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KC - 10 The Knights of the
Round Table

Nantucket Island
Massachusetts

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World
Affairs

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535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In the course of this past month I had the chance to put some of the ideas I'd been working on this spring into practice in front of an audience, and you may be interested in the whole process rather than just the results, which I hope you will be able to see in New York later this year or early next.

The Williamstown Theatre is a summer theatre housed in the Adams Memorial Theatre of Williams College, in Massachusetts. Its director is Nikos Psacharopoulos, who has built the theatre up over the past twenty years from a group of non-Equity actors into a large and prestigious operation presenting 8 classic and modern plays in the course of each summer. The first production this year was Chekhov's The Seagull with a cast that included Olympia Dukakis, Blythe Danner, Kevin McCarthy, Frank Langella, and Lee Grant. Productions of Chekhov, Ibsen, Brecht, Moliere, Shaw, Sheridan, and Euripides, set the Williamstown Theatre apart from most summer stock companies. Nikos, though, like all producers, makes a variety of complicated and ingenious deals in order to survive and his methods are a combination of the off-hand and the surreptitious. But in general he is loyal to people, realistic about what they can do (for him), and surprisingly generous to their working needs.

Over the years Williamstown has developed an intern program for apprentices, young people interested in making theatre a career but with no experience of the profession. It offers them classes in acting, movement, voice, as well as the chance to appear on stage in small supporting roles and as extras. In addition, the apprentices, as they discover to their dismay after they have arrived, are expected to help with building sets and costumes, poster runs, and thousands of other little chores around the theatre. It is their presence that makes it possible to mount ambitious large cast productions such as Arturo Ui or Peer Gynt - and to put up an elaborate set overnight with only a few professional crew members.

Two years ago, realising that the productions on the main stage offered only a limited and conventional selection of plays, Nikos

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initiated the "Second Company", at first out of advanced apprentices and then, last year, out of non-Equity but still fairly experienced young actors from New York and a few East coast drama schools. The directors were professionals with plays they wanted to try out, or new approaches to standard works. It was in this situation that I developed the first version of my adaptation from Boccaccio, and this spring Nikos asked me to return and work with a now more elaborately organised Second Company on a new production. At the time I was in the middle of my workshops in New York, and the idea of a new show that could be rehearsed and presented in the summer was far from my mind. On the other hand it seemed a shame to miss the chance to try out some of my ideas in a situation where it would be necessary to have a fairly broad appeal to an audience.

I suggested a number of possibilities, but after several meetings the one that we both agreed would be best to try was a version of legends from the stories surrounding King Arthur. I had been experimenting with one of these - Sir Gawain and the Green Knight - in my workshops. I went back to the sources to look for more, and after reading through Malory, a lot of Chrétien de Troyes, and other source material, I settled on three stories. One, called Balin and Balan, is based on Malory's Morte D'Arthur, and was written about 1470, drawing on much older material. It is about two brothers, one of whom acquires a miraculous sword and uses it to rid the world of a terrible scourge (the personification of Death itself). Eventually, possessed by the superhuman power of this sword, he kills his own brother, having brought on even worse suffering and disaster than existed before he set about his mission of 'good'. The second story, The Knight of the Cart was the oldest, written in 1170 by Chrétien de Troyes, a French court poet. It concerns a mysterious knight who penetrates a kingdom, defended by impregnable forces, to which Queen Guinevere has been kidnapped. The knight has to undergo the most terrible ordeals and humiliations in order to accomplish his task - but he passes all the tests and emerges victorious. The knight, we discover at the end, is Sir Lancelot of the Lake himself, and this adventure is the beginning of the love between him and Guinevere that will eventually destroy the Round Table fellowship. The third story was Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, by an anonymous author of the 14th century, and tells how a strange knight, dressed from head to toe in green, and with a green complexion and green hair, challenges the Round Table to strike off his head. There is one condition: whoever agrees to strike the blow, must also agree to allow the Green Knight to strike the same blow a year from hence. Sir Gawain is the only one to accept the challenge. He beheads the Green Knight, who promptly replaces his head and rides away, reminding Gawain not to break his word. A year later Gawain sets out in search of the Green Knight (and his own certain death). In the course of the events that follow he is offered a way out of his predicament, but at the expense of his honor. After some hesitation, he refuses, but compromises ever so little. In the climax of the story, he is spared the death (for having refused the easy way out) but is nicked by the axe (for having compromised).

