A World out of Joint: Kenneth Bernard's Theatre of the Ridiculous A Microcosm of a Disintegrating World

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Date of Acceptance 15/11/2005

Abstract

The paper deals with the contemporary American playwright, Kenneth Bernard, and his Theatre of the Ridiculous. This theatre, which originated in the 1960s and 1970s, aims at undermining dramatic and social conventions, and political, psychological, sexual, and cultural categories. It makes use of mass culture entertainment in America (television, popular songs, old movies, the circus) in its attempt to make us recognize the world as "ridiculous," a world which is both brutal and farcically trivial and insignificant, a world of ruthless powers, of freaks, clowns, and victims, of hysteria and absence of truth, a world, as Bernard describes it, "without hope, mercy, history, or any saving sociology or ideology." The paper is meant to shed light on the development of this theatre, its vision of and radical attitudes towards the world we live in (as illustrated in the plays of Bernard), and the postmodernist influences which went into its making.

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> I feel that I have a responsibility to say "No' to false pieties, to delusions, to systematic and technological mutilations of the human spirit. Salvation, if I can use such a word, lies in the uncompromising look. ("An Interview with Kenneth Bernard" 256)

So says Kenneth Bernard, distinguished and widely reviewed American playwright, short story writer, poet, and critic.[1] Kenneth Bernard's Theatre of the Ridiculous is considered a postmodernist offshoot of the Theatre of the Absurd. Originally and as a theatrical form, the "ridiculous" thrived in the 1960's and 1970's, aiming at undermining dramatic and social conventions, and political, psychological, sexual and cultural categories. It made use of mass culture entertainment in America – popular songs, old movies, television, the circus. It is a burlesque of everything people take seriously. It is a theatre which announces the death of civilization. Its purpose is to make us recognize the world as "ridiculous," a world full of barbarities and humiliations, a world of freaks, clowns, and victims. It is a theatre daring enough to expose the truth about the world we live in, a world of arbitrary ruthless powers, of butchers and helpless victims. The ultimate objective of Bernard's theatre of the Ridiculous is to face the butchers with an "uncompromising look," "to laugh at them, mock them, struggle with them, perhaps get nicked by them, but not succumb." (*Clown At Wall* 145) Far from being "ridiculous," this theatre is very serious and disturbing. Behind its clownish and seemingly "ridiculous" shows there lies a deep irony, a scathing criticism of American and Western systems and institutions. It is a theatre that is meant, using Bernard's words, to "genuinely offend," "disorienting rather than titillating: it blurs the focus." ("An Interview" 259)

John Vaccaro, the founder and director of the Play-House of the Ridiculous, comments on the origin of the title "Ridiculous": " Ridiculous was a name tacked onto us. We got to NYC on the heels of the Absurd. And the Absurd was not saying enough for us." They were doing a play, says Vaccaro, and they went "beyond the Absurd." They were "preposterous," so preposterous they thought they were "ridiculous." Vaccaro continues:

> Our first manifesto was "We have gone beyond the Absurd. We are absolutely preposterous. … From the time it was named "the Ridiculous," a whole logic came into being with us, where the whole type of humor we were getting out was hitting at the establishment because their particular values were all ridiculous. Just think of the world today. I mean, I think it's just ridiculous. The whole thing in the Middle East, the whole thing in Viet Nam, everything that goes on … the assassinations, and they continue to talk and talk and talk about these things. For example, while people were still dying in Viet Nam , they spent almost a year discussing the shape of a table for the Paris peace talks. – Think about the F.B.I., the C.I.A." ("Confronting the Ridiculous" 136)

In his preface to the 1998 edition of *Theatre of the Ridiculous,* Gautam Dasgupta comments that by 1979 "the Ridiculous sensibility in the American theatre was already established in the works of three representative

playwrights – Kenneth Bernard, Charles Ludlam, and Ronald Tavel." (viii) Vaccaro with Ronald Tavel and Charles Ludlam co-founded the Play-House of the Ridiculous in the mid-sixties "in response to a new sensibility born of Pop-Art and emerging gay-consciousness." (Rabkin, "The Unspeakable Theatre" i) It shared with other experimental theatres of the era a radical dissent from middle class values. Bernard joined the group in 1968; his plays enriched the Theatre of the Ridiculous and, in Rabkin's words, transformed its image from "one of campy titillation to serious, frequently shocking confrontation." His "nightmare apocalyptic parables invested the gender-bending antics of the young Ridiculous theatre movement with sterner thematic stuff …: the death of America, the end of the world, the non-consolability of art, the ubiquity of cruelty. And the Play-House provided Bernard with a means of distancing his bleak vision through extravagant theatrical vocabulary, fantastic and exaggerated make-up, costuming and acting." ("Cries and Whispers" ix)

