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KC 11 - From Page to Stage

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535 Fifth Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

The past month has been spent in writing - revising and adding new material to the script based on Boccaccio's Decameron for its production in Washington later in the fall, putting into order the script based on the Arthurian legends for a New York showing later in the season, and translating into a coherent form some of the results of the workshop experiments I was conducting this spring. I thought you might be interested in a closer look at this process of shaping raw material and turning it into something that has a theatrical life. I think a 'before' and 'after' method might be the clearest way of showing what I was doing, and how.

First, an excerpt from the Arthurian legends, SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT. The original is written in alliterative blank verse and is 2530 lines long. I had to compress this into a theatre piece that would last no more than 40 minutes, and also allow us time to hear the music and work through some of the action. The passage I'll show you covers about 200 lines of the original text. I won't re-type all of them here, only the important sections, summarizing what happens in between. The translation into modern English is by Marie Borroff.

Gawain hasjust spent several days asthe guest of a mysterious knight, Sir Bernlak, whose wife has tried to tempt him into an affair with her. He has resisted her, but compromised himself to the extent of accepting a gift from her - a green scarf which she says will be proof against any weapon. But now he has to go and find the Green Knight, the object of his quest, and submit to the axe, one blow aimed at his neck. He says goodbye to Sir Bernlak, his Lady, and the household, and ...

'Then he steps into the stirrups and bestrides his mount
His shield is shown forth, on his shoulder he casts it
Strikes the side of his steed with his steel spurs,
And he starts across stones nor stands any longer ...

Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow exploring in theatrical form our past and present mythologies and their capacity to aid us in self-transformation.

Gawain rides out through the castle gates, accompanied by a servant of Sir Bernlak's, who will show him the way to his rendezvous with the Green Knight ...

"Under bare boughs they ride, where steep banks rise,
Over high cliffs they climb, where cold snow clings
The heavens held aloof, but heavy thereunder
Mist mantled the moors, moved on the slopes.
Each hill had a hat, a huge cape of cloud;
Brooks bubbled and broke over broken rocks,
Flashing in freshets that waterfalls fed.
Roundabout was the road that ran through the wood
Till the sun at that season was soon to rise,
that day
They were on a hilltop high
The white snow around them lay;
The man that rode nearby
Now bade his master stay.

"For I have seen you safe at the set time,
And now you are not far from that notable place
That you have sought for so long with such special pains.
But this I say for certain since I know you, Sir Knight,
And have your good at heart, and hold you dear -
Would you heed well my words, it were worth your while -
You are rushing into risks that you reck not of:
There is a villain in yon valley, the veriest on earth;
For he is rugged and rude, and ready with his fists,
And most immense in his mold of mortals alive
And his body bigger than the best four
That are in Arthur's house, Hector or any."'

After more descriptive details of the Green Knight's horrendous size and power, the servant concludes ...

'"And so, Sir Gawain, let the grim man be;
Go off by some other road, in God's own name!
Leave by some other land for the love of Christ,
And I shall get me home again and give you my word
That I shall swear by God's self and the saints above,
By heaven and by my halidom and other oaths more,
To conceal this day's deed, nor say to a soul
That ever you fled for fear from any that I knew."'

Gawain refuses to take this easy way out.

'"I must to the Chapel to chance my luck
And say to that same man such words as I please,
Befall what may befall through Fortune's will."'

The servant says that if Gawain wants a quick death, he should keep him no longer. He points out the Chapel and rides off.

'The Knight urges his horse and heads for the knoll.
He saw some way off what seemed like a mound,
A hillock high and broad, hard by the water,
Where the stream fell in foam down the face of the steep.
He strides straight to the mound and strolls all about
Much wondering what it was, but no whit the wiser.
It had a hole at one end, and on either side,
And was covered with coarse grass in clumps all without,
And hollow all within ...'

"Can this be the Chapel Green," he says to himself."Here might the devil himself be seen, saying matins at black midnight." He goes closer.

'"This is a chapel of mischance, may the mischief take it,
As accursed a country church as I came upon ever."'

Then, as he walks cautiously towards it, he hears a sound, "a most barbarous din".

'Lord, it clattered in the cliff fit to cleave it in two
As one upon a grindstone ground a great scythe.
Lord! It whirled like a mill-wheel whirling about.
Lord! It echoed loud and long, lamentable to hear.'

