

DEMOCRACY AND THEATRE

WILES (D.) *Democracy, Theatre and Performance. From the Greeks to Gandhi*. Pp. viii + 241, ills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £30, US\$39.99. ISBN: 978-1-009-16799-4.

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This brilliant and engaging book is about the theatricality of politics and the political importance of theatre in democracies. Its organising theme is the opposition of representation to reality and its performative analogue, rhetoric vs sincerity. It responds to two developments. One is the rise of cognitive science in the humanities. Traditional theories of democracy are founded on a faith in individual rational choice, but empirical studies show this to be a mythic inversion of actual practice, where emotions and group-identifications govern behaviour at the ballot box. Another is the malaise in current democracies with traditional politics and parties, ushering in the electoral success of ‘leaders like Trump and Johnson, adept in the role of a flawed, rebellious human being who speaks as he thinks’ (p. 10), and who, in contrast to the scripted, censored and politically corrected speech of the liberal left, appears somehow genuine: ‘most people prefer overt liars to hypocrites’ (p. 16). There is even a certain honesty to their lies in that they are so loose with the truth that they bring themselves to believe what they say for the moment of utterance. ‘Honest lies’, as one might say, can ignore ‘factual truth’, but contain ‘theatrical or emotional truths’ (p. 2).

The book is conscious of its moment. W. says that it was written in the shadow of Brexit and the putsch-like finale to Trump’s first presidency. It came out just before Trump’s second election. It is not, however, about modern populism, but about the historical background to political rhetoric and posturing. Its main argument is ‘that democracy always was and always will be an art of performance’ (p. 2). In form it is a series of incisive and entertaining vignettes of a cast of figures interacting in five different democratic regimes, setting the scene, describing their take on acting and rhetoric, and subjecting their performance to dramaturgical analysis. In each set W. finds a polar opposition in attitudes to rhetoric and theatre between those who openly embrace performance arts and those who pretend to reject them. But he leaves no doubt that it is the practised and consummate actor (the hypocrite) who adopts the persona of sincerity and artlessness.

Scene 1: Athens. Chapter 1, ‘Rhetoric in Athens’, concisely describes the deep connections between democracy, rhetoric and theatre. Contrasting portraits of Pericles and Cleon emblemise the rhetorical and anti-rhetorical style. Chapter 2, ‘Acting versus sincerity’, shifts to the ‘twilight’ of Athenian democracy and the confrontation between the actor Aeschines and the anti-histrionic Demosthenes, the former characterised by the ‘seductive power’ (p. 39) of his voice and respect for the law, the latter by his ‘ability to put words together’ (p. 40) and a certain disregard for the rules. Demosthenes anticipated Stanislavskian techniques, ‘performed his own authenticity in order to sustain his patriotic message’ (p. 40) and ‘in the language of today . . . looks like a populist’ (p. 41). In doing so, W. argues, Demosthenes created something new, turning a by-product of democratic confrontation into its object: ‘the dangerous step taken by Demosthenes was to remove the mask, so that the man became the argument, the *hypokrites* became the hypocrite’ (p. 62).

Scene 2: Putney, 1647 (Chapter 3, ‘Puritan Democracy’). Reacting to Catholic hierarchy, magic and authoritarianism, Calvinism was centred on the individual soul in direct contact with God through reason and faith. With King Charles I under arrest, the rebel army’s

General Council debated whether to extend the franchise to all Englishmen or propertied classes only. The surviving transcript of the 'Putney drama' is set out in three 'acts'. Act I. Enter Ireton with a learned disquisition equating ownership of property with the rule of law, a performance denounced the same night: 'one of the surest marks of deceivers is to make fair, long and eloquent speeches' (p. 84). Cromwell remedies the situation, encouraging all to follow, 'honestly and sincerely', God-given reason free of 'carnal imagining'. In speech and dress playing the role of 'plain man', Cromwell is a 'master of anti-theatrical idiom' (p. 83). Act II. Rainborough and Sexby plead for the extended franchise in plain, emotive and patriotic language. They win the vote. Act III. A face-off between Ireton and Wildman on the role of the King, likened to stichomythia. Putney ends with Fairfax, 'a kind of *deus ex machina*' (p. 87), calling in the troops.

Scene 3: Paris, 1790s (Chapter 4, 'Oratory in the French Revolution'). This section introduces a more chequered rogues' gallery: the actor, playwright and impresario d'Eglantine; the actor Hérault; the arch-rationalist Condorcet who aspired to replace emotive political rhetoric with a precise scientific language; the activist Lequinio denouncing oratory as a tool of manipulation, but hopeful for the triumph of a rational, enlightened rhetoric; the 'performance artist' Mirabeau for whom verbal pomp excited men's passion for truth, law and fatherland; and his opponent, the plain-spoken, imperiously egalitarian and studiously sincere Robespierre, whom Mirabeau said 'will go far, for he believes everything he says', and d'Eglantine from the guillotine called 'vile Tartuffe!' (p. 115).

Scene 4 (Chapter 5): 'American Democracy'. American puritanism took a dim view of theatre and rhetoric. The 'whole art of government' for Jefferson 'was the art of being honest' (p. 119). For John Adams, however, politics was theatricality (he praised Washington as 'the best actor of presidency we ever had'); his son John Quincy, Professor of Rhetoric, claimed that 'eloquence is the child of liberty' (p. 122). The Adams's Ciceronian aspirations were not to last. In the nineteenth century the puritanical US's conflation of plain-speaking and truth called forth a toned-down, 'tasteful' oratorical standard adapted to educated elite leadership. But its hypocrisy was soon called out by the working-class actor Forrest, the black orator Douglass, and the female activists Wright, Gimke, Mott and Stanton: some adherents of classical rhetoric, some self-conscious anti-rhetoricians.

Scene 5: India (Chapter 6, 'Democracy as a Universal Good'). This section takes us to the birth of Indian democracy to test Gandhi's claim that Asia could develop a 'true democracy' unblemished by the hypocrisies and contradictions of Western imperialist democracies. But Gandhi can be viewed as another anti-theatrical who skilfully performed truth and simplicity and provides a rich contrast to Tagore, 'the man of the theatre' who 'viewed the political world through the lens of performance'. Both men's performances were nonetheless different from Western models, Gandhi playing a self without individuality, Tagore viewing performance, not as tension between mind and body, but an integration.

W.'s drama of democracy is powerful and insightful. The characters are vivid, the action is exciting and evenly, sometimes breathlessly, paced. The performance analysis successfully reconstructs each political actor's styles and effects. The book's themes are densely explored through each character and scene.

We take away a strong sense of continuity in the behaviour and postures of democratic politicians. Attention is paid to the differences between epochs and cultures, but these remain less developed, some doubtless sacrificed to the book's concision and unity. For example, Demosthenes' attacks on Aeschines allegedly give evidence of the emergence of a new concept of psychological depth that allows Demosthenes to claim a mismatch between what Aeschines thinks and what he says, thus forging the weapon of 'insincerity'

for the arsenal of future rhetoric. For me just what was new remained elusive, since lying is as old as language, and making lesser arguments seem greater was always rhetoric's ideal.

Chapter 7 reiterates the importance of theatre to democracy in Athens and elsewhere. Without theatre/rhetoric there can be no democracy. Theatre offers the training to represent viewpoints effectively and to judge wisely. Awareness that 'liberal democracy can never do without public pretence' (p. 144) helps unmask the populist's 'sincerity'. Some may feel that the more immediate problem is that modern populists do without truth. For democracy's present ills the book would seem to prescribe 'more rhetoric'. Some might prefer 'more honesty'. Is it always just another mask?

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