Dear Luc

I need to write to you about your production of *In The Company of Men*. For me it was an important production. It raised basic questions of modern drama that have concerned me for years. They are also profound questions about modern society – in fact, about human reality. During the day I saw monuments of the classical past and in the evenings I went back to the hotel to read in the New York Herald Tribune the latest news about the événements in Egypt. Your production related to all these things. Drama seemed decent again.

First I will get something out of the way. Dramatic imagination is disciplined but radical – this is how it creates the dramatic reality that changes human reality. For instance, the red armchairs on the grey set become, in the play’s context, patches of blood on grey (dead?) skin. It relates to the play’s centre. The mind need not be conscious of this, “know it knows,” but it is so -- it is like a light hidden inside a shadow. I promise not to be as technical as this in the rest of the letter! – but I need to make this point. But I would have liked to talk to you about the cut U7 because it turns on the crisis of modern drama. I will explain this later. Your production impressed me deeply. Because it recreated the play so well it raised the questions of method that have concerned me for a long time. In my plays there is a difference between set and site. “Set” is a bad word because it means static, unchanging. It’s the literal drawing room, kitchen, bedroom or elsewhere where events take place. On the contemporary facile stage the set produces “theatre;“ which is a false form of drama. Nowadays the set becomes the packaging for the play and commercialises it. (The art of packaging is the defining art of our times.) The site is different --it is the set together with the social, psychological, natural, political, geopolitical etc nexus of relationships in which we live and which determine our lives. It is the site of drama. Many of the relationships are invisible but some may be objectified in objects. An event on the site changes all the relationships on it. Modern drama creates situations that affect these relations and the way they determine the possibilities of our lives. The Greek and Jacobean stages are sites. The invisible structures -- social, political and so on -- were built into the architecture. This is not so with the empty space of the modern stage. So the site must be built into the text. (Its said that if you do not get the “set” right my plays will not work because the set will obscure the site.) The relation between set and site is a problem. Should the stage present the set? Should it try to evoke the site? You produced *Company of Men* in an almost empty light-grey stage. There were two or three red armchairs, a table, desk and a few other objects. It was more site than set. If this was forced on you as an economy it worked well. It clarified the play’s structure and showed why it was written as it was. It meant that the actors had to carry more of the play’s burdens on themselves and gave them an unforced, unself-conscious classical responsibility. The scenes were changed without music. The general astringency allowed the play’s centre, its meaning, to flourish. The play and the acting were made more powerful. So the choices you’d taken were good. Your production made me think not just about this play but the crisis of modern drama.

Your production (and the play itself) raised the whole problem of this crisis. This modern crisis connects with a related crisis in the classical past – and these two crises connect us with the original drama of Greece. In Milan I saw Leonardo’s Last Supper and Michelangelo’s Rondanini Pieta. They are both experimental works trying to use reality in a way that would change it: which is what modern drama also seeks to do. Leonardo used a new method of painting fresco. In comparison the conventional method creates something of a cartoon – it has to be quick and static. Nothing can be changed. Leonardo wanted to be more intimate, wanted the flexibility of tempera and oil. He wanted a more human immediacy, so that the painter’s hand did not have to compromise with the subtleties of the mind. The method failed technically – but the painting still has an overwhelming humanness, simplicity and evocativeness (= it “speaks”) – it creates all the tensions of betrayal, impending torture, the life of the spectator, longing, human drama, that “hover” round the food table that might have been in any restaurant. Compare its sense of human doubt and uncertainty with the assertiveness of the Sistine chapel frescos. If Leonardo had used the conventional method the gestures and postures would
have been rather comic – because they are so human they needed the greater intimacy. The picture is so moving because it is a performance. It has faded in the past in order to be contemporary now. The Rondinini Pieta is two sculptures in one. Its said this is what Michelangelo intended -- that he wanted to create a new sort of sculpture that would be a form of impressionism and expressionism, of modern juxtaposition of perspectives. He didn’t. He changed his mind after he had started to carve. He wanted the mother and son to be closer. The two wedges of stone to be closer. So he “re-rehearsed” the stone. You look at it and see the stone thinking. Its as if, paradoxically, the sculptor is not changing (a piece of stone in) reality but as if imagination is changing reality. It is a performance. It is exactly what drama (not theatre) does. In another room in the Castello Sforzesco there is a medieval wooden crucifixion. Its conception is total. When the carver carved the head for the crown of thorns he knew exactly how he would carve the toenails. Nothing would ever be changed. It is an age of faith. It is perfect. And it is modern. It is weirdly like a body in the heaps of bodies at Auschwitz – another site of faith. It is why we must change. And this is the crisis of U7. The nature of drama changes in U7. It is the crisis of the Last Supper and the stone Mother and Son -- of how we are to live now. Your production was powerful because it entered this crisis and dramatised it.