Bernard's plays are said to have been most successfully produced in collaboration with his director, John Vaccaro. This collaboration lasted from 1968 to 1984 in which Vaccaro directed eight of Bernard's plays. To Vaccaro and Bernard, the arena of the Ridiculous became "a microcosm of the universe. … It had to do with a world situation." They assert that the theatre of the Ridiculous is not concerned with individuals in conflict with themselves but "with the world vs. itself." And that, they think, "is the height of drama now." ("Confronting the Ridiculous" 137)

The violence and cruelty of this theatre is obviously not without cause. People, Bernard says, do not seem to be " aware that the cruelty they are looking at is relatively mild compared to the cruelty in their own lives." ("Confronting the Ridiculous" 140) People seem or pretend to be blind to the truth. And the Theatre of the Ridiculous is an attempt to break through this reserve, this blindness to the general cruelty. In Bernard's words again, the Ridiculous is "a form of urban guerrilla theatre, warfare." (144) It assaults a world which has lost its certainties and values, where social codes and traditional beliefs are "desanctified," a world dominated by materialistic monsters lusting for power, where nothing matters more than exploitation, money, and sex. It is a world made grotesque by its ugliness, vulgarity, and pathos, populated by beasts and freaks. In this world, horror goes side by side with hysterical laughter. Both horror and hysterical laughter, Vaccaro and Bernard seem to believe, come from the same source, "the primal scream." And as such they have an exorcising and cathartic effect. (154)

From what has been said above, Bernard's theatre seems to be the product of many modernist and postmodernist influences. On one hand , there is Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty, and on the other hand, the Theatre of the Absurd and later postmodernist movements. Asked about the impact of Artaud on his work, Bernard answers:

> Derrida has a wonderful essay on Artaud in which he refers in various ways to the scream in humanity that articulation has frozen over, the repressed gestures in all speech, the "speech" anterior to words. All this interests me very much. … Artaud's undeviating promulgation of that excluded mostly silent world that seethes beneath society's

> paradigmatic articulations is what he means by "theater of cruelty." I am drawn to that, and to his strategies, for example, of spectacle, ritual, and metaphor. …In several of passages in *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud writes about giving words the power of dreams, a version of what he calls somewhere else, I think, the metaphysics of speech. When I have called my plays a "theater of metaphor," I mean the same kind of thing. *And I frequently do attach my plays, not so much to a plot, as to a ritual – the rehearsal, the circus, the courtroom, the show, the panel discussion – beneath which lurk deeper possibilities of unfreezing humanity's scream than would be true with the conventional pieties and affirmations of representation and coherence*. [Emphasis added]
> ("An Interview" 260)

As to the Absurd, both Bernard and Vaccaro admit being affected by the Beckettian vision and theatrical techniques but they assert that they "have gone beyond the Absurd." In this context, Bernard's own comparison between "European Absurd" and "American Ridiculous" is worth quoting and analyzing, since it crystallizes the many postmodernist influences which have made Bernard's theatre what it is today:

> The Absurd is historically and temperamentally late modernist in thrust [in the sense that] modernism was more a shattering of surfaces than a wholesale destruction or dislodgement. … The master narratives of our security systems (including master narrators like Freud and Marx) remain in place. At worst, there is a nostalgia or a mourning for a more coherent and humane world view to meet increasingly monstrous exigencies of the modern world like war, genocide, exploitation, poverty, inequality. It never quite relinquishes scientific-rational hopes. The Absurd, while clearly stretching the limits of modernism, also retains a high literary mode, that is, a respect (troubled to be sure) for proper language, a unity of literary devices, style, closure, categories, hierarchies, transparency, and so on. It is Eurocentric in scope and intellectual and elitist in presentation. Its despair tends to be metaphysical rather than actual.
> The Ridiculous, on the other hand, is *post-modernist* … . It takes for granted the loss or inefficacy of historically sustaining metaphysical substructures. Its *shrillness and hysteria* derive in part from an unblinking look into the *void*. Its mode is *anti-literary*, that is, *it embraces everything from low to high culture*, including the boring, the repetitious, the banal. *It transgress all categories* such as gender, form, seriousness, rationality, authenticity, style, etc. It is *global and democratic*, mixing all cultures, all dictions, all tastes indiscriminately. It has a strong tendency to be *relativist and anarchic* It dances frenetically on a tightwire over *a raging sea of simulacra.* Its cynicism *disdains the truth of language, the purity of causes and ideologies, the substance of character*. Parody is a defining characteristic not only because it incorporates an *hysterical distancing and critique* but also because it incorporates *the idea of ruin built upon ruin*. Its despair is visceral, its "solution" is perpetual, *horrific carnival*, for example, *an unbridled indulgence in the glitter of consumer capitalism at the same time that is dying of laughter over it*. It is without hope, mercy, history, or any saving sociology or ideology.

> *It is a style predicated on absence rather than presence*, and as such is suitable for a disintegrating world. [Emphasis added] (*Collages and Bricolages* 61-62)

To a reader familiar with postmodern and poststructuralist theories, Bernard's definition of the "Ridiculous" contains many references to some of these theories: Jacques Derrida's and Ronald Barthes' theme of the absent center ("a style predicated on absence rather than presence"), Michel Foucault's ideas on ideology and the power of discourse (implied in the sentence, "Its cynicism disdains the truth of language, the purity of causes and ideologies, the substance of character"), Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnival" ("horrific carnival), and Jean Baudrillard's theory of "loss of the real" ("a raging sea of simulacra").