Three different stories, spanning three centuries, and with three different modulations - folk tale, courtly, literary. But they all, taken together, seemed to deal with a consistent theme - a confrontation with death that took the form of some kind of initiatory experience. The whole image of the quest for the Grail, and the tension between high idealism and barbarism, seemed very appropriate for today. The stories were full of magical and supernatural elements that were theatrically challenging. One final thing helped me to decide. Richard Peaslee, with whom I had collaborated on the Boccaccio material, had been experimenting this spring with synthesised sounds, musical and otherwise. I had heard some of the sketches he had recorded, and used them in my own experiments. They are powerful theatrical pieces, and something about them fitted the Arthurian world very well. I asked permission to use them in Williamstown, and he agreed, and the project was settled upon as the third production, to open mid-July.

When I arrived in Williamstown in June, Gawain and Balin & Balan were in typescript. The Knight of the Cart was still in manuscript draft, as I was having difficulty in finding a focus for the story (it's still the least successful, I think). These drafts were even more provisional than is usual for me, because I had no way of knowing, until we started rehearsal, how the music would fit in.

The company had been working for nearly a week when I arrived, rehearsing the first production, an experimental version of Twelfth Night. I knew only two of the actors personally, and I had seen one other as a student. There were fourteen in the company but after Twelfth Night they were to be split up - six assigned to Production #2, and the rest to mine, Production #3. Then the bargaining began.

Whichever way I broke down my cast, shuffling parts, doubling and eliminating roles, I could not mount Arthur with less than nine people - one more than there were actors. Naturally both I and the other director wanted the pick of the better actors, who were easy to identify after a look at the Twelfth Night rehearsals. So we faced our first crisis even before we started work. I was committed to a show opening in three weeks, and not enough actors to perform it. The problem was solved by a series of jugglings and arm-twistings by the two young administrators running the company. They found two additional 'bodies', one the husband of the business manager of the main theatre and himself a playwright; the other, an assistant director and musician. They were recruited, or rather, press-ganged into taking small parts.

But I was not very optimistic. I had to justify a non-actor in the role of Arthur, whom I had seen, admittedly, as a figurehead, an ageing monarch barely able to control the Round Table, whose once lofty values had degenerated into frivolity and charade. But

this concept needed some substance in the acting in order to carry any conviction, and my extra actor was young, and even looked young for his age. I asked for a mask, cut the part of Arthur as much as I dared without turning the play into the legends of Guinevere, and hoped for the best.

Our rehearsal schedule was unusual to the point of bizarre. In order to have as many productions as possible ready to open and tour in the early part of the summer, three shows had to be finished by mid-July. The first (Twelfth Night), as I said, was already in rehearsal when I arrived. The second and third were to open a day apart, one week after Twelfth Night. Every actor in each of these subsequent shows was also cast in Twelfth Night, although shows two and three did not have overlapping casts. The resulting schedule was made even more complex by the fact that once Twelfth Night opened it immediately went on tour sweeping actors from shows #2 & #3 with it, and cutting into those vital days in the last week of rehearsal. And as the openings of #2 and #3 were so close together, the overworked and understaffed technical crew was split at the very time it should have been most concentrated. Our working day was usually one block of three hours out of a possible nine, with the actors running from one play to the next and learning the lines for one while they were between scenes in the other.

The free time this gave me was useful, at least in the early stages. It gave me a chance to rewrite. The disadvantage was that the 3-hour blocks were often 24 hours apart. Actors would arrive from the world of Shakespeare or Sam Shephard and find it hard to be inventive in the world of Arthur. The actors themselves were a very mixed group. Three of the men and one of the women were good, versatile and enthusiastic. One of them, Paul, had been part of my spring workshop (See newsletter #9), and was a great help as an objective eye on the production as it progressed. He played Merlin, slipping in and out of a variety of other roles with great aplomb. Of the rest, some were adequate, and two were, to be charitable, 'beginners'. The whole company, though, was always cheerful, ready to try anything, and they worked hard to support each other. In that sense, they were a pleasure to work with.

These were the conditions, then, under which we started. Most of the first week was taken up with the basic work of any theatrical production, reading the script, and letting the actors get the feel of the story line, the dramatic shape, where it needed to be expanded, where actors could contribute, where it had to be cut. All this is routine, but the interesting part was to see how these stories opened up possibilities for the kind of techniques I had been exploring in the spring.

