Double Dialogues

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Art and Pain

Bloody Roman Narratives: Gladiators, "Fatal Charades" & Senecan Theatre

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I. Introduction

In an interview not long before his death in 1995, East German playwright Heiner Müller predicted that the theatrical medium would soon be faced with an important decision. Provoked by the fact that one of his plays, *Mauser*, in which a character is executed, had been performed in a penitentiary by murderers awaiting the death penalty, Müller asked what it would mean for theatre if some one were to be really killed in a performance? A borderline would have been crossed and the medium would face a crisis:

> There will be gladiator games again in the not too distant future. There will be performances where people will be actually killed. There is already an indication of this in television, everything is moving in that direction: reality TV. What will that mean for the theatre? Will the theatre become part of it, will it be integrated or will it find another route and remain symbolic? That is the essential question (in Weber, 2001: 228).

This paper seeks to ask a question: if it is the case that the audience of mainstream entertainment are showing an overwhelming preference for ‘reality television’ over fiction as represented in film and theatre, then what can we learn from history when the line between staged actual pain and staged fictional pain became blurred?

Bert States proposes that theatre is continually fed by "a certain roughage of hard-core reality" (1985:39). This "roughage" is brought into the illusionary world of the performance as something that is full of 'phenomenal distraction,' that is, it is "phenomenally heavy with itself" and resists the tendency to pass from "presence" to semiological absence (States, 1985: 37). Such is the nature of the medium, however, that in the normal course of events the image soon loses its phenomenal shock value and becomes a convention, a sign. In moments of emerging crisis in the artform, however, such as Müller foresaw, this roughage might be so extreme as to demand "a reconstruction [of the medium] that changes some of the field's most elementary theatrical generalisations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications"

(States, 1985: 42-43).

The Roman philosopher and playwright, L. Annaeus Seneca, was, I believe, faced with just this kind of situation in the first century AD. In this paper, I will draw on the phenomenology of theatre to frame my discussion of the relationship of Seneca's theatre to the Roman gladiatorial games, and a 'theatrical' development and refinement of the games called 'costumed executions' (Shelton, in Harrison, 2000: 95) or 'fatal charades' (Coleman, 1990: 44), in which the situation envisaged by Müller was built into the format of the spectacle. I will suggest that these brutal forms of 'theatricalised' spectator sport, which appear to have been especially prominent and popular in and following Seneca's lifetime (4 BC - 65 AD), created a field within which Seneca's strangely gruesome plays could, and perhaps needed to, be written. States suggests that theatre as an artistic medium involves itself with the tension between two orders of signification--the external, workaday significations and the internal (that is, within the medium) illusionary significations--sometimes intentionally confusing them, and often "trying to subjugate one to the power of the other" (1985: 36). I will suggest that we might think about Senecan theatre as involving itself with this tension, in an attempt to subjugate the workaday (that is, the power of the phenomenally real games and executions) to the power of the illusionary (the fictional, constructed and framed world of narrative drama).

II. Gladiatorial Games

Gladiatorial combat was a "specifically Roman form of competitive sport" (Kohne & Ewigleben, 2000: 31), which thrived in the second half of the first century AD and continued in force until at least the end of the third century AD. Its antecedents, however, are to be found in the pre-Roman Etruscan culture, where these kinds of spectacles were commonly held in honour of fallen comrades. Kohne and Ewigleben comment, "the idea of shedding blood beside a dead man's grave is very old, and occurs in most ancient Mediterranean cultures. The blood was supposed to reconcile the dead with the living" (2000: 11). But in first century AD Rome and later, the funereal function of the Games seems to have waned, and their entertainment and judicial value grew. Criminals could be condemned by law to fight as a gladiators in the Ludi or Public Games, characterised by "pleasure, excess, loss of control" and "mistreatment of the body through excessive indulgence" (Toner, 1995: 66 & 72). The Ludi also included more conventional sporting activities like boxing, wrestling and chariot racing, as well as animal fights and *ludi scaenici* or theatrical games. The Etruscan influence on the format of these games has been well documented (Olivova, 1984: 164ff).