Sir Gawain summons the Green Knight out of the chapel, but his opponent is in no hurry.

'"Abide", said one on the bank above over his head,
"And what I promised you once shall straightway be given."
Yet he stayed not his grindstone nor stinted its noise
But worked awhile at his whetting, before he would rest.'

Finally the Green Knight makes his entrance, swinging his axe. Gawain puts a stream between himself and the knight, who advances and vaults over the stream.

'"God love you, Sir Gawain!" said the Green Knight then,
And well met this morning, man, at my place.
And you have followed me faithfully and found me betimes,
And on the business between us both are agreed:
Twelve months ago today you took what was yours,
And you at this New Year must yield me the same.
And we have met in these mountains, remote from all eyes:
There is none here to halt us or hinder our sport;
Unhasp your high helm, and have here your wages;
Make no more demur than I did myself
When you hacked off my head with one hard blow."'

This material, as it turned out, was expressed in about two and half pages of text, with two separate musical themes, one mixing through into the other, and a sequence of actions during which a bare minimum of words were spoken. Here is how the prompt script looked after we had finished working on it. (For the sake of clarity

I have changed the layout a little, corresponding more to the shooting script of a movie than the script of a play:

DIALOGUE	ACTION	MUSIC
SERVANT:		
We have a fine morning of sleet and wild winds sir,	SERVANT SHOWS GAWAIN THE WAY	Sound - GO
	HOUSEHOLD STARTS TO TRANSFORM INTO THE OBSTACLES THAT GAWAIN ENCOUNTERS ON HIS WAY.	
	THE JOURNEY IS CONFUSING TO GAWAIN - MARSHES, HILLS, THICKETS, EACH OF WHICH THE SERVANT IS ABLE TO GO THROUGH OR OVER WITH GREAT EASE, BUT WHEN GAWAIN TRIES TO FOLLOW HIM HE FINDS HIMSELF STUCK, TRAPPED, ENTANGLED AND EXHAUSTED.	
	FINALLY, THE JOURNEY IS OVER. GAWAIN DOES NOTKNOW WHERE HE IS. HE EMERGES FROM THE LAST OBSTACLE OUT OF BREATH AND DAZED. THE SERVANT WELCOMES HIM SMILING AND NOT IN THE LEAST FATIGUED	
SERVANT:		
Look, each of those hills wears a little hat of cloud.		Sound - FADE OUT
I go no further, and neither should you, sir. See that valley over there - that's where he lives. He's a terrible villain, bigger than any four men at King Arthur's court. I've never seen anyone go in that valley and come out again. See that road down there?		WARN Sound

DIALOGUE	ACTION	MUSIC
SERVANT: (contd.) That takes you straight back to Camelot and I won't tell a soul.		
GAWAIN: I gave my word I would visit that Chapel.		
SERVANT: And that forces you to go there - your word?		
GAWAIN: Yes.		
SERVANT: Even if it means you'll die - it still forces you?		Sound GO
GAWAIN: Yes.		Before actor speaks level 2
	SERVANT LAUGHS SCORNFULLY AND WALKS AWAY.	
GAWAIN: No Chapel anywhere ... Just a mound ... looks like a hillock with tufts of grass ... Hollow inside, there's a hole at one end ... another on each side ... Green chapel - a chapel of mischance, the devil's own chapel!	AS HE GOES IN THE DIRECTION THE SERVANT POINTED ...	RUN ON - down.
The axe! Grinding in there.	HE LEAPS BACK	RAISE LEVEL
Come out! Sir Green Knight. Let's see you.		TAPE RUNS - level 3

DIALOGUE	ACTION	MUSIC
GREEN KNIGHT: (offstage) Wait - it's not sharp enough yet.		Sound - UP
	GAWAIN WAITS	
Ready. Where are you?		Sound - level 4
	ENTER GREEN KNIGHT	
GAWAIN: The other side of this stream. Come and find me.		
	GREEN KNIGHT APPROACHES SWINGING HIS AXE.	
	GAWAIN WAITS FOR HIM.	
	GREEN KNIGHT COMES UP TO GAWAIN, TESTS THE SHARPNESS OF THE AXE ON HIS THUMB. DRAWS BLOOD, SMILES.	
		Sound - FADE OUT, start
GREEN KNIGHT: Well met, Sir Gawain. You keep your word.		
GAWAIN:		Sound - FADE OUT, complete.
As always		
GREEN KNIGHT: Twelve months ago to a day you took what was yours. Now you will permit me to take what is mine.		
GAWAIN: Without stint		
GREEN KNIGHT: Undo your helmet.		

