

O.J.'s passion play distracts us from ourselves

DONALD N. S. UNGER

I don't need the O.J. Simpson media circus - whether he ultimately turns out to be guilty or innocent in the murder of his ex-wife - to raise my consciousness on the subject of domestic abuse any more than I needed Jane Fonda to clue me in on what was going on in Vietnam or Paula Jones to explain Clinton's sex life to me.

We keep looking for silver linings in these media feeding frenzies; we tell ourselves that at least this will focus attention on name-that-problem. This goes some distance toward rationalizing to ourselves why we are so easily sucked in to the spectacle or scandal of the week, and it makes it easier to avoid taking responsibility for the tragedies in our own lives.

Modern theater started out as an offshoot of religion - passion plays done on the steps of churches. And while it is a popular tendency to bemoan how our moral standards have fallen in recent years, it is a safe bet that we have always found it easier to pay attention to ritual instead of day-to-day justice and decency, to allow the empowered minority, from the pulpit or from the throne, to act out the moral extremes while the great majority strive for simple survival, with ethical considerations an afterthought.

The government doesn't retain much moral authority these days: We pick and choose the laws we obey (How many people who drive on a daily basis can throw the first stone?) and we extend this easily into churches and synagogues. The passion plays we watch are on television now, and the most compelling ones come to us disguised as news coverage: religious fanatics with automatic weapons; drug problems of the rich and famous; husbands, wives, parents and children killing or torturing themselves and each other in numerous ways.

We have, both individually and collectively, a limited amount of moral and intellectual energy, a limited attention span. We can only be interested in, informed about, upset by a finite number of things every day. Each new scandal shines a light on some particular societal problem or issue, galvanizing some people into action. But I suspect that the major-



ity of the nation simply sits in front of the TV set, feeling someone else's pain and then moving on, convinced that in the passive act of watching the lives of strangers unfold, we have somehow dealt with whatever today's issue may be.

To say that we have lost the ability to truly experience what goes on around us - joy at the successes; horror at the tragedies - is to miss the point. The struggle has always been to deal with the here and now and with our own lives. The fact that we are about to have 600 channels inflicted upon us intensifies the assault, but the battle is an old one.

The moral function of theater, and of most art in general, was and remains in many ways a positive force. Our modern dilemma springs from two relatively recent developments. First, unlike other kinds of art, television is omnipresent. People might go to the theater once a week; television is America's daytime baby sitter, of adults and children alike, and our nighttime night light. Second, television has expanded far beyond the bounds of any other kind of art. Not just the TV set but also the TV camera are now everywhere, bracketing the lives of the temporarily and permanently famous within the frame of the glowing screen,

bringing us real-time, live pictures of people's lives as theater.

I don't care about O.J. Simpson. I didn't see *The Great Highway Chase*, and I don't feel any sense of deprivation over this. I'm looking forward to not watching the TV movies that are doubtless in the making at this very moment. The death of Nicole Brown Simpson carries no more and no less weight to me than do the daily deaths of anonymous women across the nation.

Does this sound callous, unnatural? I didn't know her. I had never even heard of her until a few days ago. She is a media-generated picture to me, and while I see what happened to her as a tragedy, I have no compunction in saying that it is not my tragedy. Domestic abuse is a blot on our national character. But really doing something about it means looking beyond sensationalism and into our own lives, those of our friends, our families, our neighbors. It means turning off the TV set.

The O.J. Simpson saga has raised consciousness about domestic abuse, the papers tell me. But this is only one side effect of the larger circus. And I can't help thinking that across the country, people are glued to their TV sets, shaking their heads in dismay over this great tragedy,

pausing only occasionally to bang on the ceiling to make the neighbors quiet down so the news report can be heard more clearly.

Something's going on in the apartment up above again - it happens several times a week now. Maybe he's hitting her; she probably deserves it. Can't they just shut up for a few minutes so we can see how the Simpson thing turns out? This is important stuff on the tube - moving, intense, colorful. Not like the ragged, poorly put-together problems we see day to day. That stuff's really hard to watch.

Increasingly, media alchemy has allowed us to substitute the images on our TV screens for our day-to-day reality. We confuse actors in character with real people, sympathy with truth, thought with action.

Blaming them - whether "them" refers to uncontrollable youth, irresponsible government or decadent celebrities - has become the preferred alternative to serious, introspective thought. The fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves. And it is on ourselves that we should be concentrating our attention.

Donald N. S. Unger is a freelance writer from Worcester.