

A black and white photograph of a theater stage. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several people are visible, some standing and some sitting on the floor. The background is dark, with several bright spotlights illuminating the scene from above. The large, white, serif text 'RUMBLINGS' is superimposed over the center of the image, with the spotlights appearing to shine through the letters.

RUMBLINGS

THEATER RUMBLINGS

// ERNST EBBE

Sometimes I think I am one of the old white men so much attacked these days. I identify with them just out of spite. As my grandfather says, Viel Feind, viel Ehr' , which means something like The more danger, the more honor. I lack the power of those old guys, I envy them for their power, and I love them for their old-fashioned views. This put me in a mess. Because when recently I swaggered about my impressions of the terrible theater pieces I had seen because my girlfriend insists on my accompanying her to that theater house she adores and I dread, and suddenly an old acquaintance of mine popped up asking me, why don' t you write down your theater views for a theater journal, well then, honestly, I wasn' t much pleased because talking is one thing and writing another. But that damned acquaintance I don' t know how and why he was just then popping up, he said, you shoot your mouth off but when challenged, you chicken out. So I couldn' t chicken out, and when he said the journal I should write for was really really good and rolled his eyes full of admiration, I took the bait and was stupid enough to promise him that yes, before the end of June I' d send him a paper he could use or not use, I don' t mind. And that' s why I' m now sitting in front of my laptop, fretting what the hell I should write, or better, what to begin with, for there are so many things I' m angry with that I don' t know what to flog first.

But don' t think too much, I admonish myself, thinking much is the mother of all evil. I remember one of my best friends, a religious Catholic and specialist on St. Augustine, you know the bishop of some place that is now Algeria. Augustine, my friend says, says the more you think, the more you feel like God, and this of course you are not, but thinking you are will necessarily lead to hell where all the best thinkers have gone down to, starting from Lucifer, the most intelligent being, to Socrates, sentenced to death by his own city, and Jesus, crucified as a criminal, and the many dissenters of our age, murdered and sent into prisons, labor camps and loony bins. Yes, now we pretend to adore them, except for Lucifer, though even he has gotten a fine name, carrier of the light. But in fact, that' s all fake, we all know thinking is for God and the devil, not for man, and here I am already at the very center of my complaints about theater. Theater wants us to think, as if we were God or the devil!

Yes, the theater wants us to think, so the theater is bad. This is the iron logic I do see through and my poor girlfriend and so many theater fans don' t. But I should distinguish. Contemporary theater wants us to think. Formerly they didn' t. They did not want us to think, they have been modest, they knew what' s right and what' s wrong, they wanted to amuse us, to delight us, to have us enjoy the goods of life without thinking that there are black kids in the Congo who starve. While these modern guys, Thomas Ostermeier and Milo Rau and Robert Wilson, they really seem to believe you must not have your morning coffee without weeping for the poor and exploited in Mexico or Molenbeek. While the kids you are weeping for can at least enjoy the little food they get.

But yes, I have to distinguish. We had a fine talk some weeks ago, my girlfriend and me. We had watched a piece directed by Robert Wilson, Mary said what she said. What a stupid title, I told her, Mary said what she said! What else could she say but what she said? The piece had exceeded my worst expectations. Nothing but one monologue without end, no action at all. Well, that' s what I had to expect, as the title is Mary said what she said, so what else can you expect but that Mary said what she said? Which she did. Of course I knew that Mary was Mary Stuart, the Scottish queen that her cousin and rival Queen Elizabeth of England had put in prison and would execute after Mary said what she said. So wouldn' t she say some interesting things about her life and the conflict with Elizabeth? Wouldn' t you have expected that too? Anyway, I pricked up my ears to understand every word that she would say, all the more so as Mary was played by Isabelle Huppert, who was gorgeous in her looks and movements and dresses and the modulation of her voice and the power and passion she expressed. But guess what happened! I didn' t understand a word! Well, I did understand some words, even whole sentences. But what she said didn' t make any sense. Yes, I realized she spoke sometimes of herself as Mary and then used the first person, but when I understood a sentence, it was only trivialities, how she felt with a relative or a man but nothing of interest. She believed she was holy and a queen, she was pretty proud of her beauty and mocked Elizabeth' s ugliness. But when things got more interesting, I didn' t understand a word because then she whispered or talked too fast and suddenly cried so my ears pained. My ears are reliable, I' m not a bit hard of hearing, and everyone I talked to confirmed me they didn' t understand either what Mary said when things got interesting. So is there a logic in the piece? There isn' t, or I' m more stupid than I think I am.