I particularly wanted to see whether the sense of time, always an elastic content of consciousness, could be altered for theatrical

effect. In Gawain, for instance, I wanted to make the axe stroke, both at the beginning of the story and at the end, a scene in itself including not only the actor's thoughts, but his consciousness of what he was leaving behind, and some sense that the act of striking was a gateway between one world and another. Also in Gawain, there was to be a scene in which the hero was armed, and in the course of that simple action I wanted to convey the sense of his own fragility, contrasted with the steel of the armor, his own thoughts, the thoughts of the people helping him to arm, and at the same time leave the audience free to have their own reflections on the situation. Again, in Balin & Balan I had to create the feeling of a man possessed; the sword had to control the character, and scenes had to leap from sudden violence to a dream world in which the hero could fight with ghosts, see visions, and eventually destroy himself (in the shape of his brother).

The music was crucial. It could not be used as underscoring, or program music. It did not ask for vocal accompaniment. I had no intention, nor the means, of making it into a ballet score. It had to have its own space to breathe and move. But what were the actors to do meanwhile? I tried to think of precedents for this kind of thing, but I couldn't come up with any. The only clue I had was a remark made by someone who had heard it earlier in the year and said, 'It has to be another character'.

For the first week I didn't let the actors hear the music, or even hint to them where it would be used. It was puzzling to them when I gave them a speech, not very connected, some very sparse action, and nothing else. But I felt that our best chance of finding a solution to the problem of balance between the dramatic action and the music was to have first found a way to support the scenes without the music, to let them find their own life, and then to introduce the taped sounds only when the actors could, at a pinch and with some editing, present the piece without music.

We worked on this principle for the whole first week. One evening at the beginning of our second week Dick Peaslee arrived. The actors weren't prepared for the presence of two large speakers, a tape deck and amplifier, and a tangle of wires strewn over their rehearsal floor. We had one of our blocks of three hours in which to work and I had intended to make it a run-through of the entire show, dropping in music as we went along. Instead, it turned into a series of musical events with improvisation.

We had never rehearsed the opening, spoken by Merlin, but on this evening we started with his speech, in which he describes his birth, his special powers, and then goes on to tell of the formation of the Round Table Fellowship, the mysterious and catastrophic events that began with the maiming of a king (acted out later in Balin and Balan), and the subsequent quest for the Grail. This speech ends on

a list of names of knights, an open-ended list that had made no sense to the actors in its shapeless, literary form. The tape we used for the opening was at first only a low drone, almost imperceptible to the ear; the drone gathers strength, menacing, throbbing, like distant World War II airplanes; it starts to build up a sense of urgency, of time running out. Suddenly, into this drone, blazes a fanfare that seems to be made up of primeval animal sounds and colossal futuristic wind instruments. The fanfares echo and repeat, overlap and finally end on a sinister dying electronic reverberation.

Merlin's speech was timed, though the actor did not know it, to reach the open-ended list of knights just as the first fanfare broke through. As he reached the names - Sir Percivale, Sir Bors de Ganis, Sir Agravaire, Sir Breuse sans Pité ... the list was swallowed up in noise; it was as if all the knights who had ever been created, only to fight and die in the quest of the Grail, were waving banners with their insignia before disappearing forever into a mist. It had a visible effect on the actors. Some shivered; others seemed stunned. We went on.

As cue after cue unfolded I could see that the music had opened up a new dimension, and set us new standards. Some of the actors found their manner of speaking altered by contact with it. The actor playing Balin, for instance, has a speech in which he describes what he sees when he breaks into a room in which the Grail relics are kept. He had always spoken the words fast, dramatizing them and trying to express his feelings about the vision through his acting. But with the addition of the tape, his voice dropped to a monotone, his speech rhythms slowed down, and he spoke like someone under deep hypnosis. Coupled with the effect of the music it was a striking and somewhat frightening transformation. I would have liked to keep it, but in the days that followed, the actor struggled to free himself from the influence of the tape and to win back his autonomy as an actor. However, in a future production I would try to retrieve that effect with the actor playing Balin, and try to extend it to the audience.

There were other episodes where the music and the action combined in an eerie symbiosis, slowing down one's sense of time and allowing the spectator to meditate on the meaning of a scene, to see details that would otherwise have gone by unnoticed, to get beneath the skin of a character without needing words to explain everything. These possibilities were clear from the first moment the actors and the music combined; the problem was to bring them to full flower within the time and resources at our disposal.