In interviews and commentaries, Bernard seems to be fond of quoting Derrida and, consciously or unconsciously, echoing Barthes, Foucault, and Bakhtin. While his description of the Ridiculous as "a style predicated on absence rather than presence," echoes structuralist and deconstructionist views, his disdain of "the truth of language," and the falsity of "causes and ideologies," bring to mind Foucault's New Historicism, particularly his ideas regarding discourse and power. According to Foucault, as R. Selden puts it, "discourses are produced within a real world of power struggle. In politics, art, science, power is gained through discourse: discourse is 'a violence we do to things'." (*Contemporary Literary Theory* 160, abbrev. as *CLT*) In Foucault's own words, "each society has its … 'general politics' of truth, that is, types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true." It depends on "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." In other words, "'Truth' … is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses." (*Foucault: A Reader* 73) Foucault stresses the idea that through history discourse has been controlled by the ruling elite for its own purposes. Bernard seems to adopt the same view in his dramatic and fictional works. Asked whether there can be "justice without violence," Bernard says, "No. All systems mutilate. … For the moment, let us just say that suspicion and skepticism over claims of justice and equity and visions of brave new worlds are very much in order. One can be co-opted in many ways …" ("An Interview" 263) In Bernard's *Molloy Monologs*, the speaker touches on the same theme of power and discourse, deriding those in power, "Mr. Good Man" and "Mistress good Woman", and their "claims" of a "happy," "perfect," "good life": "I kick them out the door. … I've no repentance or reform in me to mold to their good life, and I'd be dead. Good ones like these can eat babies, if they must. History must be performed, with them as angels." (*Clown At Wall* 147)

The plays of Bernard illustrate the clear influence not only of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault but also of Bakhtin, another poststructuralist whose ideas on "meaning" and function of language take a different approach. To Bakhtin, language is not totally devoid of meaning, as the deconstructionists argue; rather than being just a free play of signifiers, it has a significant social function. In his book, *Rablais and his Work*, Bakhtin stresses the social nature of language. In Rablais's world, language is made to undermine authority and liberate alternative voices. Bakhtin discusses his concept of "grotesque realism" in the novel, whose ultimate source could

be traced to an ancient "carnival" sense of the world, "in which unofficial forms of language served to subvert the official seriousness of authoritative discourse." (Honeycutt, 3) This "carnivalesque" concept of literature must have influenced Kenneth Bernard as it is obvious in his description of the "Ridiculous" as a "horrific carnival" in "its embrace of low culture, its mixture of styles, its devotion to the amateur, the banal, the disgusting or offensive, its irreverence of all tradition, history, society …" ("An Interview" 259) All this, as his plays show, relate to Bakhtin's "carnival," a literary mode associated with the "carnival festivities and comic spectacle and ritual" of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in which all forms of authority and hierarchy are mocked and derided. (*Rablais* 4) "Folk festivities of the carnival type," Bakhtin continues, with all its variety, "the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humour." It is a "feast of fools," (5) "an art of degradation … [of] debasement of the higher." (18) Bernard's plays seem to fit perfectly well in this genre of literature. As this paper intends to show, his plays are "carnivalised" pieces in every sense of the word.

Bernard's definition of the Ridiculous bring us to another poststructuralist theory. Bernard 's words describing his theatre as "dancing frenetically on a tightwire over a raging sea of simulacra" and his reference to the "unbridled indulgence in the glitter of consumer capitalism" sound very much like Jean Baudrillard's theory of "the loss of the real" and the concern with the depthless world of "simulacra and simulations." Baudrillard argues that we are living in a world that "is no longer real at all," a "space whose curvature is not of the real, nor of truth," an "age of simulation [which] begins with a liquidation of all referentials … by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, … It is no longer a question of imitation, … [but] rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself." (*Jean Baudrillard*, *Selected Writings* 167) Baudrillard projects "the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and reproduction," typified in consumer capitalism, in a vain attempt to restore "the real which escapes it." (180) He criticizes technology and consumer capitalism in the era of media reproduction, the epoch of simulations, where reality is gone for good, and we are left only with appearance, images, mere pretence. In Noah Raizman's words, "a simulacra has been created, something without its own reality, a signifier without a corresponding signified, against which we judge ourselves and our positions." (3) The theatre of Kenneth Bernard seems to reflect this vision. As he says, in modern commercial culture everything seems to be risking "commodification," even "the most radical aspects of modern art quickly became the daily bread and butter of the advertising industry." In other words, he concludes, "consumer capitalism seems to me to have a seamless capacity to convert [everything] into a processed waste product while the world continues to collapse on itself." ("An Interview" 262)