LOGIC OF THEATER

Why must there be a logic in a theater piece? Gisela asked, my girlfriend.

Gosh, this question caught me off guard. Of course there must be, I roared, else it's no piece but nonsense. And that's what Mary said what she said is, a piece of nonsense, I thought. But I kept this truth to myself, Gisela was so enthusiastic about the piece and I didn't want to hurt her.

The great thing about theater that I like it for, said Gisela, is that logic doesn't count. It doesn't count? I gasped. What then does count?

Good question, she said. I don't know either. Sometimes it's just that there is someone standing on the stage and you know something will happen to her. What a great picture of life! There you are, and you can be absolutely sure something will happen to you. Even if nothing happens, that's also a happening, isn't it?

I was baffled. Something was true in what Gisela said, I felt, though of course entirely wrong at the end of the day. Don't tell me you go to the theater to see someone standing on the stage, I said, and nothing happens to her. You don't watch a movie either in which nothing happens.

Theater is not film, she said.

But something to watch and to pay for and to waste your time on. You cannot even read a novel in which nothing happens. Nothing could be written then, so there wouldn't be a novel. I think this is why I prefer novels to theater hell of a lot more.

With me it's just the other way round, Gisela said. She looked at me with her big round eyes so honestly I laughed.

Well, I said, I admit there can be something great about someone just standing on the stage. And Isabelle Huppert looked great alone on the stage. But then she is talking and talking and you don't understand when it gets interesting. Because she starts whispering or crying like crazy. Or did you understand?

No, my dear girlfriend said and laughed with me. That's the great thing about theater. People talk and you don't understand them. Like in real life. You have to guess. Even if you get every word, you still have to guess. You can never be sure what the author really means. And that's great. You should always beware of being sure about what you hear.

Come on, I said. If I always doubt whether I got your words right, we'll never come to a talk.

Well, she laughed again, when do we come to a talk? Seems you always doubt.

Now I did doubt if I got her right. But I asked her to tell me what she guessed Mary had said.

Just imagine what you would say about your life when you know you'll be executed in an hour or so. What would pop up in your mind? The nodal points of your life when you made the decisions that made you what you are and got you into trouble? Or rather details that other people would think are ridiculously peripheral and negligible?

Good question, I said, I don't know, I really don't know.

I shook my head. What would I think? What are the nodal points of my life? When did I really decide anything? Well, I'm not a queen, I thought, a queen should know when she made crucial decisions, shouldn't she? But could she? Gisela had confused me, I confess. So I asked her, But what do you think Mary said?

Ridiculously peripheral details, she said, as I would. And I wonder what that means.

Are there any nodal points at all in a human life? I asked.

Wasn't your decision to go with me a nodal point? she replied.

It was your decision to go with me, I thought. But I didn't say that, Gisela is sometimes too sure of herself and just includes my existence in hers. Or she knows anyway, so why answer her? And in the end, it's true there must be two for a relationship, I had to agree, assent, comply. Cling together swing together! So I said, You have a point, I grant, theater can be interesting just because we don't understand it. It makes us think. But first, it's interesting only because we talk about it, and second, it's interesting because we imagine interesting things about the piece while the piece is bland and blank, and third, it's bad to think too much. If you start thinking about the nodal points of your life, gracious God! You see you're but a straw blown by the wind, a drop in the ocean that fancies to cause the tides.

You love poetry, Gisela laughed again.

O no, it just sticks. I hate thinking. In my core, I'm a pious conservative. Thinking is for God and the devil, you know how often I say so, and these theater guys are devils who want us to become devils too.

I'm already a devil, Gisela couldn't stop laughing. Though as pious as you. Didn't Godmother or Mother Nature give us brains to think?

No, I said, she gave us brains to beware of thinking. You must be clever not to think. Look at the stupid cows and sheep. They stand there so often with their amazed mouths open that they just forget to shut, thinking and thinking why they exist and how there can be a world at all! Well, it's not in vain they do, because when they stand still in their thinking, they produce milk and wool. But we produce only religions and kill one another for them.

But now you are thinking, Gisela laughed once more.

Yes, I said, to beware of thinking. While your theater wants us to be cows and sheep gaping at their stages. See? I'm not only pious and conservative, I'm also proud, I don't want to become a gaping sheep.

