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# CLASS ACTS

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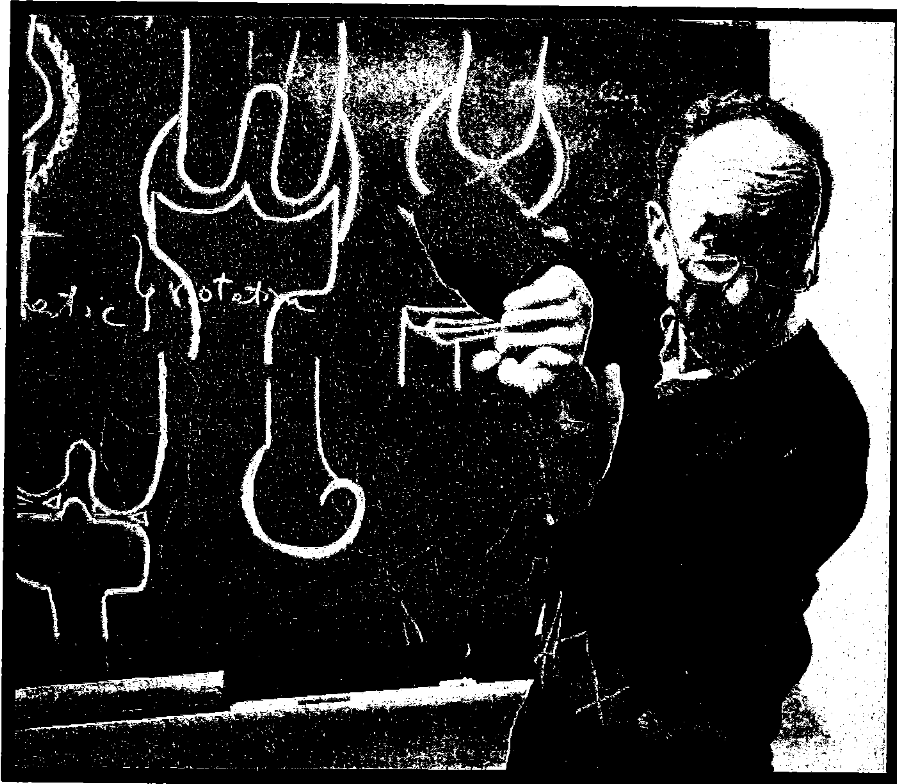
photo: Jerrie Berndt

*A few minutes before 8:30 A.M. I climb to a seat in a steep amphitheater at the Harvard Medical School and pull up the writing board. On my left a student is eating a bagel spread with peanut butter. On my right another student is drinking Hawaiian Punch out of a small cardboard box. Ahead of me, on the upper level of the blackboard, is what looks like a joke: a many-colored cartoon apparently featuring a red ghost and a blue ghost flanked by green hairs sprouting from all sides. Below me, at the bottom of the lecture hall, is a plain wooden desk with a tiny sink arched by a faucet. It's littered with colored chalk spilling out of several boxes. To one side is an amplifier with two glowing lights.*

*Soon a wiry man in glasses comes through the swinging doors, picks up a small mike from the desk, and loops it around his neck. This is Professor Elio Raviola, who pulls down the cartoon and leans back*

*against the blackboard, hands in pockets. Peering over his glasses he begins to speak in a brisk Italian accent to the three hundred-odd students peering back down at him. In the course of the next seventy-five minutes his task is to strip of its mystery the anatomy of the abdomen.*

TO the first year medical students in the room this is a prelude to an encounter with a cadaver. I, however, am there simply to catch Raviola's act – to see The Abdomen Revealed, as one might go to see Spalding Gray do "Swimming to Cambodia."

Academic lectures are the form of performance art in which Boston is richest. Like the work of Gray or Laurie Anderson, they are one-person tours-de-force, exhibitions that at their best have a dramatic urgency. And if the audience is a captive one, perhaps that only makes it more urgent that the content be so imaginatively brewed that those to whom it is offered realize they are thirsty. In *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching,* Joseph Lowman argues that college lectures "satisfy the need for dramatic spectacle and offer an interpersonal arena in which important psychological needs are met." He even goes so far as to claim that "college classrooms are dramatic arenas first and intellectual arenas second." Two of the lectures I attended in fact took place in dramatic arenas. One was in Sanders Theater, and the students were so conscious of the setting that they applauded politely at the end. The other was in the Nickelodeon Cinema 2, where Political Science 394 plays to a packed house Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 11.