Bernard's succinct portrayal of his theatre, quoted above, as "relativist and anarchic," transgressing "all categories …, form, seriousness, rationality, authenticity," epitomises the postmodern experience which stems from a profound sense of ontological uncertainty. Human shock in the face

of the unimaginable horrors of modern life results in " a loss of fixed points of reference. Neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence, meaning. They are radically 'decentred'." (Selden, *CLT* 178)

In discussing Bernard's work, critics and reviewers have always emphasized its cruelty, violence and sadism. Rabkin titles his introduction to a volume of Bernard's plays, *How We Danced While We Burned and La Justice*, as "The Unspeakable Theatre of Kenneth Bernard," and Michael Feigngold comments: "Nothing is more revolting than a Kenneth Bernard's play except, of course, real life." ("An interview" 256) Bernard, "the dark spirit of the Ridiculous," as Bonnie Marranca calls him (*Theatre of the Ridiculous*, xviii), justifies what he terms as the "outrageousness of my work": "I can conclude about this insistence on the outrageousness of my work that it must shock and/or offend people because it has no mitigating parameters. … My work is unredeeming. It is nasty. But I recognize that if we truly registered the facts of global killing, of the monolithic and seamless economic construct within which we struggle to be human, we would probably be raving in the streets." ("An Interview" 256) In this sense Bernard's theatre runs defiantly against the current of American optimism and canons of good taste. It is no surprise then that his theatre has not been popular. Audiences do not usually want to see "their faces reflected back brutishly, lacerated, albeit in a distorted mirror." (Rabkin, "The Unspeakable Theatre," i) Nor do they want to be confronted with a universe without meaning, justice, or order.

There is no security in this world of ours: "it is the curse of fools to be secure," a statement Bernard is fond of quoting from Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703) and which he borrows as a title for one of his volumes of plays, *Curse of Fool*. Only fools feel secure. For Bernard, everything becomes a joke; "America itself is a joke," its very constitution is based on lies, "all our cultural institutions are going the same way. It is all an elaborate swindle, something like dancing … over the abyss. Only catastrophe can change us if we survive it. And catastrophe, I think, is imminent." ("An Interview" 261-62)

In his plays, Bernard seems to say that our life is a cruel carnival, a brutal show, ending in barbarous violence. It is a dangerous game of power in the hands of merciless manipulators. Let us take, as a case in point, his play *La Fin du Cirque* (1984). Here we see Bernard's fondness for the show as a framing device within which there is an intricate pattern of acts within acts and shows within shows. Most of his plays rest on the device of a show. This stresses Bernard's idea that our life is a series of simulations, where reality and truth disappear. It is a world of images which, using Baudrillard's words, "mask the absence of a basic reality," a world which "bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is … pure simulacrum." (6) In his talk about Artaud (quoted above), Bernard describes his theatre as a theatre of ritual and metaphor. *La Fin du Cirque* takes place in a shabby bankrupt European circus, which can be considered as a metaphor for our disintegrating world. It opens with La Pequena, "the circus fat lady," and Bruto, the circus dwarf, exchanging obscene "vulgar and cruel" jokes (199).[2] The language used by most of the characters is deliberately "cruel and vulgar," full of obscene sexual connotations. Gradually the light reveals the rest of the circus performers in the main dressing room of the circus tent. The stage is full of mirrors which

reflect the activities, particularly those of "the performers of the sideshow – the FREAKS." (199) Reference to the mirrors recurs during the play, suggestive of Bernard's "raging sea of simulacra."

The circus, this microcosm of the world, is populated by a gallery of characters. On one hand, we have Monsieur Panana, the circus owner, Kleinholz the lion tamer, and the Buyer Beast, who comes to buy the circus, all representing power in its various aspects, arbitrary, authorized, and sadistically brutal. On the other hand, we have the artists of the circus—jugglers, aerialists, performers, clowns, fortune-teller, and sideshow freaks, all helpless victims of power. In this ugly world of victims and victimizers, only two characters represent what is beautiful and graceful in life: Bisquette, "the young and beautiful" aerialist, and Capelli, "the beautiful silent" juggler (199). Both are delicate fragile creatures. Symbolically, they are ruthlessly pursued and abused by the sadistic earth-bound lion-tamer. At the end of the play, Kleinholz, who lusts for Bisquette and is jealous of her love for Capelli, locks them in with his lions; the animals claw Bisquette's face and deform her beauty for ever, while Capelli is seriously wounded by the beasts. The performers, representing the masses, act as a kind of chorus. They announce the lion-tamer as "the ruler of wild beasts." They hate him , calling him "Beast," "Devil," "Swine of swines." (228) But they fear and flatter him, "Oh good, good Kleinholz," (230) as he shakes his whip proudly and declares: "I am the circus. The audience do not look up [at aerialists who do tricks in the air]. They look down at me. With the big cats that rip and tear and kill." (204) The symbolism or the metaphor is obviously clear. In Foucault's words, "power is that which abstracts, which negates the body, represses, suppresses, and so forth." (66)

