

Exit, Pursued by a Bear: Life and a Life in the Theatre

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■ Craft Essay

I

The essence, the nub, of a life in the theater is surprise, unpredictability, the immersion of a life in time, in an era, at a place. Shakespeare would not have been Shakespeare and written all (or almost all) of those plays if he hadn't been living and writing in the England of Elizabeth the First. Emily Mann would not have written and persuaded others to produce the plays she did had she not lived in the America of Vietnam and its aftermath. The recent biography of Emily Mann by Alexis Greene, *Emily Mann: Rebel Artist of the American Theater* (Applause Books, 2021) is about being a specific woman, with a particular background, education, family and apprenticeships, about being a theater artist in a late age, as Gertrude Stein reminds us. About making art new, relevant, important.

In addition to chronicling Emily Mann's career, her professional development as she became a theater master, this book reminds us of the invention and richness of what was for the American theater, a great or late age.

Alexis Greene makes central the rebellious quality of Emily Mann's writing and lifelong mission. Emily Mann was ever the writer, in and out of writing plays directly for the theater, and her experiments with the form of theater productions, as a writer, as a director and producer, were forged in the tumultuous times. Tumultuous but not too tumultuous. All-out war and the complete collapse of civil society does not nurture artists, or allow great art to flourish. Repression, dictators, and military tanks in the streets, deaths in battle (especially of the young) squash and stamp out the artistic impulse, repress and darken the imagination. Social decay, but not too much deterioration, in the fabric of civil society may prod or encourage the creation of art, the festering of the imagination, and foster the collective urge to criticize, to make over, to put in place something else. The Vietnam War did spur political outrage, and some of that spilled into theater, see, e.g. Emily Mann, *Still Life* (1981).

Shakespeare would not have had Shakespeare's career, albeit mysteriously truncated, without the enthusiastic audiences of Elizabethan England. If great plays are to be written (or read four hundred years later), and great actors and directors to learn their art, there must be audiences and institutions, a home for actors, directors, playwrights, and the many others whose contributions are necessary to get work up on a stage.

Plays cannot be produced in a social and political vacuum. While the literacy of Elizabethan audiences is unknown and unknowable, we do know there was an impassioned audience for Shakespeare's plays and for the plays of his contemporaries. There were theaters all over the city of London then. Those plays taught their audiences what their country, their society was. The plays about long-dead kings and queens, taught their audiences what their country, their society was then. The history plays tell a story about the War of the Roses which was about power and authority—its arbitrary exercise, the finality of killing—in what was then the present, the reign of Elizabeth the First.

II

Greene's biography of Emily Mann reminds us that the act of producing of *Execution of Justice, Greensboro: A Requiem*, and less obviously *Having Our Say, The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, were joined at the hip and the heart, with their times. Each production of each work, or multiple productions of the same work, or the absence of a planned production happened, or didn't happen—or didn't happen the way Emily Mann thought it would happen—because of a time-defined, place-limited circumstances, or the idiosyncrasy of who (mostly men) was deciding what work should be put on, and how it should reach an audience.

That is the second preoccupation of this biography—the *Life in the Theatre* part. What a valuable series of lessons this book is: about the vagaries and chance of getting a production on the boards. Alexis Greene has done her homework, and we get the stories behind all the productions, and along with the stories, a precise chronicle of all the work, in South Africa, in Minneapolis, in Chicago, in Los Angeles, and in Princeton, New Jersey. How different the theater culture was for Emily Mann in each of those places.

III

Then there is the *Life* part. That is carefully documented as well. Complete, but not invasive; thoughtful, but not judgmental. Interviews, letters, diaries, the voices of others are all there. And it is an extraordinary life, and a *Life in the Theatre*. Plus, there is the story of her own family, grandchildren, the extraordinary marriage to Gary Mailman—without whom Emily Mann might not have been able to realize the second act of her career in the theater.

Then there has been the lifelong partnership and love of both of her parents, the intellectual leadership and commitment of Emily Mann's father, University of Chicago Professor of History, Arthur Mann, a historian of the civil rights movement and Black history, who remained firmly in the corner of the United States government with regard to Vietnam, and an important dialectical adversary for his politically-engaged daughter.

Emily Mann was educated at the University of Chicago Laboratory School at a specific period in its history, and put on her first play there while in high school. It was there in that school, in that city, at that time, that Emily Mann declared to herself, her teachers, her family, "This is what I want to do, what I want to devote my life to—a life in the theatre." And she did.

IV

Like a university, a museum, an opera company, a court, or an agency of government, a legislative body, a theater is an institution. Meaning: it lives on (hopefully) through successive generations of individuals occupying key roles—directors, divas, deans, presidents, judges, prosecutors—sometimes carrying on with more distinction than at other times.

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* opened at McCarter Theatre on a snowy January 22nd in 1938 to a standing-room-only audience (and mixed reviews). A constellation of circumstances, people and presences in 1938, (including a profound disagreement between the playwright and director on the play) are retrievable on the page, but hard to comprehend now. *Our Town* is a play about which it is said, The sun doesn't rise but on a live production of *Our Town* somewhere, some place, in some language, in a prison, in a clearing in a wood, in a church, on a school stage—in a Japanese internment camp in World War II and at McCarter Theatre many times after January 22, 1938.

The hows and whys of all the productions by or directed or produced by Emily Mann are other tales of fate, circumstance, and chance. When Emily Mann was appointed Artistic Director of McCarter Theatre in December of 1989 (moving to Princeton New Jersey in December of 1990 with her son Nicholas), McCarter Theatre was an institution with a long, and sometimes distinguished history. Emily Mann, the first woman Artistic Director at McCarter Theatre, made that theater central to and part of the beating heart of American theater around the turn of the last century: a time of exceptional vibrancy and color in the fabric of American culture, and American theater in particular.