Between U5 and U6 Leonard realises that he cannot live in the world of intrigue and subterfuge. He hasn’t yet realised the consequences of this realisation. In U6 he returns to Oldfield to confess. He tells Oldfield about his inner life, his inner experiences, he wants to be honest -- its about his journey to be himself. Then he reveals Dodd’s betrayal of Oldfield. His reward is a “seat on the board” and the inheritance. But the confession isn’t honest enough. He has the problem of Hamlet or Raskolnikov or the Karamazov brothers. He must come to know himself, to respond to the temptation to be extreme -- in drama this means, of course, to create himself, and this means to create a new human reality in a changed world. Hamlet does not confess because he does not know he harbours a secret crime -- the primordial passions of Oedipus. He has not read Freud and so he hangs around waiting to be murdered. Really Shakespeare resolves the play by an accident -- logically (in the logic of imagination) the ghost should be in the last scene but dramatically it would be unthinkable, almost obscene and certainly sentimental, for it to appear there. Raskolnikov murders the old woman (she and her sister are Jocasta in the plot) and almost begs the detective Porfiry to discover his guilt -- because there is still a God and Raskolnikov wants to confess to him and be redeemed (find himself) through punishment. But in the Brothers-K this world is already wrecked. The most important thing about Dostoevsky is that he was once condemned to death. He spent the rest of his life seeking a God to confess to so that he might be allowed to live in safety. He seeks this God in his last novel -- r ummages around for him in the three K-Hamlets, the stepson, the Inquisitor, Judges, the Devil, the Saint (whose corpse stinks), the insane . . . but he can find only a wisp of God. The Christian novelist has to give the resonant truths to the atheist. But all these characters -- who are all modern man seeking himself -- can still find some resolution in the classical Tragic, some decorum in death to give some hope to the living. We cant. That is Leonard’s crisis in U7 -- and so it is also the question “what is reality for the audience?” Or “How should we live?”

In U7 Leonard confesses to his father that he tried to kill him -- but really in the end like Hamlet, Raskolnikov and the K-Brothers, he is confessing to the universe (the final extreme) and asking it “what d’you make of that?” The universe is silent. It is empty. He cannot even confess because he can never know if Oldfield (God-the-Father as the ear of the universe) heard his confession. Like Hamlet and the others he is at the boundary of the human Tragic -- and it is farce. Farce is the absence of the decorum of wounds and death. The definition of a joke is this: that it has no answer to the question. The first part of the play (to the end of U6) is grounded in classic tragedy -- as human consciousness must be. Your production -- and the actors -- convey this well. This is the boundary where the Last Supper and the Rondanini Pieta are created. The audience’s expectation -- it is the residual ghost of the past -- is that the second half of the play will continue the classical tragedy of the first half. But that would be fake and morose, or the platitudes of the Absurd (an answer substituting for a question) or some frivolity of post-modernism, or a goody-bag of consumerism. But Leonard goes further, pursues the search for himself further. The second half of the play, after U6, is not what the audience expects. It is radically different. Watching it in your production I felt I was, as a
dramatist, being questioned by the world in which I lived -- did I understand it? And if I did, could I create the text of understanding? And if I did that, the problem is how to stage and act it, how to enact it. Your production avoided all the theatrical trickery we have come to expect. It took the problem seriously.

