



Seana's View: Performing Nude

Twice, in fact. In two plays with many performances.

The first time was in Chicago in a production of *Passion Play* at the Goodman Theatre when I was 31. I was playing an urbane photographer who was having an affair with a married man, and many of the scenes were the man's fantasies. At the end of the play, I was to drop a fur coat and reveal all.

The director, Frank Galati, handled the whole thing with the utmost sensitivity. I never was required to remove any clothing in rehearsal, and it was only when we had left the rehearsal hall and were doing the final dress rehearsal in the theatre that he prepared me for the "coat drop." It was to be full frontal. But just at the last mo-

ment, as I geared up for my exposure, he changed the blocking and told me to turn, walk up the stairs and drop the coat as I moved, letting it fall behind me. I must say I was relieved. It was a huge cast, and full of very young beautiful actors as well as seasoned professionals. There was wonderful lighting and beautiful music as I ascended, and the dreamlike image was to represent the constant yearning for the unattainable, the fantasy. The high heels helped.

After that first nude rehearsal, the cast were very supportive and respectful, assuaging my insecurities and nerves.

Empowered by Nudity

But the first audience was nerve-wracking. The fact that they were strangers, who lived in a strange city in a foreign country helped. I would never have to greet them at the grocery store two months later. Gradually, after a few performances, my self-consciousness about the flaws of my body gave way, and I began to feel empowered by my nudity, if even for a moment at the end of the play. "This is what a 30-year-old body looks like. If you have a problem looking, don't look."

The second time I dropped clothing was also at the very end of play, but was startlingly different. I was now 41, and had recently had my son. I was not dropping a fur coat behind me, but a hospital gown. My head was hairless, my feet were bare. I was playing Vivian Bearing in Margaret Edison's *Wit*, a woman who had just died of ovarian cancer. She leaves the bed as the doctors are noting the time of her death, and lets all the clothing, all the pain, all the heavy trappings of life slip off, and reaches toward a bright light. The lights dim as she moves towards it, naked as the day she was born.

In both plays, the nakedness continues to tell the story visually in a way that words could not communicate. In the theatre, you are in the same room with that naked body onstage. The bodies are not airbrushed, and are often not Hollywood beautiful. That is the point. One is confronted with our common mortality, with the differences in our bodies, the process of aging, the glory of youth, the sheer fragility of our outer casings, our vulnerability. It can be uncomfortable to witness, but that may not be a bad thing if one asks why. There are warnings about nudity onstage in the program or in the lobby for those who might be shocked or disapproving.

No Body Doubles

Of course, I have seen nudity on stage that I did not think helped the production, which would be my definition of "gratuitous." It was merely distracting, or was "set-dressing" and perhaps exploitative of beautiful young actors. One rarely sees many naked elderly people on stage, and perhaps that is an omission that should be addressed. "This is what a naked 80 year old looks like."

There are no body doubles in the theatre. You are looking at the actor's body, but the actor is letting his body serve the play and his character. If the actor is not comfortable being naked, the audience will worry about the actor and be drawn out of the play. But try to imagine *Hair* without nudity. A body unclothed symbolizes all that the youth of the '60s were aspiring to: freedom.

As I button my collar, put on my cape and nun's bonnet, it has been almost a decade since I last shed my clothes for my art. I don't anticipate any future public disrobings, but if the play honestly requires it, and I am still around, I may be that nude 80 year old you were warned about.

While I was in the midst of rehearsals for *Doubt* at Canstage, and was bonnetted, buttoned up and cloaked in black from head to toe in my role as a nun, I was intrigued by a question someone asked me: have you ever been nude on stage?