Howard Zinn's "Introduction to Political Theory," a famous course at Boston University for over a decade, is not exactly what the title suggests. "I'm trying to teach students to believe in their own ability to theorize, rather than having a fascinating intellectual discussion about Rousseau or Locke," Zinn explained. To this end he offers a performance in which theory emerges as a style of discourse, a stand-up routine in which sarcasm and common sense are woven around the story of the day. The day I saw it, the story was Swimming to Nicaragua, which included a recapitulation of U.S. relations with Central America since the Monroe Doctrine, and a digression on the removal of Native Americans first from Louisiana to Georgia and then, when gold was discovered in Georgia, to Oklahoma – until oil was discovered. "Why," he asked, "don't they do surveys before they compress people into an area – to make sure there's nothing there?" Arriving at Nicaragua by way of Mexico, Panama, Cuba, and Honduras, he brought his shameful tale around to U.S. support of the Somoza family, whose flight he compared to Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos's. When Somoza fled the country, he told them, he took three hundred and seventy-nine suitcases. "Of what?" Zinn asked, "Documents? Books?" A slight pause. "A big reader," he finishes, to a ripple of laughter.

As the students poured into the aisles of the theater on their way out to lunch, I asked the one sitting next to me why she was taking the course. "I'd always heard about it," she answered, "and I wanted to take it before I graduated. He leaves room for other opinions," she explained, "he's not . . ." she made a fist, "dogmatic, like some professors who say, 'This is the way it is.' " As Joseph Lowman would say, Zinn's interpersonal arena seems to be meeting some important psychological needs.

SEVERAL miles away, on the Tufts campus, Jonathan Wilson's "American Fiction from 1950 to the Present," is similarly in demand. SRO in the classroom where it was originally scheduled, it had to be moved to an auditorium at Tufts' Fletcher School: "And I want a mike and a back-up band," Wilson told the registrar when she finished reassigning his classroom.

On the day set aside for Michael Herr's *Dispatches* he arrived at the podium in a faded plaid shirt with a label on the pocket saying ID# ____, and somewhat military-looking pants. One of the points of his lecture is how

much the style of the common soldier in Vietnam has become our own—not only in dress, but in langauge. However, he warned, when we say something like, "I was blown away," it's stripped of associations with death and combat. "We've come a long way from the provincial innocence of blow jobs," he adds, to general appreciation.

When Wilson described Herr's style as having a "rock-and-roll appeal," the student sitting next to me abandoned her crossword puzzle and began taking notes. "The jokes work best," he said to me, "when they are part of the ideas, when they flow spontaneously out of the material." In an earlier lecture he explained the jumpiness of the experimental novel as an attempt to imitate modern life. The lecture form you are now involved in, he told the class, is outmoded: "You should be able to switch me when it gets boring. Try ten minutes of economics, or see what's going on over at Ballou [the administration building at Tufts]."

The heart of Wilson's technique is his willingness to reimagine literary issues in the terms of his audience's lives. In general, though, the lecture relies on more old-fashioned principles. As the helpful Lowman has it, "Accomplished teachers are frequently skilled storytellers."

*"What comes next?" Raviola asks his anatomy students, having outlined the kidneys in green on the cartoon, two soft boxing gloves on either side of the red and blue ghosts. He puts a finger to his right ear as mumbling and shuffing fills the room. "Did I hear correctly? The origin of the portal vein?" He raises a cautionary finger. "We are talking about only one portion of the portal vein," he warns. Drawing in the pancreas he continues to talk to his audience ("This is the head, this is the neck . . . and this is the body . . . and this is the tail") as it emerges in magenta, the tail crossing the left kidney.*

*The drama of the abdomen lies within the soft balloon of the peritoneum ("a miracle of engineering"). Twenty feet of tubing have to be accommodated in a cavity one foot in height. To make sure that no one misses the dimension of the problem, he chalks the length of it across the width of the blackboard, pacing in long steps, counting out the six meters. So how do you make it fit? "You do it with a trapezoid filled with pleats," he reveals, going on to sketch the anterior of the abdomen, gradually building it up like a house—only the walls turn out to be things like the stomach, and, he says, "we call this roof* liver."

