

The Tart, or Miss America

DICK HIGGINS

The Thing about *The Tart*

The thing about *The Tart* is that I wanted to be specific and un-abstract. Most experimental theatre has been done by painters who think abstractly. But I was a musician in rebellion against my medium; I didn't come to Happenings from the visual arts. I felt that the painters were too elegant and iconoclastic. What was missing was danger. So I wrote *The Tart* to express a sociological concept through choreography. It was not successful; neither was it intended to be. As it has no psychological empathy, *The Tart* does not permit the audience to view it as a play or ballet. But my hope was that audiences would sympathize with the performers (not the characters) in their social contexts and that the lines would be more tragic than funny.

We performed *The Tart* in the Sunnyside Gardens boxing ring in New York. Here people come expecting combat between two men. If we have developed an aesthetic expectation in theatre, there is little of that in boxing. Style is theatre's mark while catharsis rules prize fighting. Furthermore there is something marvelous about the ring: a pedestal onto which one mounts, enacts a ritual act of (implied) violence, and goes away. The light, heavy with smoke, is broken up by the movements of the fighters, like "atmosphere" in an impressionist painting. The setting is free from the traditional trappings of theatre and the mind is free to wander among the pillars, lights, and hot-dog stands.

Formally *The Tart* is not a conventional play. I worked out its form seven years ago when I was looking for ways to apply collage to theatre.

Most of my work since then has followed this form, though only recently have I gone through with its implications. I call my pieces "Event Theatre," but Allan Kaprow calls them Happenings and I'm not enough interested in semantics to quarrel.

Each performer is given material to work with. In *The Tart* they have the same lines but different actions (invented by the performer). Both lines and actions are cued by lighting, other performers' events, sounds, and so on. No narrative sequence is possible. Consequently the aesthetic impact of the play depends upon the clarity of the lines (and their ability to withstand repetition), the skill of the performers in picking up their cues, and the over-all lucidity of the piece. This last factor—my responsibility—is the most important. It means that the effect depends upon the simplicity of the message. The form is therefore best suited for dialectical and socially-oriented stuff. Anything else has a nightmare effect.

The Tart is about women although only the title role is played by a woman. Each performer identifies with a stock urban character, but each line is attributed to a persona, such as: "Light and Electricity, say the electricians." Each performer becomes a persona or reacts directly to a persona. Through collage principles I try to suggest a cross-section of society. Chance techniques emphasize the subject matter by eliminating narrative. To keep the performance clear and exciting I made the cueing the responsibility of the "special performer(s)." These people produced cues and thereby started or stopped things from happening. At first I thought of them as merely means, but now I think they say something about power. In *The Tart* the special performers were dressed as Salvation Army workers.

We only had about forty-four hours of rehearsal and we needed eighty-eight. The performers lacked security, though most of them were veterans. We did the play on Easter Saturday and Sunday, 1965, and we had small audiences; the performers were conscious of this.

On the other hand, the Tart, Letty Eisenhower, to whom the piece is dedicated, played perfectly. I view the persona as part of the *nouveau* middle class, complete with eye make-up and an Alpine, New Jersey address (a discreet Levittown). Letty played her as an urban-minority trollop who was "going places." Ay-o, the wild man from Japan, led the special performers, threw gigantic (three-foot cube) dice, projected slides over everyone, set bonfires with carnival fire (which burns at

120°), and so on. Sunday's show was much better than Saturday's and I wish there had been one on Monday. Also I wish the production wasn't called a Happening, because it wasn't.