

May 25, 2001

I started writing this in my trailer on the set of Atom Egoyan's "Ararat" and have time to make contact. I haven't written for almost a year, not because I have nothing to say, but I'm having difficulty saying anything cogently. Perhaps because I've been so immersed in trying to be cogent elsewhere.

I've been touring the solo work more than usual. I toured to support the novel last fall. And this is the third location shoot in ten months, not to mention the odd work in New York. Next month I go up to Williamstown to begin rehearsals for Howard Gould's "Diva" with Bebe Neuwirth. I continue to work on two plays, and I wrote a television pilot for HBO which did not get "picked up".

I'm not supposed to "do any press" about Atom's film before it comes out, but there are a few things I'd like to say about the experience of working with Atom Egoyan and his crew up in Canada. I wish every experience in film were

like this one. Atom is intensely intelligent. He knows exactly what he wants to do, what kind of shot he wants to make, what he thinks the characters should say. He is an "auteur" in the classic sense of the word. He "authors" the film.

The crew was top-notch and calm and pleasant as people. This was also true of the cast which included the legendary Charles Aznavor (like Atom and myself, of Armenian ancestry). The writing was crisp and unpredictable (am I saying too much?).

Perhaps the thing I valued most on this set was time. The most expensive commodity on a film set is time. As the clock ticks, money goes down the drain. So things tend to get rushed. Because lighting takes as long as it takes, very often it is the acting that gets rushed. Often the director (or I should say the producer) wants to "get the angle" in as few takes as possible. This could mean one or two.

In this film, we usually shot the "master" about six times, then moved into a medium close-up (for each actor) six

times, then close for six or so times. And after that, Atom would come up to me or Arsinee Khanjian or whomever and ask "Are you happy?" meaning, do you feel you've done your best?

This is the way film acting is supposed to work. This is how the director gets the best performances from his actors. I appreciated it very much because often I am doing something technical (like giving a complex speech) and I "need the takes." When I was shooting "Under Siege II", I had an eight page monologue that they wanted to get in one take! When I asked for another, they seemed surprised when the next take was so much better. Much of what happens on a film set is technical: sound, lights, camera movement, lens, focus. As things get rushed, the soul of the endeavor, the human emotion, gets left behind.

Which is just one of those things about film acting today. As it gets speeded up, as stars become the sole focal point, the whole thing is more an exercise in recognition, rather than exploration. "Ah, yes, there is Harrison Ford reprising his furrowed brow character! Excellent!" "There

is the toothy Gwyneth, the angry Brad, the dopey Adam!"  
People go to the movies to see what they expect to see.

Which is fine as far as it goes. But I've loved film where something new is invented. Adult drama. Could be Wally Shawn, could be Bergman, could be Woody Allen. I don't want to see the predictable. And for that to happen, rather than having actors roll in their characters like giant totems, the actors have to listen to one another and react. They have to know what they are saying almost to point of inventing the words themselves. "Reservoir Dogs" has great energy because so much of it is in "two-shot", in which two actors are on screen at the same time and are forced to deal with one another.

Anyway, I'm off to Western Massachusetts to do the play. I haven't been onstage in something I haven't written (except for readings) for about 25 years. Wow. I am looking forward to this. I am looking forward to memorizing my lines and being in rehearsal. It's my idea of heaven. The script is

fun and the company includes Bebe, my buddy C.J.Wilson and the nefarious and very funny Kurtwood Smith.

Back to film acting for a sec. What the fuck is it? Is it art? Is it making something or is it just showing up and slapping your face on celluloid? If it's the latter, I think some very bad karma can be incited. And I try to watch out for that. When I act on film, I want to be doing something, make something. Be awkward. (Oh, if we could all dance like Malkovich!)

That's why the life of the writer or the director is dangerous, because it requires a point of view. When bringing a point of view is part of what you do, real risk is involved. There's always the possibility of falling on your face publicly. True also of book-writing, stage-acting, poetry. But there's this weird thing about film acting where you're invited to repeat the same old stock thing. An attempt to eliminate risk. And then what do you have but a bizarre job that is about selling your face, body and soul.

Speaking of taking risks, the great Brother Theodore (Theodore Gottlieb) passed away two months ago. He was ninety-four. He kept performing into his eighties. The first time I saw him, he was over seventy. He was the original "in your face", angry ranter. He knew Albert Einstein when he was a kid, he was the darling of the Beats and Merv Griffin. His entire family was murdered by the Nazis. He was one of the best chess players in New York. His performances were insane and and wonderful. He was unique. I learned very important lessons about taking chances in front of a live audience. I will miss him.