THE Harvard *Crimson's Confidential Guide to Courses at Harvard-Radcliffe* suggests that one reason for the popularity of "America Since 1945"—last spring 850 students tried to register for 500 places—is the way Alan Brinkley outlines the lectures on the board before beginning to speak. "Moreover," add the *Crimson* editors, "his smooth public speaking style allows even the worst note-taker to get down the basics, and his repetition of course themes will have you reciting the basic ideas well before the final."

All true, as I discovered during his lecture called "The Feminist Revolution." I had thought of the feminist revolution as something that was a part of my life, but in the crowded confines of Science Center B, surrounded by the quiet breathing and scribbling of people young enough to be my children, I understood it was History, a neat package of Sources and Patterns, with its own crucial moments (Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* Gloria Steinem's moment in the Congressional sun, Stokely Carmichael's remark that the only position for a woman in SNCC was prone). Brinkley's speaking style is clear and unhistrionic. He doesn't move from behind the lectern where his notes are propped and seems in complete control at all times. He made a mild joke about Phyllis Schlafly (if she thinks women ought to be home minding their families, how come she spends all her time out speaking in public?), but by noon had maneuvered his unwieldy ship into the quiet channel leading to the future (Carol Gilligan's reformulation of women's differentness as something positive). Unlike Raviola's task, which was to turn a body of basic and essentially non-controversial material into a suspenseful tale, Brinkley's was to pre-digest a volatile, still-evolving story so that it could be easily absorbed.

As a performer, Brinkley stands modestly behind his material. Like the rest of us, he probably watched his father David on NBC news, packaging the complicated events of the day into something that could be handled

around dinnertime. The solid organization inspires perfect trust: this guy is not going to jerk anybody around. And if he says feminism is the most significant social movement to come out of the sixties, well there certainly are a lot of women anchoring the TV news these days.

There are not, as it happens, a lot of women lecturing to college students, though. Not because there aren't lots of women professors, but because lecturing itself still seems to be a male province. Helena Michie, who teaches in the Women's Studies Program and the English Department at Brandeis, suggests that women academics often take on an opposite kind of role in their departments: "They become known as the ones who listen. Lots of women would rather lecture, but they don't ask for large lecture courses and are not thought of in the department as lecturers. Even the students tend to see you as more nurturing than you really are, simply because you are a woman."

Perhaps it's not a coincidence that Wellesley, which is still an all-women's college, is committed to the nurturant educational model. Rachel Jacoff, professor of Italian at Wellesley, makes a distinction between a classroom lecture and one to, say, a group of colleagues or alumnae. In the latter, "It's more of a performance. You are trying to engage people with the text, and you say the most wonderful things you can about it. In a class you want to talk about some of the problems or questions you have." Carolyn Williams, of Boston University's English Department, breaks her classes up into periods of fifteen-minute lectures followed by ten minutes or so of discussion. Even in a large lecture with one or two hundred students, though, she ttempts to have periods of discussion. 'It makes the students feel less ılienated," she says, "in fact, it makes me feel less alienated."

*As the hands of the clock pass 9:30, Raviola completes his map of the abdomen. He turns to the ranks of students and lets them in on a secret. The graphic positioning of all these organs is a convention. It really depends on how the anatomist slices the body. "What we are asking for is an act of faith," he finishes, selecting a piece of chalk for the final demonstration of the peritoneum's awesomely crazy and totally logical shape.*

*Although it encloses all the organs like the skin of a building or the rim of the sea, the peritoneum is in fact neither round nor square. Its folds run all around the interior of the abdomen. To prove it, he says, "imagine that you are a peritoneal mouse running around the edge . . . " He steps to the cartoon, by this time heavily encrusted with its many-colored organs, and prepares to run the mouse through the peritoneal maze. He takes his time pushing the chalk over, up, and around, ending triumphantly at the point where he began. "There's the proof," he finishes, to a wild burst of applause, including a whistle or two.*

I made my way out to the dazzle of Longwood Avenue with a sense of having been let in on big news. Whatever it meant to the medical students, for me Raviola's performance added up to revelation. It didn't seem right just to call that interplay of narrative fantasy and respect for the subject *school*—you'd have to call it art. □