

THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

Echo Chambers: A reflection on *Eleemosynary* by Lee Blessing

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Eleemosynary is a strange word, difficult to spell and even more challenging to pronounce. It is found in the English dictionary but it is rarely used in everyday speech and as a title for a play it is strange indeed. Titles function as clues about the subject of the play, but this title does little to enlighten us. In fact, it functions more as a direct challenge to our need to be in control of a play's meaning. By refusing to give us a hint about what to expect, this play is asserting itself from the start. "Don't think you know what I'm about," this title seems to say. "I will tell you in my own good time."

As if to calm us, the first character we meet, a young girl of sixteen named Echo, immediately pronounces it, spells it and tells us that Eleemosynary means "of or pertaining to alms; charitable." But that does not explain what she means by using that word. Nor does it explain what the play means by taking it as its title. Echo will introduce us to many more words that are strange to our ears and though she explains the dictionary definitions, what she means by using them and what they mean to her require much more explanation. And that, I believe, is at the heart of what this play is about: people, like words, discover who they are in relationships, not in a static dictionary definition, but in the mutual struggle to be heard and understood.

The cast consists of three generations of women who for better and often for worse have shaped each other's identity and experience of themselves in the world. The world itself is a character of sorts, for patriarchal attitudes have shaped Dorothea, the first generation of this threesome. She explains that when she was born her father was disappointed that she wasn't a boy. "Girls weren't really worth much then," but she doesn't really blame her father. And she tells us that "It wasn't my mothers' fault either, I suppose. We all try to be just right, just what the next one needs. And we never come close." She is giving voice to a pattern of thought or belief, really, that all parents fall into: that somehow we can control how our children react to us. We believe that our best efforts are not only what our children need but that they will intuit the meaning behind our efforts when they fail miserably, that we were doing our best and truly meant no harm. We can no more control our children's reactions to us than we can control the goings on of this play and the self-discoveries that may emerge from our engagement with it.

The playwright, Lee Blessing, has given his characters names taken directly from Greek mythology or with Greek etymology. The names, I believe, offer insights into the characters' experiences of themselves. Dorothea, from the Greek, means "God's gift", an ironic name given her reception by her father and the patriarchal culture at large. Yet this strong woman creatively clung to her belief in herself, that she had gifts to explore and share. She named her daughter Artemis, a Greek goddess of the hunt but also of chastity and a protector of children. A hopeful name, perhaps, but this daughter, called Artie in the play, aborts her first pregnancy in her teens at Dorothea's insistence. Then when she does have a daughter, Echo, she abandons her to be raised by Dorothea when her husband dies tragically in a car accident.

And then there is Echo, this third generation daughter who we meet as the play opens, whose given name is Barbara. Artie chose this name for her, whose Greek roots mean foreign or strange, perhaps a clue to how Artie feels about herself and what she sees reflected to her from her infant daughter. But Dorothea insists on calling the baby Echo, and the reason for this choice draws us close to the deep insights of this play, insights that go all the way back to the ancient Greek tragedians.

Echo was a mountain nymph cursed by a goddess so that she could only repeat the last words said to her. But this curse reveals a deep truth about the human condition, a truth dramatized for us in *Eleemosynary* and one the ancient Greeks knew but that we have lost sight of. Despite our modern faith in autonomy and independence, the truth is that we are interrelated and utterly dependent on the reactions of others to know who we are. As we journey with Dorothea, Artie and Echo we will encounter reactions that are judgmental, cruel, and misinterpreted, and others that are suffused with forgiveness, love and longing.

Like these women, we live and discover ourselves for better or worse inside echo chambers, complex patterns of blessings and curses. We can choose how we react to the reactions we receive, of course, and that is the foundation for personal growth and raised consciousness. And more importantly, we can consciously choose how we will react to others. Perhaps the reason *eleemosynary* sounds strange to our ears is that the we have grown a bit rusty at being charitable towards one another. We can learn to spell this odd word, even learn to repeat the dictionary definition. But we won't discover its meaning until we become its living embodiment and others begin to describe our presence in their lives as *eleemosynary*.