In U7 two things have to change. The nature of Leonard’s subjectivity -- he must do what Hamlet does in his soliloquies: create a new form of consciousness. He does this in his long description of the attempted murder. He enters into previously closed areas of his “self” -- just as Hamlet does in his soliloquies about himself and society. And Leonard, at the same time, enters closer into the universe and time, into human raw material -- he enters into the reality to which he means to be confessing. Hamlet says: “There are more things in heaven and hell than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Hamlet is silent about them but now -- in our time -- Leonard must enter into them. I dont need to explain here what this means but its as if he finds a map or module of the universe in his self. The audience must see that Leonard has changed. This is done through this long soliloquy to the corpse of his father. The audience hears it. I think you should not have cut any of it. The staging of the attempted murder (in U4) is like an empty carton. The audience know its strangeness but not the nature of its strangeness -- which Leonard will describe to them in U7. In U4 he describes the gun -- to create a gap between the technologically efficient, surface thing (or the nature of natural reality) and the chasm of human consciousness. In U7 he explores the chasm, opened up by the extremity of his situation. That is, as I’ve said, important to the audience’s understanding of Leonard -- but it is also important to their understanding of themselves. Leonard describes the subjective experience of trying to kill his father -- that is also the experience of the audience watching the play. . . because the subject (patricide, crime) must (if its allowed) penetrate the audience’s self (psyche, subjectivity), but in a way that, though the drama-of-imagination demands it, it also protects. This is how the logic of imagination creates reality -- how the present reveals the hidden. Not how the hidden is dragged up to be revealed because the hidden is already in the present and in drama the present reveals it -- the symptom becomes the cure (drama is not psychoanalysis).

The length of Leonard’s speech in U7 is eccentric. But this has another function -- it tells the audience, alerts them, that the nature of drama has changed: as Leonard changes so the drama that contains him, and that he makes by becoming increasingly self-conscious, changes. The eccentric length of the speech teaches the audience that now they must attend to the drama -- see and hear it -- differently. Because now everything is different. After Oldfield’s death the play could become a farce - - but it doesn’t and mustn’t. You controlled this well and I think that was one of the most careful and subtle things in your production. But I think it would have helped the audience, signalled the change to them more clearly, if you had used the whole of Leonard’s speech. The tension of the Tragic is close to the tension of the Comic -- and how they are disposed to each other produces the nature of a culture, its morality and self-understanding. Other arts may avoid this relation but drama cant -- because it involves the living person in the dramatic (hyper)-semblance of living. The Greeks separated Comic from Tragic. Shakespeare unites them but compartmentalizes them. Dostoevsky writes silent films in which Hamlet incessantly, frantically tells us verbal jokes (they are never visual) but we cant hear them. And the comic Absurd is terrified of the Tragic and so cannot create human seriousness: really its aesthetic motto is Komik Macht Frei.

Drama is at the crisis of da Vinci and Michelangelo that I described -- the connection between the classic past and the present. Leonard stumbles into it. It’s a change in the relation of the Tragic and Comic, of the ultimate seriousness of being human and human responsibility. It is absolutely not the Absurd -- or tragic-comedy, which is just barbarous. But I cant describe it abstractly. It would be like asking the three dimensions of space to say what space is. (They would just point at us.) The change has to be enacted by actors. This requires a text-of-situations which are critical and extreme -- and a director and actors who may enter the text and take it further than the writer can. Your production did this and there are few other theatres where it could be done. The past created its humanness through the Tragic seriousness of the classics. To remain human, to live in humanness, we have to take this seriousness and “show our world to it”(sic) -- which means taking the responsibility of doing it. Anything else is trivial. People may want a “theatre of niceness” to use as a mirror when they get up
each morning. But look, to create justice you take the corrupt to court. The stage is the public, democratic site of justice. People may easily notice that the characters in this play are corrupt. They may not notice that the play is about innocence. And at some time all the corrupt seek to help Leonard, humble themselves to him as if they unconsciously longed to share his innocence. The director and the actors must make this clear. To find the means of staging and acting this is the task of modern drama. You and your actors did it in this production.

In drama the Tragic figures are always innocent. They always search for justice in and for the community. At the end of this play Leonard kills himself. He does this in order to trap and kill someone else. He becomes a suicide bomber. At that moment stage and street, imagination and reality, become one and the end presents itself in our beginning.

I wish I had seen your production of The War Plays.

Thanks and best wishes
Edward