With power goes "money," which word is repeated several times throughout the play: "give us money, give us money, give us money," Panana reiterates. When Luna, the fortune-teller, prophesies that the circus will have "huge hungry bears," who "will tear off … arms [and] heads, … but they will never harm the pure and innocent," Panana interrupts: "Who is pure? Who is innocent? – Will we make money? That's the question." (207) Panana's obsession with money increases as the play goes on. He is ready to sacrifice everything for it. Addressing Bisquette he says: "sacrifice, my dear, sacrifice. We must all sacrifice. There must be blood in the lion's cage. Even yours." (204) Panana and the Buyer Beast, who comes to buy the bankrupt circus, seem to represent materialism and "consumer capitalism," which prey on this world and destroy beauty, love, and art. Symbolically again, the Buyer Beast invades the circus, frightens everybody into silence with his grotesque bull-like sounds and moves, and attacks Brique, another aerialist, breaking his bones and twisting his body. To say with Baudrillard, capitalism is " a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing more" for it "was capital which was the first to feed through history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish … the iron law of its power."(18)

Bernard's ruthless tragi-comedy or tragi-farce, as we may call it, includes the whole world in its biting irony and satire. The characters, as their names suggest, represent all western nationalities, German, Italian, French.

Bernard, of course, does not exclude America. Among the characters is Dirkson, "an American hanger-on," who comes to join the circus. Panana welcomes him in whining Mexican English:

> Hey, *Americano*, can you give us *dinero*? *Dinero*? (*In his normal accent*) We have been hospitable, no? We have taken you into our caravan and let you see us naked. Naked. What can you give us? Whose dress you have not looked up? When will you thrust your hand, make your move, (*Mexican English again, ogling*) hey, Americano?
>
> Dirkson: I I just want to learn to be a clown. I … love the circus. I (interrupted by raucous laughter)
> Panana: I don't care what you say. Give us money. Give us money. Give us money.
> (Music. Panana dances and sings):
>
> American man,
> Can you give us money?
> I will be your honey,
> If you save the circus for a day.
>
> American man,
> Can you spare a dollar?
> I will wear your collar,
> If you save the circus for a day.
>
> American man, Can you give us gold?
> We will make you bold,
> If you save the circus for a day. (211-12)

The political allegory here is all too obvious. This circus-like world is ready to wear the collar for the American dollar. The allegory goes on; the fortune-teller looks into the crystal ball and announces the future. "Blood," she says, "The Future is dark, dark. Fools will die. … But the circus will continue. Your tents will be ragged, patched. Some will die, but new people will come. Different. Different skin even." (206-08) The last words give the only note of hope in an otherwise devastatingly bleak play.

But if the circus will continue, the "tents will be ragged and patched." Panana is desperate:

> Panana: [*Distraught*] I am sorry. What can I do? We are in desperate straits. Beasts to the right, beasts to the left. But … I have concluded nothing.
> Luna: Nor will you.
> Panana: But … how can we survive?
> Luna: In whatever we can. In pieces if necessary.
> Popo: *[clownishly*] In the manure pile, even. We can throw caca balls. … (216-7)

The image of the "manure pile" appears again when Bernard is interviewed about the place of "serious art" on Broadway. He responds: "I'm very doubtful. … I think Broadway's a joke. It

has very little to do with art and everything to do with entertainment. It sells a product, and the bonus is confirmation of one's cultural status. But the confirmation is like handing out a piece of the manure pile one is standing on." ("An Interview" 261) Bernard's bleak vision of the role of art illustrates what Rabkin calls "the non-consolability of art" (quoted above) in a fragmented commercial culture which obliterates the frontiers between art and commodity, and highlights the artist's alienation and exploitation.

Bernard's dramatic and fictional pieces abound in scatological imagery, another aspect of the grotesque and carnivalesque. *La Fin du Cirque* opens, in a manner reminiscent of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.[3] Just as Jarry's play opens with the word, "*Merde*," so does Bernard's with "c'mon. Cut the shit. *Coupez la merde."* (196) We hear the words, "*merde*," "shit," "shit pile," several times in *La Fin*, *La Justice*, and other works. Scatology is another way of expressing rejection of social conformity, and a deep sense of disgust with the accepted social and moral norms. It is one of the tactics used by the avant-garde theatre to shock audiences into a realization of their sordid existence.

The final procession in *La Fin du Cirque* shows the miserable condition of the performers as they decide to "go east … To meet our destiny":

[BISQUETTE *with grotesque stitches on her cheek and head held high*. CAPELLI *with one useless arm and three balls in the hand of the other* a*rm*. KLEINHOLZ, *subdued, bearing a misshapen and drooling* CLARA *on his shoulders. . . . As the procession is ending, the lights fade, the music dies, and a single spot of light is left on* BRUTO and LA PEQUENA. *Everything else is dark, except, dimly, the opening to the big tent.]* (234-35)

Bruto and La Pequina conclude the play with another exchange of obscene jokes.

