

'Hum—I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been strook so to the soul, that presently they have proclaim'd their malefactions'

—*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2



Edwin Booth as Hamlet at Princess's Theatre, London, 1880.

By Eric Bentley

In our time, role-playing is the favorite word of psychiatrists, and scenario the favorite word of public-relations men. The word "image" runs a good second with both groups and is for me, a student of theater, an equally theatrical term: Theater is a sequence of images. Now whatever else Richard M. Nixon is, no one will deny that he is a child of our time, a student of theater in the style of our time: He is preoccupied with the image, with role-playing.

What did we all learn from the tape transcripts? Nothing new, certainly, about the philosophy or the policy of Mr. Nixon. We learned, however, that when he meets behind closed doors to receive advice from those he considers the finest public servants of the age, what they chiefly do is lay before him what they themselves are quick to term scenarios.

And today, if the President has really decided he won't resign, we can safely assume that his time is spent listening to scenarios for impeachment written by the newest court dramatist, James D. St. Clair.

Now even for those of us who are prepared to see all life as role-playing—all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players—there is still a crucial difference between role-playing in the arts and role-playing in the rest of life.

It can be expressed this way: You know Laurence Olivier is not Hamlet and you admire him for pretending so artfully to be what he is not. Equally, you know a politician is not a hero, tragic or otherwise, but far from admiring him for pretending to be one, you condemn the pretense. This pretense you put down as hypocrisy. The word artful has, here, only a negative connotation: This play-actor is the Artful Dodger.

In art, it is only the unschooled critic who praises a work because it presents an illusion of life and ceases, for him, to be art at all.

In politics, however, the scenarist has failed as soon as anyone recognizes a scenario; the good scenario is precisely the one that will not be taken for a scenario at all but will come across as a sheer happening or, better still, as the unfolding of the will of God and/or the President. We all remember how Mr. Nixon ended the speech that announced the resignation of John W. Dean 3d, H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and Richard G. Kleindienst: "Tonight I ask for your prayers to help me in everything that I do . . . God bless America and God bless each and every one of you." The image is of a Messiah figure, supported from above by a deity and from below by the people.

If it had worked, then the scenario would have vanished in created and creative myth. That impeachment is on the agenda a year later proves that it did not work.

In this respect, Mr. Nixon was revealing nothing when he published records that indicated, yes, there had been a scenario. What was revealed—what shocked people—was the glimpse they got of the scenarists, an ungodly crew.

Mr. St. Clair can write a thousand scenarios, but they must all be variants of two: a scenario for victory and a scenario for defeat. And even

these, if Nixonian enough—the President has hitherto been co-author of the Nixon scenarios—are more alike than you might think.

Center stage, in either case, is our embattled hero, head bloody but unbowed. If he is going to win, he wouldn't want the victory, at this point, to come easy: Opportunity lies in the sense of Himalayan obstacles to overcome.

If he is going to lose, the whole tradition of tragedy can be drawn upon in a, yes, heroic effort to show that once again defeat is real victory and, if Mr. Nixon does not rise on the third day, at least he will be vindicated in his memoirs, as well as by historians of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries.

Victory or defeat will make more difference for Mr. Nixon's enemies than for him, for if he wins, the scenario will include a little magnanimity toward the defeated, whereas, if he loses, it will be necessary for Mr. St. Clair and his successors to create monstrous villains out of the victors. Dramatically, the most interesting of the latter will be the Judases who betrayed our Messiah with a kiss.

Impeachment, obviously, was set up by the Founding Fathers as very high drama indeed, second only, say, to such scenes as the public beheading of Charles I in seventeenth-century London.

In reality (non-art, non-scenario), impeachment may turn out rather a bore. Those who insist on seeing it as art may have to rate it a flop. And this could be none of Mr. Nixon's fault. It could be for sheer lack of a powerful antagonist, for already he seems to have won one portion of his fight: His argument that this is just a party squabble seems to have scared the Democrats away from playing their otherwise appointed roles.

We can ask ourselves whether Mr. St. Clair cannot write a scenario in which his client is starred and the roles of the hero's opponents are played by dull heavies and weak sisters from central casting. However, it is not so clear, now, that Mr. Nixon can get away with his hero role. The tapes may have definitively exposed the scenario as a scenario, the role as a role, the image as an image. The purring tones of the television speeches may at long last have lost their (it's his word) credibility. We may have a *Hamlet* not only without the hero's adequate antagonists but also without the Prince himself.

One technical factor has some bearing here. An impeached President does not have to appear on the Senate floor, and our one impeached President, Andrew Johnson, never did appear there: Not Hamlet but only a few Horatios in the guise of Presidential attorneys actually performed. Will Mr. St. Clair get the part he wrote?

Will the "real" drama take place, not in the appointed stage setting of the Senate, in the classical-post-office style of the speechwriters, but on the telephone and in the lingo of Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, and the "real" Richard Nixon. This type of dialogue needs breaking up with a few low-life episodes in the street talk of Jack Caulfield and Tony Ulasewicz.

Eric Bentley, the drama critic, has written a documentary play, "Expletive Deleted," based on the White House transcripts.