

A Story of the Composer Who Cried

Embedded in the multi-story 1942 Julien Duvivier movie “Tales of Manhattan”

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A young, struggling composer – long, unkempt hair, bumbling, and all – has submitted a symphonic piece of his own in a national contest. He receives notification that not only his piece has been selected and will be premiered in a concert of the city’s prestigious symphony orchestra, but also that he is being invited to conduct his composition, as part of a full concert the rest of which under the baton of the orchestra’s stable conductor.

Stretching his last reserves, he barely manages to buy a second-hand tailcoat at a pawn shop. His wife does the best she can to remodel the jacket, obviously tailored for a thinner man than the rather rotund composer.

When the day comes, he arrives to the concert hall, and the stable conductor of the Symphony cordially ushers him to the podium. The orchestra begins the concert, under the rather impassionate conduction of the composer. All goes well until, as he gesticulates vigorously, his tailcoat begins to disintegrate at the seams. The audience is first surprised, then giggles, and finally laughs aloud. The composer continues while obviously distressed, not understanding what is going on, until the first violin approaches him and whisper in his ear what is happening. The composer, startled, reaches to his own back, only to confirm that the sleeves of the tailcoat have detached. While the audience continues to laugh, he tears off his tailcoat, sits on the podium, and, hiding his face in his hands, cries. The audience shifts progressively from laughter to a rather silent embarrassment. Then, a steady applause is heard: from a balcony, standing up, his own tailcoat off, the revered stable conductor of the symphony orchestra is applauding. Slowly but steadily, all the men in the audience take their jackets and begin to clap. The steady applause of the whole audience, and of the orchestra, brings back the composer to the podium, who continues directing what is his triumphal debut.

Three issues merit comment in this moving story:

I. What the composer expresses is shame and not humiliation – it is clearly internalized embarrassment, no anger at the audience but only at himself;

II. the public display of shame – an emotion generally enacted only in an intimate space, if at all – greatly increases the audience’s ability to identify with their target (it makes him human) and explains their progressive discomfort if not guilt about the effect of their own prior behavior; and

III. the noble enactment of the orchestra director acted as catalytic agent, modeling a reparative behavior than, when made collective, reversed the shame. Before that enactment, the audience didn’t know what to do and may have done nothing. This last

scene illustrates the powerful impact of a (in this case benevolent) leader on a disconcerted crowd.

Yours,
Carlos