YEATS'S CUCHULAIN CYCLE AND THE CHINESE DRAMA

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William Butler Yeats had a life–long fascination with the myth of the Irish hero Cuchulain. When Yeats was a young boy growing up in the northern coast town of Sligo, he listened to the tales the Irish peasants told of the great Ulster champion of the Red Branch. He could look up to see the very hills upon which Cuchulain was supposed to have fought with the Sidhe, warrior–women of the spirit world, and he could stroll upon a stretch of beach which the natives told him was the very Baile's strand upon which Cuchulain fought with the sea.

Yeats was disenchanted with the Christianity of his time, and so it is not strange that he was interested in the myths of his own culture. The poet was drawn to the tales of the warrior who refused to serve any purpose other than his own. Yeats was pleased that there were so many versions of Cuchulain's life; it seems that each person who repeated the old stories was likely to add his own interpretation, and Yeats was no different.

In Yeats's version of the Cuchulain cycle, we are shown the Irish hero in youth, middle age, and appropriately, as Yeats himself was facing his last days, he wrote *The Death of Cuchulain*. Although Cuchulain was traditionally supposed to be twenty-seven when he died, in Yeats's version he seemed to age along with the poet. It is also fitting that of the seven main treatments of the Cuchulain theme, the first (a poem) and the last (a play) are titled *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Before I attempt to explain Yeats's interest in and use of Cuchulain, some general explanation of his dramaturgy is appropriate. Although Yeats's fame is mainly as a poet, it is no secret that he thought of himself as a playwright. But the early twentieth century idea of playwright was at variance with the kind of drama that Yeats preferred. He eschewed the realistic drama so popular at the time and chose instead a drama of ritual and mystery.

Yeats belongs to a great tradition of subjective art which has its representatives in English literature but is not limited to any culture or nationality. In his search for an esthetic which would best suit his art, Yeats discovered artists of his sensitivity and temper

in several literatures and times. Whenever he found an idea which suited him, Yeats did not hesitate to include it in his own world–view. In this manner he constructed his own myth.

By the nature of the subjective tradition from which he drew most of his ideas, Yeats's personal mythology and esthetic tend to be heterodox. Any conscious exclusion of ideas might for him be movement toward objectivity. For Yeats objectivity meant a concern with apparent outward reality, a concentration upon appearance instead of essence. He believed that objectivity, instead of leading toward reality, rather led away from it by fostering the delusion that definition captured the essence of an object or idea. Abstractions such as love or religion, for example, are certainly different for each of us; yet we tend to submit to the dictionary when we wish to explain them. Communism and democracy are complex ideas which we treat as readily identifiable and stable concepts. Such acceptance of the definition of the idea for the idea itself can close our minds to further investigation, can make us deal in stereotypes. And stereotypes tend to blind us to real ideas shaped by living minds. Yeats chose not to deal in stereotypes, not to close his mind to further investigation.

Undoubtedly one of the appeals of unusual doctrines or systems to Yeats was that they furnished him with symbols, either existing in the material or suggested by it. For Yeats symbols were not an adornment to poetry but the basis of its function. He believed that he was living in an objective age which had all but destroyed the power of the word to communicate. Symbols gave him a means of penetration to a deeper level of awareness by a deliberate challenge to the rational, "sensible," and sometimes careless assignment of arbitrary, fixed values to objects and ideas which may be seen differently by different individuals.

Yeats could not, as could a poet writing some decades earlier, presume a common heritage of symbol among his readers; modern life had desensitized man to the point where he had lost touch with his historical past. The industrial revolution had broken up families so that there no longer was the passage of tradition from one generation to the next. But Yeats did believe in an idea which transcended and encompassed all tradition: he believed in a "great memory passing on from generation to generation"[1] which accounted for man's reaction to symbols.

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1. W. B. Yeats, "Per Amica, Silentia Lunae" (1917), in *Mythologies* New York, 1959), pp. 345.

> All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions:[2]

Yeats chose symbolism for the prime agent of his drama because he believed that it might act as a key by which the inexpressible might be expressed. If the word had become decadent and had its meaning imprisoned by a dictionary, perhaps the very imprecision of the symbol could again effect communication between men.

