

The tape-recorded lecture "Life Gets Around," which Eli Siegel gave on April 27, 1973, was studied in one of the professional classes for Aesthetic Realism consultants and associates. The following report by Len Bernstein of this lecture was part of a Dramatic Presentation at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, a not-for-profit educational foundation, at 141 Greene St., NYC 10012, (212) 777-4490.

Life Gets Around

Eli Siegel's lecture, "Life Gets Around," was an education in the meaning of drama and what it can teach us about the largest matters in our lives. In it Mr. Siegel looked at an esteemed play of 1949, *Detective Story* by Sidney Kingsley. There are three things it has, Mr. Siegel said, "a philosophic approach to the idea of guilt; economics; and plain, human emotion." And he said in this lecture given over 25 years ago, "At the moment there is a great deal about crime....People are more fearful than they ever were." And he asked, "What does crime come from? And why is crime so dramatic?" *Detective Story* is often anthologized, and was made into a popular movie, but I believe the drama of it, and its relevance for us today, was present in a new way as Eli Siegel read and became every character in this play. He showed each of them stands for particular ways of seeing guilt. Aesthetic Realism explains that when we feel guilty, it is not because it has been imposed on us by society—but because we have been unfair to the world which it is our deepest purpose to know and honestly like.

The play "keeps to the unities," Mr. Siegel explained, referring to the requirements of classic drama that the action occur in one day and in one place. It takes place in a New York City police station, the 21st Precinct. Detective McLeod, the central character, is described by the playwright:

(James McLeod is tall, lean, handsome, has powerful shoulders, uncompromising mouth, a studied, immobile, mask-like face betrayed by the deep-set, impatient, mocking eyes which reveal the quick flickers of mood, the deep passions of the man possessed by his own demon.)

Commenting on the use of the word "demon", Mr. Siegel explained, "The demon in McLeod is [his feeling]: "When a person does evil, he does evil, and that's that!" McLeod feels that once a person commits any crime, he can see no good in that person—and we see that McLeod himself suffers because of this. "We all of us are police officers looking for the people who have injured us," said Mr. Siegel. "How well we do it, has to do with how our life is."

As the curtain rises for the first act, Detective Nicholas Dakis, "a bull of a man as wide as he is high..." with "...a voice like the roll of a kettledrum" is questioning a young woman arrested for shoplifting a \$6.00 bag. She is a character that combines pathos and humor. Mr. Siegel explained that "there are many people in this play, "in fact, too many people," and that the shoplifter who appears in every scene "ties together the play. She is always

there, all the time, wondering what is going to happen." "In spite of her avowed guilt, Kingsley writes, "she has all the innocence of ignorance."

Shoplifter: My God, the times I spent twice as much for a pocketbook.

Dakis (matter of factly, with no animus): Well, you took it.

Shoplifter: I don't know why. It was crazy.

Dakis (shrugs it off): It's your first offense. You'll get off on probation.

Shoplifter: I didn't need it. I didn't even like it.

In this lecture Mr. Siegel related this play to various styles of drama. He said, for example, that Detective Story is very different from the plays of Harold Pinter whose characters "are not-much-talking enigmas."

Entering the scene is a police reporter, Joe Feinson, whom Mr. Siegel likened to the Greek Chorus because he comes in periodically with a refrain countering his friend McLeod's rigid way of seeing guilt. He feels that people are both good and bad. The stage directions describe Feinson as "...few inches more than five feet, exaggerated nose, crooked features." Mr. Siegel commented deeply and movingly on the meaning of the characters in this play, showing how they represent humanity. He related Joe Feinson to "the Hunchback of Notre Dame and other people who don't look so good but who have the goodness of the world in them."

Another character is Arthur, a young man, who robbed his employer. We learn that Arthur won the Silver Star for carrying a wounded sailor up three flights of a burning ship during the Second World War. He represents, Mr. Siegel explained, "a new kind of criminal, [a young man] who, after the War, felt that society had not been very kind or understanding." There is a dialogue between Arthur and McLeod which Mr. Siegel said was like Sophocles, with its technique of stichomythia, that is, short sentences back and forth between two characters that have a certain rhythm of sameness and difference. "Sidney Kingsley," said Mr. Siegel, "is one of the persons—there are a few in America—who studied drama seriously, and it came through."

