

People Watching People

The night before last I was sitting somewhere in the middle of the orchestra stalls –the lowest area of seating- in the Royal Opera House, reading the cast-list and listening to the struggled breathing of a large man next to me when the lights dimmed and the entire audience began to clap. The clapping began slowly like a breeze running through the crowd, making the throngs of elegant individuals rustle with a sound somewhere between the wind in a forest and a distantly falling cascade, not as sharp as it usually sounds because the space was so large and because nobody was clapping to any precise cue, there was nothing happening on stage, the applause had emerged from within the audience while the hall was in semi-darkness, with nothing to see but itself and as I looked up at this moving blanket of sound I saw innumerable people rising up, away from me in every direction, stacked on top of each other until they disappeared behind the glistening ceiling, but below it they were as decorative in their clapping as the gilding was in its shimmer, and everybody was facing me; in the quasi-light before the opera, this encrusted waterfall of people seemed to be clapping for me and I couldn't help but let myself go for a second and be filled with the expansive glamour of attention, be irradiated with the elating energy of a thousand pairs of eyes: for a brief moment, because of the combination of the extrusion of an elongated horse-shoe plan and my position in its pits, I felt a touch of the basic form of celebrity in all its seductiveness, I felt how the simple accumulation of individual attentions on one person can have the sublime force of standing frozen in joyous, exultant terror in front of a vertiginous Andean precipice.

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Boxes in operas and the theatre rarely have the best view, and often have severely obstructed views, but this was irrelevant since their primary role was not to provide a perfect place from which to see the performance -the optimal place to see the stage- rather they were meant to be the perfect place from which to be seen, to be stages in their own right, and also from where to have the perfect view of the audience. The event being performed on stage was often just the funnel through which a kaleidoscopic display of dress, decorum, judgemental observation, social critique and good old people-watching would be brought together in one place and time; it was

the packaging in four dimensions which contained the sparkling bitchiness within its two or three hour limits, and it was this coruscating display of interchanging glances and asides within the audience which was for what the architecture was designed, both to be its container in three dimensions and its catalyst in form: from the over-articulation of every protruding element within the auditorium which framed the miniscule and multiple exchanges within the audience more elaborately than any exchange between them and the stage, to the overall layout with its considerable care for sightlines leading in any other direction than the stage. The space of the audience as a self-observing and self-celebrating social spectacle was codified within the architecture and layout of many of our older performance spaces, and while most of them are no longer loci of any kind of social relevance, like archaeological sites they retain pungent remains which can be picked for clues: their architectures worked for, and with, more material than the performances they hosted and while the endless iterations of Carmen and Rigoletto, the silences of abandonment or the thumping of a nightclub surround the crumbling or pristinely renovated stucco and gilding, there are whole milieus of strange and distant fashions, hairstyles, predilections, conversations, hatreds, jealousies and allegiances whose existences tenuously cling to the present with every unnecessary chandelier that has survived their abandonment, with every pointlessly plush surface populated with irreverent putti that has been left uncovered.

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I am embarrassed and thrilled every time that I go to the Queen Elizabeth Hall when during the performance I turn around in my seat to look behind me at the encyclopaedic grid of faces rising away in its huge, dark space; embarrassed because I am standing out like an incorrect calculation in a vast spread-sheet, denuded and alone, and thrilled because there are so many people, and they are endlessly interesting and I want to see them, exchange glances with them, study them furtively but in full sight, experience the performance differently depending on their reaction, hate some of them because they are elated and I am frowning and the show is just stupid... I once saw a tutor from my old university when doing this, sitting with his arms around a student of his from whom, the moment he saw me, he withdrew his arms and enacted a comical attempt to hide his face from view. He immediately ran out as the lights came on.

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My Synagogue is large and split into two levels, the upper level rising steeply away from its banisters in tiers, and curving around the floor below to create an unusually accentuated Edwardian amphitheatre full of women and girls with large bobbing hats populating the brightly lit second floor, and suited men with small white shawls crammed in rows beneath, talking to each other with furrowed brows and serious glances which place the atmosphere there somewhere between the boardroom and the Gentleman's club. The men are arrayed in subterranean solemnity in full sight of the women who look down on them, pointing and talking to each other and about the level beneath in such a way that the boys and men can tell not only who they are talking about amongst the huddles suits –the seating is bought by subscription and only rarely alters, meaning everybody knows who is being talked about- but also what they are thinking and feeling, since the women are all set in full view and relief by the progressively raised tiers of seating which isolates them into gesticulating tableaux. Everybody is seen by everybody else at every moment, and very soon after each sermon the observations made within the amphitheatre are shared, tested, confirmed or disputed when overall opinion assembles in the Synagogue's lobby to noisily conclude its cultural verdicts on the evening's "horrors", "he should be ashamed's and "she is really taking it very well's, before spilling out into the street to go back to their respective dining rooms, armed with more than enough material for a good meal's hearty and denunciatory conversation.
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For the film that this is the script for, please [CLICK HERE](#)