Symbolism, as important as it was to Yeats, was only a part of his lifelong search for the fullest possible artistic expression. He wanted to add to his poetry the kind of shared emotion which the theatre–goer may experience from his presence in the audience of like–minded people. He was aware that the printed page, the form with which we usually associate literature, is in fact quite a late development. Literature existed for ages before it was written down, and Yeats wanted to recapture some of the original power of the spoken word.

> When we are reading a book we are quite in the snare of words, and if they are beautiful, one forgets the rest. The human side of it is not thrust before us as it would be if a living man spoke to us, with a voice trembling with passion or quivering with gayety. Out of the written book has come our decadence, our literature, which puts secondary things first.[3]

Yeats's concern is that we should not treat the printed word as the final expression of the poet. The words of the poet need to be shaped, interpreted, by "a living man."

It is easy to understand the appeal of the theatre to a poet who was working with symbols. Theatre gives added dimension because it appeals more immediately and more completely than does print. It involves the audience in a way which cannot be approximated by the book. The senses are involved to a greater degree, and a person's response tends to become less compartmentalized. His experiences expand from the printed page to the spoken word, from the description to the dance, to the costume, to the mask.

The modern realistic drama, effective as it is in capturing the imagination of the audience, still supports the fiction that we are peeping toms looking through an invisible

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2. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry (1900), in *Essays and Introductions* (New York, 1961), pp. 156-57.
3. Yeats, unpublished lecture ©1902, p. 14.

fourth wall into the private lives of humans quite like ourselves. Yeats wanted a drama that was not overheard, but one in which the audience was acknowledged and invited into the play, much as the onlookers at a religious rite are invited to participate in the prayers. For,

> When man cannot dramatize himself, he cannot dramatize anybody. He can no longer create great personages . . . . It is because of the written book, in which we speak always to strangers and never with a living voice to friends, that we have lost personal utterance.[4]

Theatre audiences of the early part of this century were used to direct representations of characters working out their fates in the natural world. Such representations were clearly not suited to Yeats's drama. Yeats believed that modern plays were not so much immoral as ignoble. They did not take into account man's capacity for the great action. Their concern with a temporal and local reality could only be misleading.

> I do not call these modern plays immoral, and indeed I am inclined to think that they far more often touch with the intellect and with the conscience some obscure corner of life than appeal to what is merely gross. But I do think that these plays will always stir the heart less nobly than plays which set before the imagination men and women living in a more splendid and passionate world than our eyes have seen, and speaking a loftier language than our ears have heard.[5]

Modern realistic drama was therefore not evil or even wrong; it was simply too close to the grubby facts of life for man to see himself as anything other than a chain of antecedent causes.

It is reasonable, then, that Yeats turned to mythology for the characters in his plays, and he saw in Cuchulain an anti–self. Yeats had learned the theory of necessary opposition from his study of William Blake's poetry, and Cuchulain represented to Yeats everything that he was not, a kid of *yang* to his *yin*. Yeats was attempting to "write a poetical play where every character became an example of the finding or not finding of what I have called the Antithetical Self."[6]

This antithetical self, elsewhere in his work described as mask or antinomy, is a poeti-

4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid*, p. 7.
6. Yeats, *Plays in Prose and Verse* (London, 1922), p. 428.

cal attempt to deal with the paradoxes of life. Rather than shrink from our opposite, Yeats believed we should embrace it, for only in that acceptance can we hope to find anything of our real nature. Life is a continual reconciliation of opposites, and we must, as Yeats suggests, realize that the human condition is uncertainty, and we should embrace this uncertainty rather than search "irritably" for final answers.

So Cuchulain, the warrior, the man of action, became the opposite of Yeats, the poet and thinker.