In the ironically "grand finale" (234), as the circus performers exit past the theatre audience and out, Bernard suggests that they carry "a large mirror reflecting the audience." (234) Thus the audience "see themselves there somewhere. They're guilty. They are the ridiculous ones." (Vaccaro in "Confronting the Ridiculous" 138) The audience, as Rabkin puts it, "can never hide, it is always made to recognize that it cannot be immune from the barbarities and humiliations that are before it. We are the real freaks, clowns, inept performers, victims." ("Cries and Whispers, xii) In this and other plays of Bernard, "the reflecting mirrors," Bonnie Marranca says, "keep throwing the distorted images of the theatrical caricatures back to us, and we in turn are reflected in the all-seeing, all-distorting eyes of the world." (*Theatre of the Ridiculous*, xviii).

Bernard's other play, chosen for this paper, is entitled *La Justice or The Cock That Crew* (1979), often considered his best play. It treats the relation between justice and power, and the idea of order, that "visible paradigm of civilization," as one of the jurors calls it (*La Justice* 66).[4] In an article, entitled "Order in the Court," James Leverret comments: "The court of law is the social form that Bernard makes his target. Or more accurately, the idea of a court becomes his instigation to explore and explode the concept of order itself" (20). In this Kafkaesque play the structure is based on a traditional dramatic device, the trial, with its familiar but grotesquely portrayed representatives, a mock-judge, given to weeping over his domestic troubles, a "gaudy, leering," "silly" jury who during the play "jerk and bobble and gabble like a

collection of balloon-heads, geese, puppets, spastics, irrepressible children" (66), a pompous prosecutor who tap dances, a comically ostentatious defense attorney who declares himself the saver of the world, and one comic witness in two disguises. In addition, there is a big cock in a cage that perches over the prosecutor and elicits a lot of comments about cocks. But the accused who is vilified as "devoid of morality and sentience," (70) never appears, and his "vile crime" (67) is never specified. Instead, we are increasingly made to feel that a terrible crime is about to be committed. To our surprise, the guilty man, the perpetrator of the crime, is discovered to be the Judge himself. The play moves between the world of the court and the domestic world, his home, which is also portrayed as falling to pieces. The two worlds increasingly go through a process of fragmentation until everything becomes irrational and hysterical. In his hysteria and frustration the Judge is driven to kill his own children, his faith in the future. *La Justice*, as Bernard comments in his production notes on the play, is built on two contrasting ideas: order and disintegration. On one hand, there's the structure of the court with its implication of order, logic, and justice, which the play reveals to be nothing but empty forms. On the other hand, the idea of disintegration, "the idea that foundations, the things we have taken for granted as certainties, are crumbling away." (*How* We *Danced* 129-30) In this play, Bernard seems to question the validity of the concept or sense of justice in a violent pitiless world. "What, or where," he asks, "is justice?" "What is the justice of the human condition?" (129) Once again the play brings to mind Bakhtin's carnivalistic disrespect and questioning of authority on the one hand, and Baudrillard's concept of "simulation" on the other hand. Baudrillard argues that simulation invades every aspect of modern life but it becomes "infinitely more dangerous" when "law and order themselves [become] nothing more than simulations." (16) *La Justice* is a tragic-farce or a modern mournful tragedy in its portrayal of the collapse of a whole world. Bernard's questioning of the validity of justice and his grotesque presentation of the Judge and the trial he presides bring to mind King Lear's mad trial and his ravings about judges and justice. In Lear's mad world, social hierarchies are mixed up, everything is not what it seems to be: "Change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?" (IV.vi.150-52).[5] Like the mad world of *Lear*, the anarchic world of *La Justice* reveals the meaninglessness of human existence and the abyss on which certainties are precariously suspended; it shows a full lack of confidence in rational thought and consensus. It is a completely decentred world:

The court is now in session, the Honorable Judge [*Indistinguishable*] presiding, ...

Judge: [*Waving his hand desultorily*] Let the jury enter. …

The jury box bursts open, and the JURY's heads and torsos spill over and out. They are in white face, with bright lips and cheeks, have elaborate hair styles, and wear ballroom finery ...

Jury: Why, look at that cock!
The size of it!

Where? I can't see any cock.
My dear, you never see cock.
(*They laugh*) …

Judge: (*Gaveling patiently*) Order. Order.

Jury: But of course, darling! We must have order. It's essential. Order is the visible paradigm of civilization. I feel it in every arthritic bone. …

Prosecutor: (*Standing by the cock*) If it please the court --

Jury: (*Bursting out laughing*)
Oh, bravo, bravo!
Simply marvelous!
So well educated!
And do look at his cock! …

(*They laugh again. The Judge gavels*)

Prosecutor: If it please the court – (*He pauses, expecting another outburst. There is none*) – the person before you (*Everyone looks, but no one appears designated as the defendant*) is accused, I say *accused* -- … of a crime than which there is none more vile to man. To man, I say.