Romans appear to have been fascinated by how people faced death, "a fascination so compelling that the Romans produced spectacles at which they watched people die" (Harrison, 2000: 87). Fighters, who were usually slaves, criminals, army deserters or prisoners of war, were trained extensively in order to ensure an entertaining battle. A day's programme would commonly include a morning of animal fights, with public executions at lunchtime, and 20-25 gladiator fights in the afternoon over six hours. There were also fights between animals and men (you didn't have to be Christian to fight a lion). At times, the Emperor or a general would find it expedient to please the population with many more fights, sometimes reaching staggering proportions (see Grant, 1967; Kohne & Ewigleben, 2000; Olivova, 1984). It wasn't only the bread and circuses that the crowd longed for, as noted by the Roman satirist Juvenal in late first -

early second centuries AD (*Satires*, 10.78-81), but bloody corpses. Kohne and Ewigleben (2000: 68-69) report that in the C1 AD only some of the losers would be killed, depending on how bravely they fought, but that during the next few centuries more and more losers were killed as a matter of course. A fortunate few were freed for their extraordinary bravery, some became trainers, and some escaped. Bizarrely, it was not uncommon for young men to volunteer to become gladiators. It was ‘a man's game’ after all, and gladiators were seen as glamorous and sexy popular heroes, albeit ones with a short lifespan. The narrative patterns of Greek and Roman mythology provided the gladiators, their fans, and politically minded producers of the games, an ideal environment in which to contextualise these attitudes.

A desire to structure the experience of competitive sporting events and their outcomes can also be seen in the tendency of contemporary Western media (and perhaps also sporting fans) to create from, and/or impose onto, the sport phenomenon narratives which focus on both the personal lives and heroic status of players. Herington describes mythology as "the record of a quest for patterns of conduct, patterns of narrative, and types of human character, a record embodied in a repertoire of stories" (Herington, 1985:66), and it is in this illusionary or fictional environment, with its proven dramatic structure and climax, that the apparent desire for earth shattering, best-of-the-century clashes between teams (of giants and warriors) finds its outlet (see Rowe, 1999).

The intense excitement felt by the crowds at gladiatorial fights was vividly described by an appalled Seneca. In a famous letter, Seneca laments that the crowds are so lusty for the kill:

> Quite by chance, I went to the noon spectacles, hoping for some light entertainment and something relaxing, where human eyes could relax from bloody slaughter. It was exactly the opposite. However the games were fought before, there was compassion. Now, with frivolities omitted, the games are outright murder. The men have nothing protecting them. Their entire bodies being exposed to the blows, no shot misses its mark. Many prefer this to the ordinary pairings and request matches. Who wouldn't prefer it? No helmet or shield repels the sword. What need of armour or skill? All these things simply postpone death. In the morning hours men are thrown to lions and bears, at noon to the spectators. They demand that the murderers be thrown to future murderers and that they detain the victor for other slaughter. The only way out of the fights is death, and it is accomplished by fire and the sword. These things all take place even when the arena is empty. 'Some committed robbery, some killed a man'. But what of it? Since he killed a man he is obliged to suffer his penalty, but what has made you, poor man, obliged to watch it? 'Kill him, whip him, burn him'. Why does he kill with such lack of enthusiasm? Why does he die with such little pleasure? Let him be forced with lashes to his wounds. Let them receive mutual blows on exposed and bare chests'. When there is an intermission at the spectacles: 'Meanwhile, let men have their throats slashed so there is no lull in the action' (Epist. 7.3-5, translated by Eric Varner, in Harrison, 2000: 126).

III. Role Play and Narrative Structures

As any fan of spectator sport or unscripted theatre will know, an improvised or semi-

improvised show always has the potential to become messy, shapeless and unsatisfying. As a nation of spectators, as they have been called, the Romans would certainly have known this, and the tendency to locate gladiatorial combatants in a mythology framework was picked up and refined by the introduction of role play and a semi-structured narrative frame around the shedding of blood. K.M. Coleman has used the term "fatal charades" for an event that was common in the first century AD, which she defines as "the punishment of criminals in a formal public display involving role-play set in a dramatic context; the punishment was usually capital" (1990: 44). Shelton describes these events as follows:

> A damnatus was dressed in a costume to represent a mythical or legendary figure. He or she was then compelled to play a role and, by dying, to perform the most realistic possible enactment of the death of the dramatic persona (in Harrison, 2000: 95).