I have chosen three plays and a fragment of a fourth to represent the Cuchulain cycle. They are *At the Hawk's Well, On Baile's Strand, The Only Jealousy of Emer,* and *The Death of Cuchulain.*

In *At the Hawk's Well* the young Cuchulain, not yet famous, comes to a barren place because he has heard that near it may be found a well of immortality. He finds an old man near a dry well and a leafless hazel tree. The old man has wasted his life beside the well, waiting for it to flow. Each time the well has filled, he has missed his chance to drink. Excepting the old man, the only other creature near is a hawk–like woman, the Guardian of the Well. In order that he may wait without competition, the old man tries to persuade Cuchulain to leave the well. The well gives signs that it may flow, and the Guardian begins to dance. The old man falls asleep and Cuchulain is lured away from the well by the dance of the hawk–woman. Both Cuchulain and the old man miss the opportunity to drink from the well, which has flowed in the meantime. The old man predicts a tragic destiny for Cuchulain, and his prediction is immediately realized as the Guardian of the Well arouses the warrior–woman Aoife and her troops. Cuchulain goes off to confront them as the play ends.

> Now the art I long for is also a battle, but it takes place in the depths of the soul and one of the antagonists does not wear a shape known to the world or speak a mortal tongue. It is the struggle of the dream with the world.[7]

Yeats is speaking of the "anti–self" in this passage, and the opposing forces of Cuchulain and the Old Man, of youthful enthusiasm and crabbed old age, correspond with the "struggle of the dream with the world." Although both fail, Cuchulain's failure is magnificent, a failure of daring too much, while the old man has lost his life by daring nothing at

7. W. B. Yeats, *The Poet and the Actress*, an unfinished dialogue of 1915, quoted from Richard Ellman, *The Identity of Yeats* (London, 1954), p. 105.

all. Yeats seems to be saying that there may indeed be forces which can trick and destroy a man, but if he is fearful of them he will have no life at all. If a man has the belief that he is carving out his own destiny and acts on this belief, then he is transcending circumstances and creating his own life, just as an artist creates a work of art. He may be destroyed, but he cannot be defeated, except on his own terms.

In *On Baile's Strand* we find that for the only time in his life Cuchulain has subjected himself to another's vision. Conchubar, the high king of Ireland has convinced Cuchulain to swear an oath of fealty to him in order to stabilize the kingdom. A young man comes into the court of the king and issues a challenge. There is something familiar about him, for unknown to Cuchlain, he is his son by the warrior–woman Aoife. When he had gone off to battle with the Sidhe in *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchlain had matched his sword with Aoife's and beaten her. Afterwards they had made love, and this boy, Conlaoch, was the result. Aoife both loved and hated Cuchulain, and had raised Conlaoch with the sole purpose that he should one day kill his father.

Cuchulain refuses to fight the boy, for some instinct warns him against it; but Conchubar reminds him of his recently sworn oath, and they meet in battle. Cuchulain kills the boy, who tells him as he dies that he is Cuchulain's son. Upon hearing this, Cuchulain goes mad and fights the sea, and the waves master him.

Yeats is suggesting here that we must follow our own destinies, for if we do not, we risk losing control of our lives. The gesture of Cuchulain fighting the waves is important. Yeats sees it as "character isolated in a deed," and it helps to explain the poet's preoccupation with the drama. He believes that there is nothing one can say which will reveal truth to ourselves or others, but there are actions which reveal our essence. As he writes in a late letter, "Man cannot know the truth, but he can embody it."

Cuchulain's fight with the sea becomes for Yeats the symbol of the heroic man's confrontation with life. Certainly he will be overwhelmed by its enormous forces, but in order to have any sense of his own existence he must battle these forces.

In *The Only Jealousy of Emer* the play opens as Emer, Cuchulain's wife, and Eithne Inguba, his mistress, are beside the body of Cuchulain which has been thrown back by the sea. Unknown to both of them Bricriu, the god of discord, has taken the form of Cuchulain. When Eithne Inguba discovers the trickery, she runs and hides; Emer, ever the faithful wife, stays to confront Bricriu, who shows her a vision in the spirit world. In this vision Cuchulain, whose spirit hovers between life and death, is being tempted by Fand, one of the Sidhe, to stay with her in the spirit world. She promises him that he will be blessed

with forgetfulness and will never again know "intricacies of blind remorse."