Jury: (*Gasps*)
Oh, deasr, dear!
What does he mean?
Guilty by all means!
What person is he talking about? . . . (65-68)

Judge: The bench would like to repair an oversight. The bench has domestic troubles. The bench must soon go home for lunch. The bench does not know what lunch is. The bench … has never known what lunch is. . . .

Prosecutor: (*Pompously*) Crime, ladies and gentlemen? Crime does not pay. – Or does it? You will ask the question? Who will answer it? There on his high seat rests a Judge. Will he answer your question? (*The Judge chuckles and nods*)

Jury: Bogged down in his domestic morass. … (70-71)

The court, symbol of law and order, is grotesquely degraded. "Degradation," that particularly carnivalistic element, is what Bernard's theatre aims at: degradation of everything modern civilization holds up as sacred. In his discussion of the grotesque, Bakhtin capitalizes on the "art of degradation." To degrade, he says, "also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and of the reproductive organs," in other words, the world of the senses and of the phallus. (*Rablais*, 26) Bernard's theatre revolves on sensual and phallic imagery. In *La Justice*, for instance, the cock is a phallic symbol, as it is made clear in the Jury's leering

comments. The cock is brought to court. It perches over judge and prosecutor alike.
At home, the Judge is as confused and lost as he is in the court. His wife, Nadia, (*Nada*, as Bernard explains in his notes, 130) does not love him, and we come to know that she keeps betraying him with the milkman and other men. He is a total failure as a husband and as a father, too disturbed and troubled to be able to attend to his son's and daughter's questions and demands:

Judge: … (*Snarling at the children*) Why do you drink so much milk? … Milk is bad for you.

Son: Papa, we must grow.

Judge: You grow too big! Everything grows too big! I am surrounded by pigs! (*He pauses and collects himself*)

Wife: Come, come, husband. Eat your soup. How does your trial go?

Judge: (*Scoffing*) Bah! Trial. I cannot tell the Prosecutor from the Defense. We have a cock that does not talk. And my jury conspires.

Wife: Ahh, conspires? Against whom, may I ask?

Judge: Hah. That's the question, is it not? *Who conspires against whom*? Oh, if we only knew. If only *I* knew. Some of them are swine. I am sure of it.

Daughter: Papa. What is this cock you speak of?

(*The Son crows briefly*)

Wife: It is not a good situation, then?

Judge: Hah. (*Laughing, good-naturedly*) Who knows what a good situation is, eh . . . Coo-coo? (*He chucks her under the chin playfully and laughs*) Eh?

Daughter: Papa. There is a boy at the school who wants to study with me.

Judge (To Wife): Listen. We have time. Come into the bedroom with me.

Wife: But the bed is made.

Son: Papa. Give me money for candy.

Judge: (*Grabbing his Wife's leg*) We can do it on the floor. Forget the bed!

Wife: Husband, the children are watching.

Daughter: I don't think this boy wants really to study.

Judge: (*Moving his hand up her leg*) We can shut the door. We can shut the door, yes?

Son: Papa. The dentist says my teeth are rotten. . . . (78-79)

The play depicts the collapse of the institutions of law and marriage, but it also exposes universal decay and pollution in a set of metaphors and symbols. In the mouth of the chief witness, the Water Commissioner, Bernard issues a terrible warning:

This is your water commissioner warning you that your next drink may kill you, or at least make you sick. … Lies. All lies! … I tell you, the pipes are corroded. They are clogged. If they do not burst, it will all back up. Back up. What will you do with it? It will fill all your houses. Fetuses, turds, and orange peels stinking in your sinks. What will you do with it? It will fill your houses, your institutions. … Clear the drains! … blow air! It's all backing up, backing up! Nothing is clean but the shit itself. ((105-06)

This warning is addressed to those who would hear the truth instead of pretty platitudes. The Water Commissioner screams: "stop, now, before it is too late. The world is turning into a huge shit pile." (106) But the Judge cannot see. He does not feel the human condition.

In addition to these metaphors, the play is filled with images of disease and deformity: the cancer of the body, the body politic, and the soul. The word "cancer" is repeated again and again. To the Judge's statement to his son: "I judge. I condemn people. I mete out justice," the son responds: "Papa. My teacher said we all have cancer." And the Jury keeps whispering "cancer, cancer, cancer," then, addressing the Judge, they ask, "And how is your cancer, darling? Cancer never bothers me. Cancer is a metaphor."

The play begins and ends with the Judge addressing the audience.. In the Prologue, he says,

Dear friends and followers of the stage
I greet you in a barbarous age.

And in the Epilogue, he sarcastically concludes the play as follows:

Well now. Here we are, where we began
Having covered a two hour span.
Go now. Fill your bellies with drink,
And perhaps, just once, take pause to think.
Justice is done; you can see I mean it;
So do get out your rags – and clean it..