This is the ancient, state-sanctioned, theatrical version of the ‘snuff movie’ or ‘reality tv’ taken to its logical extreme. Fictional locations were also introduced into the ‘performance space,’ with arenas sometimes filled with landscapes of rocks, trees, and buildings, and underground water reserves being magically uncovered. In this kind of ‘designed’ space the punishment of the mythical figure Laureolus was a favourite narrative, involving the actual crucifixion of a criminal. Here we recall Müller’s prediction quoted at the top of this article. The spectacle was made more engaging by the introduction of a bear (called an Intruder in the television megalith, "Big Brother") who would maul the body as it hung. The Roman poet Martial describes in *de Spectaculis* VII how a criminal dressed as Laureolus was skinned alive, his entrails, muscles and limbs ripped apart by the bear, until human form was no longer recognisable. The death of Hercules by fire was also popular (Shelton in Harrison, 2000: 95). Grotowski's (1968: 212) statement that the actor is not there for us but instead of us is a notion that seems exceptionally apt in this context.

Role-play in this brutal enactment takes on particularly serious dimensions. While in theatrical presentations of various kinds, or even quasi-theatrical sporting events like modern ‘championship’ wrestling, role-play involves the partial replacement of the actor’s private identity by a public or even mythological personae, in the case of "fatal charades" the erasure was catastrophic. In the case of the Laureolus enactment, the identity of the condemned man was mocked and utterly obliterated both by role-playing a mythical figure and by the gentle ursine attention he was receiving. Shelton notes,

> The infliction of pain was an essential element of the execution, as was the humiliation and dehumanisation of the condemned, whose body was made ugly by mutilation, whose voice was reduced to non-verbal shrieks, and whose terror and agony provoked no sympathetic response from the crowd [those killed had] relinquished the privileges of membership in human society (in Harrison, 2000: 91).

The bodies of gladiators, executed animals and animal-like criminals were inscribed as inferior, marked by cuts and for cuts. Their scars and deformities clearly marked their degraded status. They were thus able to be subjected to violence with impunity (Shelton, in Harrison, 2000: 89).

The phenomenon of "fatal charades" has, I believe, precursors that reveal how embedded in Roman society was this kind of violent and public infliction of pain within

the framework of spectatorship, narrative and role play. It is a dreadful and telling irony in this context that our word ‘character’ derives from the ancient Greek ‘kharakter,’ the primary meaning of which is a mark that has been cut into something, like an impression cut into a coin or seal. Indeed numerous scholars (including Heurgon, 1961: 266; Beacham, 1999: 11; Bieber, 1961: 147) trace the Latin word for character, persona (mask, masked actor, character), back to an enigmatic figure in Etruscan culture named Phersu, who displays this same combination of 'phenomenal' violence, theatrical character, and spectator sport. In an Etruscan tomb painting, found within the 'Tomb of the Augurs’ in the remains of the Etruscan city of Tarquinia, Phersu holds a rope that constrains and/or incites both another man (who is naked, has a cloth over his head and is brandishing a club) and a wild dog that is attacking the man. Vera Olivova (1984: 158-159) comments, "Phersu is clearly in charge of the contest, responsible for maintaining the excitement and the subtleties of the fight between man and beast." Jacques Heurgon (1961: 264ff.) suggests that the naked man is a condemned criminal, and that Phersu appears to be in charge of an exhibition of punishment, a mixture of drama and torture. In other depictions Phersu is represented as a harlequin-like dancer-entertainer, with some connection to animals (Heurgon, 1961: 264ff and Bieber, 1961: 147, fig. 542 & 543). A derivation of ‘persona’ from ‘persono’ (to 'sound through') has been suggested by others. In support of the first derivation, it is worth noting that ‘histrio,’ the Latin word for actor, derives from another Etruscan word, ‘ister’ (Olivova, 1984: 159). The trail of evidence is admittedly thin, but Olivova and Heurgon trace a link between Phersu, Atellan Farce (early, rough, slapstick Italian farce, which derives from specifically Etruscan areas of Italy according to Heurgon, 1961: 267-269), Roman comedy (especially that of Plautus) and the later Italian commedia dell’ Arte. Heurgon (1961: 267-269) identifies the Atellan farce character Dossenus (the trickster) with the Etruscan language, and suggests that Bucco (the braggart) may originally have been a gladiator in the Etruscan funerary games such as represented on the Phersu paintings. The inference is that the trickster, Dosennus-Phersu, has the alazon Bucco in his clutches, and dangles him, so to speak, at the end of his rope. Phersu's role as protagonist in an exciting public display of brutal justice recalls the *servus callidus* or 'clever slave', usually the protagonist in Plautine comedies, and the figure that makes most direct and frequent contact with the audience. This tentative link to Phersu, along with other contextual information relating to the nature of Plautine comedy in performance (Monaghan, 2002), suggests that this most Plautine comic persona, and the Roman audience's sense of that role, was in some way informed by a strange amalgam of bestial comedy and real punishment.