Cuchulain is tempted by her offer, for he is tormented by memories of his unfaithfulness to his wife, Emer, and the horrible memory of killing his son. Bricriu, enemy of Fand, wishes to thwart her plans, and so tells Emer the only way in which she can break the spell before Cuchulain is forever lost to the mortal world: She must renounce Cuchulain's love forever. Emer is shocked, and at first refuses, since her only consolation in life is the belief that the impetuous Cuchulain will someday tire of his battles and his woman and rejoin her by the hearth fire. Just as Cuchulain is about to step into the chariot of Fand, Emer cries out, "I renounce Cuchulain's love for ever."

Cuchulain is restored to life, but he does not know that Emer has saved him. He seems not to see her, and he turns instead to Eithne Inguba, who has come back now that she is no longer frightened. The play ends as she takes Cuchulain into her embrace, claiming credit for saving him. Cuchulain seems not to see Emer, the faithful wife who has given her last chance for happiness to save him.

Paradoxes and ironies. We might feel that the Old Man in *At the Hawk's Well* deserved his fate since he was so stupid as to waste his life on the chance that it might be prolonged, but why does the faithful Emer have to suffer the loss of her husband? Certainly her long and virtuous devotion to Cuchulain deserves better payment.

Yeats is suggesting that there is nothing in this life which will happen because justice demands that it should happen. We must take life as it comes and be forever prepared for a new uncertainty. Both the Old Man and Emer depended too much on what *should* happen and thus were disappointed. They suffered from their assumptions, their fixed realities which were not flexible enough for an ever-changing world.

Cuchulain is Yeats's symbol for the consciousness which is always aware of the present moment, always searching for and creating life from the flux of events which it finds before it. Emer, with her hope of spending her last days with her husband (certainly not a vain or ignoble desire) has in effect cancelled out life in the present moment, just as we do when we wish time to pass so that we may experience some desired event in the future. The only life we have is now, the present moment, which has dissolved as you read this.

It seems that *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is in a way a further development of the ideas first advanced in *At the Hawk's Well*. We learn that it is not simply ignoble desires, but any desires at all which will exclude us from a fully realized life. Yeats is not so foolish as to suppose that most mortals or any, for that matter, are able to live such a life. What he is suggesting here, presented in a deliberately non-realistic setting, are the theoretical

possibilities of a life lived according to such principles. It would be a life in which thought and action would be united in a whole; every action would define one's character.

The last play I will discuss is *The Death of Cuchulain.* As I mentioned earlier, it was a theme which interested Yeats all of his life, and it is appropriate that his final treatment of the idea came during the last year of his life. There is a character known as the Old Man, but he is different from the old man in Yeats's previous plays; he is more closely akin to the poet's last stage of deliberate madness and wickedness than he is to the old man of *At the Hawk's Well.*

The Old Man delivers a kind of prologue in which he reestablished Yeats's debt to Oriental drama and restates the esthetic principles which have guided Yeats's drama since 1916.

> I have been asked to produce a play called *The Death of Cuchulain*. It is the last of a series of plays which has for theme his life and death. I have been selected because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of. I am so old that I have forgotten the name of my father and mother, unless indeed I am, as I affirm, the son of Talma, and he was so old that his friends and acquaintances still read Virgil and Homer. When they told me that I could have my own way, I wrote certain guiding principles on a bit of newspaper. I wanted an audience of fifty or a hundred, and if there are more, I beg them not to shuffle their feet or talk when the actors are speaking. I am sure that as I am producing a play for people I like, it is not probable, in this vile age, that they will be more in number than those who listened to the first performance of Milton's *Comus*. On the present occasion they must know the told epics and Mr. Yeats's plays about them; such people, however poor, have libraries of their own. If there are more than a hundred I won't be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches. Why pickpockets? I will explain that, I will make it all quite clear.
>
> (drum and pipe behind the scene, then silence.)
>
> That's from the musicians; I asked them to do that if I was getting excited. If you were as old you would find it easy to get excited. Before the night ends you will meet the music. There is a singer, a piper, and a drummer. I have picked them up here and there about the streets, and I will teach them, if I live, the music of the beggar–man, Homer's music. I promise a dance. I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil. Emer must dance, there must be severed heads - - I am old, I belong to mythology - - severed heads for her to dance before. I had thought to have those heads carved, but no, if the dancer can dance properly no wood–carving can look as well as a parallelogram of painted wood. But I was at my wits end to find a good dancer; I could have got such a dancer once, but she has gone; the tragi–comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death. I spit three times. I spit upon the dancers painted by

> Degas. I spit upon their short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes whereon they spin like peg–tops, above all upon that chambermaid face. They might have looked timeless, Rameses the Great, but not that chambermaid, that old maid history. I spit ! I spit ! I spit !

