

CULTURE SHOCK

Kristin Linklater is one of the most esteemed educators in the American theatre and is currently the chair of the theatre division at Columbia University. It therefore comes as nothing less than a shock to read her warnings ("Far Horizons," Jan. '00) about methods of actor training which originate (in her words) outside of our own European-based verbal traditions. Suggestions that actors and their teachers sell themselves short when they bow down to foreign gods and that by doing so they run the risk of becoming whores with low self-esteem, and of diluting their art, are xenophobic, exclusionary and borderline racist. They are as uninformed as they are destructive.

Linklater claims that her own work feeds the organs of the art of acting that are universal—the lungs and the heart—and indeed it does. But her failure to recognize that these traditions she warns us off, namely Butoh, Kathakali, Kabuki, Suzuki, Balinese dancing, T'ai Chi and the Tao of Voice, feed the very same organs is deeply disturbing.

In a major university, is she not responsible for teaching in a community of students from all over the world? Does she assume that students will be best served exclusively with Western-based training?

At the SIT Company, our mission includes the creation of new work, international exchange and

collaboration and the training of theatre artists. We live and work in America, but our work is enriched by contact with other cultures. And the approaches that we have embraced have had an indisputable impact upon the aesthetics and culture of theatre in America.

It is true that bad teaching is bad teaching. Charlatans do exist. The intricate dynamic between the teacher and the method, the teacher and the student, is delicate and not easily defined.

But Linklater, in her remarks, has dangerously demonized the possibility of cross-cultural exchange. This demonstrates a reactionary conservatism that does not belong in the arts.

*Anne Bogart and the
SITI Company
New York City*

KRISTIN LINKLATER RESPONDS: *Well! I did rather wickedly hope to stir up a little controversy, but this goes way beyond the discussion I had envisioned. If I didn't have a sense of humor and enormous respect and affection for my colleague Anne Bogart, I would be quite angry at the personal nature of this attack. "Xenophobic," "exclusionary," "racist" and "reactionary" are vilifying words that have never been flung at me before and in no way describe me; and I certainly don't have the power (or the inclination) to demonize cross-cultural exchange.*

GROPING IN THE DARK

Re: The issue of "art" versus "entertainment" that Ben Cameron raises in his essay "Do I Hear a Waltz?" (Feb. '00). I am angry and irascible when I hear the tired cry of "elitism" thrown at those who believe in these categories. There is a great difference between art and entertainment, and I'm not afraid to say it. Distinctions between "pleasures of diversion" and "pleasures of attention" are excellent ones. I add James Joyce's thoughts: "...feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. The arts that excite them, pornographic or didactic, are...improper arts. The esthetic emotion ("proper" art) is static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing."

The dogged, increasingly institutionalized bias in our culture against "art" is really an expression of justifiable class resentment. Why should only some of us, usually those rich enough to go to exclusive schools, be given the message that we are worthy and intelligent enough to seek out experiences of "art"?

All human beings are capable of creating and recognizing creation; the distribution of this faculty can be democratic and individual. Attitude, not art itself, may be elitist and divisive. No one in particular has the right answers concerning aesthetic judgment; some are more practiced than others, but we're all groping in the dark. But giving up the right to dis-

tinguish art from entertainment is giving up a basic human right.

*Barbara Blatner
Cambridge, Mass.*

CHESTNUTS WITH BITE

In "The Way We Were" (March '00), Misha Berson mentions three of George S. Kaufman's musicals. There's certainly more to these old chestnuts than one might expect.

Morrie Ryskind collaborated with Kaufman on the book for *Of Thee I Sing* (and its 1933 sequel, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*). The story exposes the corruption of American government and suggests parallels between American society and the burgeoning fascist movement of western Europe. Not even the Gershwins' music and lyrics could save the show from closing after just 90 performances. *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), with a libretto by Kaufman and Moss Hart, did better, partly because George M. Cohan played the Roosevelt knock-off.

Strike Up the Band also has an intriguing history. The 1927 version, with
continued on page 52

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