, the unnatural castle at Harfleur, the knights in armour being hoisted with primitive block and tackle onto their horses, and then, after two hours of waiting, there would come the cavalry charge. Walk, slow trot, trot, canter and full gallop. Still, all these decades later, an irresistible sequence. I certainly did not know at the time that the film was made in the middle of the Second World War as a morale booster.

But the English passion, the Englishness of it all, echoed with those other birthday-party films, *Reach for the Sky*, *The Great Escape*. Later, I must have been twelve, a year before my Bar Mitzvah, we had to perform a dramatic speech as part of elocution lessons, and it was natural that I chose Olivier's rousing speech from his horse at the gates of Harfleur. The words were almost familiar. I had no horse, so I sat astride a reversed kitchen chair. I had no armour, so I made chain mail out of unrolled zinc pot scourers. A breastplate made of cardboard covered with tinfoil, tied at the back with packing string. I had been given a plastic Roman sword.

Once more unto the breach, dear friends,
once more, or close the wall up with our
English dead!

I went at it full speed, full voice, plastic sword raised high. It felt right. School short-back-and-sides haircut an approximation to Olivier's style, the elocution lessons trying to remove the flat South African vowels, to get closer to what English English was meant to be.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man ...
becomes a man ...



My seventy-year-old hippocampus can't find the words ...
oh, yes –

... as modest stillness and humility.

How could I have forgotten the lines?

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage.

Then the lines became too complicated for a twelve-year-old,
too far off to recuperate now. There is a crag, a jutting out,
something confounded. But I would end with a triumphant,

God for Harry, England, and Saint George!