The play proper begins *in medias res* with Eithne Inguba bringing a message to the embattled Cuchulain. It is a false message because Eithne is under the spell of Maeve, Queen of the Sidhe. But he is "for the fight" and chooses to go into battle at that moment rather than wait for reenforcements. He forgives Eithne and goes to fight. He is mortally wounded during the battle, and tries to fasten himself to a pillar so that he may die on his feet. Aoife, an incarnation of the hawk–woman from *At the Hawk's Well*, enters to apply the final blow, but she hesitates because she wants him to know who it is that kills him. She askes him how her son fought in *On Baile's Strand*. He replies: "Age makes more skillful but not better men." and bitterly recalls that it was the oath that he swore to be loyal to Conchubar which caused him to fight and kill his only son. The only time in his life when Cuchulain accepted another's reality resulted in the death of his son. At this point, Aoife hears someone coming and hides.

The new arrival is the blind old man from *On Baile's Strand*. He is delighted to find Cuchulain weak and dying, for he has been promised a twelve–penny reward if he brings back Cuchulain's head to Queen Maeve's camp.

It is a consummate irony that the greatest fighting man in Ireland will meet his end on the knife of a blind beggar, but Cuchulain, ready for anything that life brings him, simply says "Twelve pennies ! What better reason for killing a man?"

> "This is the Cuchulain, blinded by heroism, butchered by a clown, who is envisaged in the final song of the play as resuming his place in the folk memory of Irish tradition with the occurrence of the Easter Rising of 1916:
>
> What stood in the Post Office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood?
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood? [8]

7. W. B. Yeats, *Selected Plays* (ed. Norman Jeffares) (London, 1964), p. 15.

With his last verse of his last play, Yeats shows us that poetry is not an idle pastime, but a vital force which changes lives and destinies of nations, for the Irish revolutionaries who died in the battle of the Post Office said that the spirit of Cuchulain stood beside them in their last fight. Nor was their gesture, which seemed so useless at the time, wasted. Like Cuchulain's fight with the waves, it was the incident which caught the imagnation of the world and eventually led to the Irish Free State.

The question remains: Why attempt these plays in the style of the Chinese opera? It is well known that Yeats modeled his plays after the Japanese drama, specifically because he wanted to create a theatre of mysterious art, where supernatural beings could appear. The conventions of scenery, mask, dance, music, and acting have strong parallels, as one might expect, between Japanese and Chinese drama. What Yeats was looking for was a model from ritual theatre for his own drama, and since he could find none in the West, he turned to the East.

> The arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.[9]

Certainly the conventions of the Chinese theatre are appropriate to what Yeats had in mind. The beautiful costumes, the conventions of acting, the music, and especially the make–up and masks create exactly the effect he wanted. I will describe these effects in order.

Scenery

In *At the Hawk's Well*, instead of the actual bare tree and well, which are easy enough to represent on the stage, the chorus enjoins us to imagine the first scene of the play, just as the Chinese drama has the chairs and table at the rear of the set represent many different things - -sometimes even tables and chairs.[10]

Yeats's scenery is now in the mind of the audience, differing as each individual interprets it. Anyone who has listened to a radio play can appreciate this effect, even for a realistic setting. In the non–realistic Yeatsian drama it has even more power.