The tentative link suggested by Heurgon and Olivova to the commedia dell' Arte, through Atellan Farce and Plautine comedy, suggests that this combination may have left a trace in the European tradition of physical comedy and entertainment. To the list of possible descendents of these more constructed forms of spectacular violence we might add the highly staged, ‘comic book’ versions of modern professional wrestling, at least as it is currently practiced in North America, and as it is, or at least was, practised in France in the 1950s when Roland Barthes wrote his essay "The World of Wrestling." The value of invoking here the "spectacle of excess" (Barthes, 1993: 15) that constitutes wrestling is that it locates within our own context something seminal in the ancient experience. Barthes’ description of wrestling and its plot-driven spectacle is particularly evocative of gladiatorial combat (albeit a playful and ‘pretend’ version), the performance mode of Plautine comedy, with its distinct and precise physicality (though of a different kind to the highly skilled athleticism of wrestling), and "fatal charades." Paul Weiss (1969: 49) finds in modern wrestling the same tension that I have noted in

Rome between the unpredictability inherent to sport and a tendency towards narrative development and structure. He suggests that the precarious balance between "play" and "display" is disrupted by spectacle-driven wrestling because "the spectacle is predictable and certain; the game, unpredictable and uncertain" (Weiss, 1969: 49). Spectacles like wrestling, Plautine comedy and costumed executions display a large amount of their narrative construction from the outset (through set, costumes, physique, character types, masks, and so on), and cannot therefore be counted as sport, Weiss contends. The wrestlers' semiotically inscribed physiques, their excessive gestures, the obviousness of their roles in body, costume and props, and their playing to the audience in such a way that intention and meaning is utterly obvious, are certainly all to be found in Plautine comedy, with its strongly etched masks and character types driven by animalistic desires or "humours," as Ben Johnson called them. The obvious and loudly proclaimed pleasure that wrestling audiences find in "the exemplary abasement of the vanquished" (Barthes, 1993: 21), their enjoyment of a sudden reversal of fortune when the 'bastard' reaches the height of his hubris, and their passionate condemnation of him from "the very depths of their humours" (1993: 17), strongly recalls what is known, and what can be imaginatively inferred, about the relationship between the Plautine comic actor and his audiences, and perhaps about the relationship between the gladiator and his audience. Comedy and someone else's pain are, as many have noted, inextricably linked (see Corrigan, 1981: 6-13)

IV. From Agon to Theatre

The similarity between theatre and public games of this kind has been examined by Roger Caillois (1961) in his categorisation of games. Caillois lists combat games under the title "agon" which he defines as games in which "equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph" (1961: 14). Theatre is a game of "mimicry" in which "the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" (1961: 19). Each category of game sits somewhere between the two poles of Paidia and Ludus, that is, between a free and child-like expression of the game and one that is highly organised. Costumed executions, Phersu, Roman Comedy and modern wrestling all straddle the categories of agon and mimicry, and are located at the Ludus end of the continuum. In the case of farce and comedy the pain clearly was not real, while in gladiatorial combat and "fatal charades" it certainly was.

In Caillois' discussion, the characteristics of each category of games refer to the player of the game, not the observers. But in the agon and mimicry categories, the movement from Paidia to Ludus is also one from participation to observation and spectacle. It has been said of the Romans that they were a nation of spectators, and certainly Seneca and his contemporaries seem to have been intrigued by the process of viewing. Eric Varner (in Harrison, 2000: 119-136) has shown how the Roman wall paintings of the fourth style, prevalent in Seneca's own time (including in Nero's Domus Aurea), were preoccupied with the spectacle of death. Both the public executions themselves and the foregrounding of the process of viewing these executions, is evident in these paintings. Varner points to the inclusion in the paintings of viewers, some of whose gaze is directed outwards towards the live viewer of the painting: "the viewer thus becomes aware of his or her own act of looking, and thereby fully implicated as an observer or

voyeur of the scenes depicted in the painting" (in Harrison, 2000: 127-128). Varner calls these paintings a "visual analogue" to Seneca's tragedies (in Harrison, 2000: 120) and compares this consciousness of the act of viewing to Seneca's use of viewers in his plays. A.J. Boyle (1997: 117) also notes the emphasis on viewing in Seneca's *Thyestes*.