La Justice demonstrates the continuous degeneration, barbarity, guilt, and folly in which everybody is implicated. Facing this universal fiasco of decay and death, the end-of-millennium wasteland and disintegration, Bernard insists on being a radical non-conformist. He insists on remaining "the other," staying "outside" and refusing to be "inside," to be co-opted, for, he says, "when everyone is happily within the System, we will be hearing our death rattles." To him, "radicalism" is resistance and rejection, the only way to keep one's integrity and reach a kind of salvation. ("An Interview" 262-63)

Nevertheless, his plays are described as "problematic" because "they don't seem to be saying no -- or yes for that matter – to anything," and "their dramatizations of torture and violence seem to be presented simply the way it is." (Templeton, "Interview" 257) Bernard's response to this comment is in full harmony with his consciously postmodern vision and aesthetic:

I am not particularly interested in answers. The questions, asked again and again, are what matter. Answers are too often delusions, too often precede, and therefore frame, the questions. Answers palliate reality. … They often leave a great deal out. All the enabling configurations of society, of course, do the same. The laundry , after all, must get done. But it is what is left out, what is tragically *dis*-abling that I am interested in. ("Interview" 257)

One cannot help here remembering Barthes' words on the function of literature: " … a work of literature has such power to ask questions of the world (by undermining the definite meanings that seem to be the apanage of beliefs, ideologies, and common sense) without, however, supplying any answers (no great work is dogmatic)." ("Criticism as Language" 650)

To conclude, Bernard's works may not give answers but they *are* strong gestures of "resistance," and "rejection" of "false pieties, … delusions, …systematic and technological mutilations of the human spirit." (quoted above - opening statement) His theatre has gone much further than the historical avant-garde in its subversion of the order of things. In his own words, "only the drastic postmodern ruptures provide the space within which more socially and politically cleansed visions can be constructed." ("Ages of the Avant-Garde" 31) But neither Bernard nor postmodernists in general seem to be able to "construct" such visions. To "destruct" and "deconstruct" the world is one thing, and to "construct" alternatives is another much harder thing. The human problem remains the same: to find meaning and comfort, to function psychologically and philosophically in the absence of traditionally accepted values, in a world without consensus!

Notes

1. Kenneth Bernard lives in New York City. He has taught for many years at Long Island University in Brooklyn. His two dozens of plays have been performed mainly in collaboration with John Vaccaro's Play-House of the Ridiculous and other experimental groups in the United States and abroad, and his hundred or more short fictions have been printed in several magazines, books, and anthologies. His novel, *From the District File*, was published in 1992, and his long poem, *The Baboon in the Nightclub,* in 1994. Bernard has been the recipient of grants or fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, among others. (*Clown At Wall* 239)
2. For this and subsequent references to the text of *La Fin du Cirque*, see *Clown At Wall: A Kenneth Bernard Reader*, ed. Martin Tucker (New York: Confrontation Press, 1996).
3. Bernard is clearly influenced by Alfred Jarry's avant-garde theatre in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Jarry's *Ubu* plays gave a shockingly shattering blow to Victorian self-complacency and sense of respectability and decorum. Ever since that time, they have been one of the most inspiring sources for modernist and postmodernist theatres.

4. For references to the text of *La Justice*, see *How We Danced While We Burned and La Justice, or The Cock That Crew* (Santa Maria: Asylum Arts, 1990).

5. In his *Practising Theory and Reading Literature*, Raman Selden provides a brief but illuminating analysis of "carnivalistic" elements in *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*, pp. 167-68.

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كينث برنارد ومسرح التفاهة والهزل: صورة مصغرة لعالم مفكّك ومنهار

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ملخص البحث

يتناول البحث الكاتب الأمريكي المعاصر كينث برنارد ومسرحه المعروف بـ Theatre of the Ridiculous . يهدف هذا المسرح الذي ظهر في اوائل الستينيات والسبعينيات من القرن العشرين إلى تقويض الدعائم المسرحية والإجتماعية المعروفة وكذلك الأعراف السياسية والسايكلوجية والجنسية والثقافية السائدة انذاك في المجتمع الأمريكي بصورة خاصة والمجتمع الغربي بصورة عامة. و يستخدم هذا المسرح كل وسائل الترفيه والثقافة العامة المتوفرة في المجتمع الأمريكي مثل التلفزيون والأغاني الشعبية والأفلام القديمة والسيرك في محاولته لجعل المشاهد يدرك سخافة وتفاهة هذا العالم الذي نعيشه، عالم متوحش وعنيف ولكنه تافه مضحك وسخيف في الوقت نفسه، عالم غريب الاطوار مثير للخوف ومثير للسخرية، عالم القوى الإستبدادية المتوحشة، عالم الآلام والضحايا، عالم الشذوذ وعالم المهرجين، عالم الهيستيريا وغياب الحقيقة ، عالم بلا أمل وبلا رحمه، بلا تاريخ وبلا حضارة. لذا جاء البحث لتسليط الضوء على نشأة هذا المسرح وتطوره ورؤيته للعالم الذي نعيشه ومواقفه الراديكالية تجاه الأفكار والعادات السائدة وتأثيرات مدارس ما بعد الحداثة Postmodern schools على تكوينه وسيرته المسرحية والفكرية.