Music

Yeats was interested in the use of music in his plays almost from the beginning of his

8. W. B. Yeats, "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916), in *Essays and Introductions* (New York, 1961), pp. 224-25.
9. Josephine Huang Hung, *Classical Chinese Plays* (Taipei,1972), p. 21.

drama, but he did not find the kind of music he wanted until he turned to an eastern model. He wanted simple instruments which would not overpower the speeches of the actors. He always regarded music as something which accompanies and enriches the spoken word, not as an element which has a discrete dramatic validity. Therefore I have decided to use a combination of Chinese folk melodies and the instruments of the *wen,* or civil part of the orchestra.

Costumes, Make–up, and Masks

The costumes of the Chinese opera are a way of identifying types of characters, and as such create the kind of economy of exposition which Yeats aimed for. No informed member of the Chinese audience would ever confuse the costumes of scholar or a general, for example.

But it is the masks for which Yeats had an especial fascination. He was always interested in masks, particularly the idea of mask in occult literature. The masking that he used in his theatre became, like most of his symbols, rich in associations which transcended specific times and cultures. As Peter Ure explains,

> . . . the immobility and austerity of the mask substitute for flesh an artifact, a dead face which is more alive, like the golden bird of Byzantium, because it is unchanging and because it is liberated from time and the sensual music.[11]

In the Chinese opera, as in the Japanese *Noh*, the mask allows the audience quickly to identify the type of character represented. For Yeats, the mask served to remove his drama from the limitations of temporal reality. There is no living face to remind the audience of the actor's humanity, and when the character being portrayed is a hero like Cuchulain, no actor's face could be quite as satisfactory as a mask. As Yeats says,

> We are accustomed to faces of bronze and marble, and what could be more suitable than that Cuchulain, . . . a half–supernatural, legendary person, should show us a face, . . . molded by some distinguished artist? . . . . It would be a stirring adventure for a poet and an artist working together to create once more heroic or grotesque types that, keeping always an appropriate distance from life, would seem an image of these profound emotions that exist only in solitude and silence.[12]

10. Peter Ure, *W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1964), p. 90.
11. Preface to *At the Hawk's Well, Variorum Plays* (New York, 1966), p. 398.

Dance

One of the most striking elements in the plays of Yeats is the dance; its climactic function focuses the audience's attention upon it as the highest moment in the drama. It is the summation and the quintessence of all the arts. Since dance involves the whole being, it is more than the words which describe it. It represents for Yeats the unification of intellect with emotion, demonstrated by the similarly unified action of the dance. Who, indeed, can tell the dancer from the dance or the artist from his art?

The place of dance in his plays is obvious. Since the dance involves the whole body, since it is both pictorial and sculptural, it is the ideal medium to bridge the gap between the time and space arts. Dancing becomes not alone the quintessence of the arts, but the culmination of them all, a spontaneous manifestation of an inward emotion.

The dance which exists in the Chinese opera is particularly congruent with Yeats's ideas. The restrained and suggestive dance of the Chinese drama provides the opportunity for the highly symbolic expression of inner emotion.

Acting

The Chinese audience is informed most economically by certain gestures and actions of the actors.

> Stepping over the threshold and opening and closing the old–fashioned double doors leading into a Chinese house are acted out with perfect mimic action. ... The gait assumed by an actor is also meaningful. A noble lady walks with grace and dignity; the flirt sways suggestively in her gaudy costume; fighters stalk; scholars pace thoughtfully; clowns scurry; and officials stride with a grand manner.[13]

Yeats wanted exactly this effect from his actors as another means by which he could reenforce the non–realistic nature of his drama. At one point he half–seriously considered putting the players of the Abbey theatre in barrels so that he could better control their actions.

Finally, I must add a note of caution. What I will be presenting is not Chinese opera, but Irish plays done in the style of the Chinese opera. I will use the conventions which I deem appropriate and omit those which do not seem to be fitting. What I am attempting is a joining of two dramatic forms which seem to me to be especially compatible. Yeats intended that his plays represent the soul and mind of his people, combining art, culture

12. Huang, p. 24.

and spirit in one presentation. Since his model is from the East, I believe it is appropriate that I return to the source of his inspiration. Like all experiments, it must risk failure. Whatever success it has must be judged by the way in which it forces you to look with new eyes on your own drama, one of the true cultural treasures of the world.

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