States suggests that theatre is "a means of looking objectively at the subjunctive life of the race as something prepared for the community out of the substance of its own body" (1985: 39). If we allow that the games and executions at least attained the status of quasi-theatre, a game that straddles Caillois' agon and mimicry categories, it is relevant to ask what aspect of their "subjunctive life" the Romans were looking at as they observed and became involved in these spectacles. What was being "uplifted to the view" as States puts it (1985: 35)? Two interconnected explanations have been proposed for what the Romans saw of themselves in the real blood of the arena. In the ancient world Rome was fighting wars a long way from home for much of the time, and, unlike in our own day when televised wars are common, ancient warfare had no audience. Joanne Shelton suggests that "the killing of foreign captives before the assembled Roman populace allowed the city inhabitants to confront the enemy, to enjoy the excitement of victory, and to participate in the process of imposing Roman justice on a barbarian world" (in Harrison, 2000: 92). More than this, though, gladiatorial games, animal fights, and public executions reinforced the dominance of Rome over the rest of the human world and the disorderly world of Nature. As Shelton expresses it, "in the chaos of Nature, animals kill people, but in civilised communities people kill animals and bestial humans" (in Harrison, 2000: 91). Quoting the famous lines from Vergil's *Aeneid*, VI.852-53: "these will be your special skills: to impose the discipline of peace, to show mercy to the defeated, and to crush the arrogant," Shelton further suggests that "it was a particularly Roman virtue to crush in war those that did not accept their inferior status" and that humans gathered to watch the killing of animals as "a symbolic demonstration of the dominion of humans over the forces which threaten our survival" (in Harrison, 2000: 89). This "reinforced the belief that security depended on violence" (Shelton, in Harrison, 2000: 89-90), a dubious notion that we in the West are thoroughly familiar with at the beginning of the twenty- first century. The games and their variations, then, seem to have enacted contests in which binary oppositions are reinforced: order versus disorder, human dominance versus bestiality, Roman military might versus anyone who might challenge her. In Seneca's view, for the crowd at the games to be so emotionally caught up in the killing meant that they were disturbing these binaries, they had become dehumanised: "the unadorned shedding of human blood stimulated in them a lust for even more bloodshed; the limen between human and sub-human, or non-human, had been transgressed" (in Harrison, 2000: 99-100).

V. Senecan Theatre

The step from "fatal charades" to the theatre of Seneca is a relatively small one. The notion that theatre feeds on a diet of hard-core reality is particularly apt in the context of Seneca's plays. These draw on the same mythological storehouse as the executions, and are replete with lurid and impassioned depictions of bestial human beings with vicious and unnatural appetites that remind one of the crowds he so deplored at the games. The spectacle of the alcohol-sodden Thyestes, patting his belly in satisfaction after a huge feast, unaware that he has just eaten his own children, is not so much an

aberration as a typical example of the kind of event to be found in these plays. Debate continues to rage over whether or not the plays were ever performed (see Harrison, 2000). There is not the space here to debate this issue, nor precisely how Seneca's Stoic philosophy was compatible with theatrical representation, but I tend to agree with those who argue that they were performed, if only to chamber audiences. I am fairly certain that their so-called 'un-performability' is an illusion rooted in myopic twentieth century 'naturalistic' views of staging. Seneca's employment of the theatre to pursue his Stoic aims does, however, need some explanation It would appear that in Seneca's day 'conventional' theatre (that is, involving characters and a narrative-driven plot) was in crisis, the kind of crisis, indeed, that States suggests demands reconstruction. The arena executions had, in a sense, stolen theatre's thunder, and there is very little evidence for conventional theatre in Rome during the first century AD (see Sorensen, 1984: 244-245). It is also somewhat of a paradox that the theatrical medium involves the same kind of relationship between performers and spectators as the arena, a relationship that lends itself to the kind of emotional involvement that Seneca decried.

I believe the key to Seneca's use of theatre lies firmly within the realm of his Stoic philosophy. The central platform of the Stoic moral philosophy was "the control of passions (*affectus*) and the attainment of inner peace through rational conformity with nature" (Tarrant, 1985: 23). Living according to Nature meant "not seeking to have everything that happens as you wish, but wishing for everything to happen as it actually does happen" (Cottingham, 1998: 55). It is interesting, in the context of the enactment in the arena of Roman control over the potentially chaotic forces of Nature, that in Stoicism we have a philosophy that, although rationalist, specifically denies the human capacity for control. All we can do is live well, wishing for everything that Nature dishes up to us, and die as best we can. It is here that the gladiator was of interest to Seneca, for, as has been noted by a number of scholars, Seneca seems to have seen the gladiator as an "apt metaphor for the disciple of Stoicism, and the arena combat a fitting metaphor for the Stoic struggle to live virtuously, to meet adversity without flinching, and to accept fate" (Shelton in Harrison, 2000: 97). The gladiator, and even more so the condemned criminal, was under the compulsion to die (sooner rather than later), and was therefore expected to fight bravely and die well, like a Roman soldier in the field of battle (Shelton, in Harrison, 2000: 93-94), and like a Stoic sage.