V

Emily Mann's career at McCarter reminds us, if we needed reminding, that productions of plays are always about a time and place, the people in the room, on the stage, and in the audience. A play itself is always a comment on its own time, even it was written or first produced centuries ago. Any theater production, is always about its time, this place, the people in the room now, on the stage, and who has walked in the door and is now in the audience.

A successful play, whatever that means, requires an audience to be listening, an audience (a group—large or small—of people) which feels compelled to listen, or there is nothing happening in the space. Theater is the most collaborative of arts (except perhaps architecture) the most collective of arts, and this means that politics, personal and small group politics, national and local (who is having sex with whom, or who is a bully) are always in the mix—who's up, who's down, who is on their way out, who is backstabbing—all are always a moving shadow projected on the back wall behind the stage.

How could it be otherwise? Is this not why we, the audience, we the theater artists, love being in the middle of it all, getting drunk on what is happening, being exhausted after the event, the production? This is another commonality between politics and theater, we can't let go of it, the drama, the hysteria, and illusion that what we are doing is important, means something, says something which must be heard now.

VI

Emily Mann took the job of artistic Director of McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey in 1989, not realizing McCarter Theatre was on shaky financial footing, that the physical plant badly needed reconstruction, and that McCarter Theatre itself was suffering from an absence of leadership. Amusingly, symptomatically, McCarter Theatre thought that it was doing Emily Mann a favor by offering her the job, not anticipating that it was McCarter Theatre and its community which she would revitalize, bring to national attention, returning an artistic quality which had been absent.

All great and complex institutions (the Papacy!) are at the mercy of who is in charge. In the case of theaters (and universities, museums and hospitals, or foundations) the governing boards (whose absence of decisive leadership or stubborn blindness) may be a problem, if they do not act. Then, the institution lumbers along until it fails, or perhaps goes bankrupt, or rights itself eventually with different people at the helm, or the times change.

McCarter Theatre, like the many theaters where Emily Mann's work was mounted—the Guthrie, in Minneapolis; the Goodman, in Chicago; the Market Theater, in Johannesburg; the Taper, in Los Angeles—was an institution of its time and place. Emily Mann would make McCarter Theatre the place where artists such as Tennessee Williams, Athol Fugard, David Rabe and others wanted their work to be staged, and to premier. It became a theater where artists such as these felt supported, and were at home.

VII

Interesting, ironic, amusing how the high points of a career, of an artist's contribution, rarely turn out to be what the artist in her twenties anticipated when she was rehearsing and learning her art. At Harvard, at the Lab School in Chicago, in Minneapolis, and later in London and Johannesburg, Emily Mann was not imagining her work and collaborations would transform a sleepy (some would have said moribund) great old barn of a theater—located in a white, wealthy, leafy and self-congratulatory university community—into a real theater with real theater artists of every craft, directors, actors, scene designers, costume people, carpenters.

Emily Mann probably didn't think that *The Job*, the job of leading McCarter Theatre, whose complex challenges snuck up on her, would perhaps be a major contribution. To what? To the national political discourse? To the development of American theater at the turn of the past century? All of the above, and not just that. I would argue it was not her rebelliousness, but the fact that she had her finger on the pulse of what was happening in the mercurial scene of American theater and the politics which made her time at McCarter noteworthy.

What is "real" theater anyway? Thornton Wilder wrote his masterpiece *Our Town* early in his career as a playwright, but it was the much later musical *Hello Dolly*, based upon another, lesser-known play by Thornton Wilder, itself based upon a European, seventeenth century comedy which, —after several failed productions of the "script"—brought Thornton Wilder financial security and new, large, laughing audiences.

Under Emily Mann's leadership, great plays, great productions were put on McCarter Theatre in, of all places, Princeton, New Jersey, in that barn with 1,100 seats. Then, in another smaller performance space, a sister place, for new work. Because it was theater, the individual plays, such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *Betsey Brown*, *Three Sisters*, came and went. People from all over the country, the theater world, came to see what was going on there, came to sit in one of the 1,100 green baize seats in the Great Barn, or on the smaller stages, to witness, to participate in the conversation sparked by what was on the stage at that time and place.

VIII

Exit, Pursued by a Bear? A real bear? Bear-baiting? At least one theater company staged an entire performance piece around that stage direction from Act III Scene 3 of *A Winter's Tale*. Hilarious? Perplexing? Elizabeth the First was said to be 'fond of' bear-baiting, what they, but not we, would call a "sport." Sometimes the real bear-baiting involved mastiffs or other dogs, or a human being torturing the bear. Always there was blood, the tearing of flesh, animal pain, wounding and sometimes a murderous death, cheered on by an audience. Fitting? What were the plays about? Murder, blood, the rendering of pain. Death, its enactment, its reception. Is that the catharsis, then and now? So much pain and so many dead bodies, at the end of *Hamlet*, at the end of *King Lear*.

IX

Leaving McCarter Theatre was not the end of Emily Mann's career or contributions to American theater. To come, among others, was *Gloria, A Life* (2018) a form bending, commissioned homage to the life and work of Gloria Steinem, herself an autonomous heroine in the recent political turmoil.

The life and work of Emily Mann continues. The book reminds us of how and when and where that career started, where it developed and how it was shaped by the institutions and the people with whom she shared her work, and life, and not just on the stage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Leigh Buchanan Bienen is a writer and a lawyer. Recent publications include: *Florence Kelley, Factory Inspector in 1890's Chicago*, and *The Children* (2014) and *Murder and its Consequences* (Northwestern University Press, 2010). She was the guest editor for *TriQuarterly 134*, featuring essays by nationally known theatre artists, including Emily Mann.

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