McLeod: Arthur, why'd you take the money?

Arthur: What's the difference? I took it, I admit it, I took it!

McLeod: Where'd you spend last night?

Arthur: In my room.

McLeod: I was there. Where were you? Under the bed?

Arthur: I sat in the Park.

McLeod: All night?

Arthur: Yes.

McLeod: It rained.

Arthur: Drizzled.

McLeod: You sat in the drizzle?

Arthur: Yes.

McLeod: What were you doing?

Arthur: Just dreaming.

McLeod: In the park at night?—Dreaming?

Arthur: Night is the time for dreams.

McLeod: And thieves!

The way Mr. Siegel read these lines had us feel Arthur's anguish, his resignation, his hope. Aesthetic Realism describes evil and what it begins with—the desire for contempt; and shows that the deepest thing in a person is our desire to respect the world. While McLeod looks at Arthur and sees only a lawbreaker, McLeod's partner, Lou Brody, a tough detective, sees there is also good in him. We learn that Brody's only son, like Arthur, was in the Navy, but he was killed. Said Mr. Siegel, "Along with all the toughness we have sentiment. Sentiment will come into life; it is around." Brody tells Arthur:

Sometimes I hear a voice on the street, or see a young fellow from the back, the set of his shoulders—like you—for a minute it's him. Your whole life becomes like a dream...a walking dream.

"So sentiment" said Mr. Siegel "is about someone who was here once and isn't here now."

The central nemesis of McLeod is Kurt Schneider, a man accused of performing illegal abortions. He has just been brought into custody, and McLeod thinks he finally has the goods on him, but one of the witnesses has been bribed, and the only other witness, a young woman operated on by Schneider, has just died. The DA is going to drop the charges and McLeod expresses his disgust with the legal system for freeing a man he is certain is guilty of murder. McLeod says, "Evil has a stench of its own. A child can spot it," and he tells Joe Feinson how, as a child, he watched his own father brutalize his mother day after day.

The thought of Schneider going free and killing someone else is unbearable to McLeod and he threatens him:

McLeod: ...you butcher one more girl in this city—and law or no law, I'll find you and I'll put a bullet in the back of your head, and I'll drop your body in the East River, and I'll go home and I'll sleep sweetly.

Kurt: You have to answer to the law the same as I. You don't frighten me. Now, I'll give you some advice. I've got plenty on you, too.

Goaded by his unrepentant, arrogant manner, McLeod loses control and hits Schneider, who is taken to the hospital. McLeod does not yet know that what Schneider "has on him" is that some years before McLeod met his wife, Mary, at the time she was a young girl, she went to Schneider for an abortion.

In the Second Act, the young man we had seen earlier, Arthur, explains he stole the money in a final attempt to keep his girlfriend Joy. He hoped to impress her by taking her to fancy nightclubs, but she has decided to marry a rich man. Joy's sister, Susan, who really cares for Arthur, has come to the police station. Susan talks to Arthur deeply, encouraging him, and even offers to convince her sister Joy to come to see Arthur. But Arthur says no, "For five years I've been in love with a girl that doesn't exist." Susan says:

Susan: Arthur, why didn't you fall in love with me? I'd have been so much better for you. I know I'm not as beautiful as Joy, but...

Arthur: But you are. Joy's prettier than you, Susan, but you're more beautiful.

Susan: Oh, Jiggs, you fracture me!

As the play proceeds, Arthur realizes he loves Susan, and says that no matter what happens, he hopes they will be together. Arthur expresses regret for his stealing and Susan begs his employer, Mr. Pritchett, to drop the charges if the money is returned, which Pritchett agrees to—but McLeod insists that Arthur stand trial. Susan, in despair, says to McLeod, "My God—didn't you ever make a mistake?" And we learn that the one mistake McLeod feels he made, and the reason he won't show leniency to Arthur is that, years ago, McLeod took pity on a young man he had arrested for stealing a car and let him go. Two nights later this boy robbed a shopkeeper and killed him. McLeod tells Arthur's employer:

McLeod: Don't invest these criminals with your nervous system, Mr. Pritchett. Sure! They laugh, they cry; but don't think it's your laughter or your tears. It isn't. They're a different species, a different breed. Believe me, I know.