Nature was seen by the Stoics as a single living organism that operates along rational principles. In their stipulation to "live according to Nature," they therefore condemned emotional involvement and every other "impulse which is excessive and disobedient to reason" (Cottingham, 1998: 53). As Shelton and others have pointed out, Seneca's negative reaction was not caused by the killing itself or by any sympathy for the victims. In the letter quoted at length above, the philosopher states that, in the case of convicted homicides at least, the condemned had removed themselves by their crimes from the domain of worthwhile human beings (Epistle 7.5). He was appalled specifically by the emotional involvement of the spectators in the event. In *De Ira* 1.6.1, Seneca advises that the punishment, though necessary, must be carried out in a calm and rational way. In *De Tranquilitate Animi* XV.5, Seneca advised that it is better to accept human vices calmly, "for you will be forever in misery if you are caught up in the suffering of others." The Stoic sage was to be engaged in human activities, teaching and promoting the good life, but in a dispassionate way.

For a Stoic philosopher and playwright the problem with the arena was that the narrative framework only served to impassion the spectator, rather than provide him with a

means to improve himself. Although I do believe that Seneca used the theatre in this way, at times the arguments advanced in support of this claim seem thin. Marcus Aurelius, the later Stoic Emperor, advised, "tragedy was invented to teach you to regard the untoward events in life with the same unruffled feeling or even pleasure as their imitations on the stage" (quoted in Rosenmeyer, 1989: 14). This solemn advice tends to tickle the imagination. One might imagine the ‘ideal’ Stoic audience for a Senecan tragedy drinking or eating perhaps (the Roman equivalent of Brecht’s cigar smoking), dispassionately making moral judgements on the characters' behaviour as they recline in a *triclinium* (dining room), as Harrison (2000: 142 & 145) suggests. And much has been made by commentators of the abundance of Stoic *sententiae* in the plays, individual lines which might be read as carrying the 'moral' of the tale. But as Rosenmeyer points out, "drama contains few statements that are not geared to choices associated with the dramatic agents" (1989: 30). The recognised influence of rhetorical training in Seneca's writing should warn the commentator that, like most plays, these tragedies avail themselves of rhetorical strategies in order to examine tensions and paradoxes in the context of dramatic situations, not to promote a single, unproblematised line (see Hook in Harrison, 2000: 53-71).

The problem of detaching oneself from the maelstrom of life in order to both understand it and give others instruction is expressed neatly by Soren Kierkegard in his 1843 Journal:

> It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other principle, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition, it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time, simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it backwards (quoted in Cottingham, 1998: 185, n. 86).

In life there may be no such resting place, but in the theatre there is. Boyle believes that the theatre was a part of Seneca's instructional apparatus:

> By describing violent death verbally and representing it and the reaction to it theatrically, Seneca is able to control the perception and evaluation of death in a way that the arena could not do. [He] furnished them with a conceptual framework with which to judge it (1997: 135-136).

While the possibility of authorial control over spectators’ reactions is exaggerated by Boyle, I believe he is right to suggest that in the arena there was too much distracting phenomenal heaviness, in States' terms, and too little redeeming structural framing or dramaturgy. If theatre, as States suggests, involves itself with the struggle for dominance between the external, workaday realm and the internal, illusionary realm and their significations, then we can, I believe, regard Seneca's plays as an attempt to overpower, perhaps even to cure the real world phenomena by taking the illusionary element found in costumed executions and its forebears much further, turning the 'phenomenal distraction' of the amphitheatre to good use.

In Gyllian Raby's description of her own production of Seneca’s *Troades*, she states that Seneca wrote the play "agonized by the excesses of Roman imperialism [to say] 'Never forget, never again'" (in Harrison, 2000: 189ff.). Heiner Müller, as quoted at the beginning of this article, may well be correct in suggesting that "Reality TV" is heading towards a return of gladiatorial combat. What, then, are the socio-cultural implications

for the contemporary spectator preferring the intensities of immediate ‘blood and guts’ to the lessons of distanced ‘tension and paradox’?

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Return to Contents

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