Now the work went on always to the accompaniment of the tapes. We found the stories acquiring their own individual moods: Balin and Balan had a harsh, jagged feeling, with intense personal force incarnated in a single character who was swept from one violent action to the next till he went beyond the bounds of the human altogether;

Sir Gawain existed in a dream-world, on the edge of death, melancholy and romantic; The Knight of the Cart, partly because of casting problems and partly because I was undecided about the thrust of the story, gave us the most problems. Linear, and apparently without shadings, it demanded a strong connecting image in the principal actor. It came out in the end much lighter than the others, and for some reason appealed to the audience (perhaps by contrast with the brooding Balin and Balan, which it followed). With its strange ordeals and superhuman tests of endurance, it should have something to say, and I look forward to another tussle with it.

The sixty hours of rehearsal time allocated to us now seemed pitifully inadequate. I concentrated more and more on the basic fabric for making a presentable piece out of the evening, curtailing the time spent on experimenting with the stories - always the most enjoyable part of the work. Apart from The Knight of the Cart which I kept tinkering with piecemeal, we found that the major rewriting had to be done in Balin and Balan. From the mid-point of the story everything worked well; but up to that point it was confusing, with four separate strands that didn't mesh. I rewrote and restaged it at least twice, but on the last Friday of rehearsal it still wasn't right. We were opening on Monday but that afternoon I sat down and reworked the entire first half of the piece. The next day I gave the actors a new set of lines, cues, and staging which chopped up and reshuffled two and a half weeks' work. It was typical of their goodnatured and serious attitude that they concentrated, put in the new structure and were able to play it smoothly by the next day. It was also the solution to the piece.

The last 36 hours were misery. Inadequate technical rehearsal, no costumes or lights, a faulty sound system, underrehearsed actors, complex music cues, and general exhaustion, combined to take away most of the excitement which usually sustains one through that period. On this occasion the unfortunate actors were doomed to open to the public without once having gone through the show in full costume or with the lights. Ten minutes before the audience was admitted to the theatre I was still working on the light cues.

When the audience came I was worried. Perhaps 160 people were crammed into a space that was meant to seat about 100. It was a hot, humid night. I couldn't imagine them submitting to the experience we had prepared for them. The first few minutes of the show were nightmarish. When the stage manager pressed the switch for the first sound cue the tape deck started to hum but not to turn. Luckily Dick Peaslee was sitting next to her, and after a few endless seconds of knob-turning and switch-pressing the machine consented to work and sound filled the theatre.

What the performance that night showed was that most of our gambles had been worth taking. We discovered that the stories, in spite of the roughnesses in the telling, contain themes that are still compelling to a modern audience. Even Balin and Balan, a tale of unmitigated grimness, mayhem, and abrupt changes of color from the violently physical to the mystical, seemed to keep people absorbed. We saw that the episodes in which we offered only the music and the scantiest suggestion of action and words could become screens on to which the audience could project its own vision. One of the most interesting possibilities that was opened up was the mix of live sound-tape sound-tape melody- live song, a progression that we started to create and which I could foresee taking much further. Masks, even the crude and sparse ones we used, seemed to mix with human physiognomies quite comfortably in this type of material, and I could see some very interesting use of light, as opposed to built structures, for the telling of the stories.

Of course I can't be objective about the result. There was a sense of euphoria when it was over that may have had as much to do with relief at getting ^{the} thing on at all as with any response from the audience. On the other hand, I think something unusual was accomplished, over and above merely getting through the lines and telling the stories - if only in having broken a few rules and gotten away with it. The next step is to take the material, now much altered from the scripts I brought with me to Williams-town, and devote more time to it in a more professional situation. This I hope to be able to do in the coming months.

As I told you, I was also working this spring on Boccaccio's Decameron, rewriting and expanding my version of it. In the course of the summer it was chosen as one of the productions to be presented by the Arena Stage, in Washington D.C., at their Kreeger Theatre next season. Rehearsals start some time in October, performances about mid-November continuing through December. In the course of the next month the casting for Boccaccio, the re-writing of Arthur, and the work on converting the spring activity into a script will keep me busy. Also, expect to hear more on the continuing saga of the search for space.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander

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