In his fierce drive to punish evil, McLeod doesn't want to see where he can be cruel, that there can be evil in him. I was much affected by this because I once preferred to self-righteously judge people for what I saw as their "faults," when I needed desperately to criticize myself for my lack of understanding and meanness. Today, I am a much kinder person because of what I am learning.

McLeod's friends appeal to him. Joe Feinson says:

Joe: Seamus, Seamus, why must you always make everything so black and white? Remember, we're all of us falling down all the time. Don't be so intolerant.

And Lou Brody also pleads with McLeod to set Arthur free. But there is a terrific struggle in McLeod between cruelty and kindness and he is in agony. He tells Brody: "I hate softness. I don't believe in it. My mother was soft; it killed her."

It is very dramatic when McLeod, who has pursued evil in others with such ferocity must now be judged in terms of his own guilt or innocence. Schneider's lawyer has accused McLeod of persecuting his client out of revenge because his wife Mary went to him for an abortion. Lieutenant Monaghan, McLeod's superior has to find out the truth. Did McLeod know about his wife's abortion? Mary is summoned to the stationhouse and tells of her past with quiet, deep feeling. McLeod is at first stunned by what she says and then brutally interrogates his wife. Mr. Siegel said that in the dialogue between Mary and McLeod "We have a picture of the absolutist husband." Mr. Siegel read these lines conveying McLeod's tortured, driven, and mean nature and Mary's dignity, her aching hope that her husband will understand.

McLeod: Why didn't you tell me?

Mary: I wanted to, but I didn't dare. I would have lost you.

McLeod: I thought I knew you. I thought you were everything good and pure...

Mary: Jim, don't judge me. Try and understand. Right and wrong aren't always as simple as they seem to you.

And then McLeod says: "What's there to understand?"

McLeod is determinedly unforgiving and, in Act Three, Mary returns to tell her husband she is leaving him. McLeod's friends have tried very hard to have him see how much Mary means to him, and how cruel he is being. He tries to be different, pleads with her to stay, and for a moment it seems they are reconciled. But the "demon" in McLeod pushes forward and he condemns her with renewed fury. Mary says:

You're a cruel and vengeful man. You're everything you've always said you hated in your own father.

And she leaves. McLeod, feeling he's driven away what he loves most, is sickened with himself. He looks so ill that his Lieutenant tells him to go home, but he says "...I haven't got any." And then McLeod shows, for the first time, some compassion for the man he has despised for so long. He says:

McLeod: I built my whole life on hating my father—and all the time he was inside me, laughing—or maybe he was crying, the poor bastard, maybe he couldn't help himself, either.

Two characters introduced early in the play are Charlie and Lewis, who have been arrested for burglary. Charlie swears he is innocent, but as his fingerprints are checked, he is identified as a violent criminal with a long record. In the final scene, desperate to escape, Charlie grabs a gun from an officer. McLeod ignores the danger, lunges for him,

and is mortally wounded. "Charlie" Mr. Siegel said "is the sinister person....Ibsen doesn't have anybody as sinister as that—in just that fashion." And then in his last moments McLeod says to Joe: "Yussel, find her! Ask her to forgive me." There is beauty in the fact that as McLeod is dying he makes a decision that is in behalf of life—he tells Brody to set Arthur free. As Mr. Siegel read McLeod's final words, people, including myself, were moved to tears:

McLeod: (He crosses himself). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven...(He falls. Brody catches him, eases him to ground...

Brody removes the handcuffs from Arthur, and he says:

All right son. Go on Home! Don't make a monkey outa me! If I see you...(Brody is crying now) up here again, I'll kick the guts outa you. Don't make a monkey outa me!

Susan takes Arthur's hand, and they leave the station together.

This lecture was a masterpiece of literary criticism. We could see the police squad room before us, with all its atmosphere and rich human feeling; each character—vibrant, alive, and a means of understanding ourselves.