The original poem is a literary creation, though the more you look at it, the more you see the visual, almost cinematic effects the author creates, building a scene, then cutting away to another piece of action to create a montage-like effect, asin the journey from the castle to the Green Chapel. He also shifts from present to past tense in the narrative, which gives the reader a peculiar sense of going from close-up to long-shot, as it were. What interested me, as I worked on it, was to see how much could be created for the audience without using the literary devices of elaborate description, verbal assonance, and dialogue that made elegant loops and spirals. The journey, for example, described so precisely and colorfully by the poet, became a wordless episode, in which the actor communicated a feeling. This feeling was extracted from a hint in the lines - 'roundabout was the road that ran through the wood' - which suggested a maze, a labyrinth, not a simple trek from one point to the next, but another in the series of puzzles and tests to which Sir Gawain had been subjected in the course of his quest. So the servant, aspart of this mystery, had an easy journey, Gawain a difficult one. As they left the palace, the synthesized tape burst in loud, in heavy descending syncopated beats, through which were twined swirling and eddying sounds that suggested the whipping gusts of a snowstorm. This effect kept up relentlessly till the end of the journey and then, as strangely as it entered, faded away, leaving a soft little phrase tinkling like wind chimes on the servants words - 'each of those hills wears a little hat of cloud.'

Later, as Sir Gawain was waiting outside the Green Chapel, the tape sprayed out a profusion of hard-edged metallic sounds, alternating with sharp slashing noises exactly like a huge knife being sharpened, the whole effect sustained underneath by a musical theme in the base.

In both cases, the action was minimal, the words used only to set the scene and launch the audience's imagination. Once set in motion, the scene had to unfold, if at all, on some inner screen belonging to the spectator. Obviously, this is a risky business at the best of times; andit's hard to decide how well it works on the basis of one or two experiments. But I hope to be able to try again in the course of next few months, and you can judge for yourself what it contains.

Before that, however, the version of Boccaccio's DECAMERON I've been working on will be produced in Washington. The journey from original text to the stage is somewhat shorter in this case, because the stories themselves fall so naturally into dialogue and action. They are a strange amalgam of the traditional folk tale and the sophisticated comedy of situation. Many of them appear, in different versions, in legends of cultures as far apart as India and 19th century America. It is this constancy in the material

that fascinated me, its capacity to regenerate itself in different ages and circumstances. But even more interesting, for our particular generation, is the central image on which the whole collection is based - the Plague.

In the mid-14th century Florence was visited by the Plague. Boccaccio describes in great detail what happened to the city as a result of this catastrophe. As he talks about the symptoms of the plague, he begins to draw a panoramic picture of a whole society suffering from a deadly disease, as much ethical as physical.

> "In this suffering and misery of our city, the authority of human and divine laws almost disappeared for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were all dead, or sick, or shut up with their families, so that no duties were carried out. Every man was therefore able to do as he pleased."

The breakdown in the machinery of government was accompanied by a loss of faith in all human institutions, in the capacity of the city to support life, and in an attempt to run from other human beings as if they themselves were the contagion.

> "Men and women, caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them ... One citizen avoided another, hardly any neighbor troubled about others, relatives never or hardly ever visited each other."

One day, says Boccaccio, a group of young people met in the church of Santa Maria Novella. There, after some discussion, they decided to leave the wickedness and corruption of the city behind them and go to live in the country. Once they are in the country, however, they discover that time passes slowly, and so they begin to tell stories to each other. These are the stories that make up the Decameron.

What I am trying to do with this material is to relate the central image of the plague and its effects on society to some of the concerns and events of our own day (without, of course, drawing heavy-handed parallels). In the course of this work, the questions that have to be answered are - who are these young people, and what do they think they are doing by setting up this ideal community in the country? What are tensions and relationships between them? What do the stories express for them? How can the events of the stories, the young story-tellers themselves, and the plague all be related? In my next letter I shall try to tell you something about how I (andmy collaborators) are trying to answer these questions, and then go on to the more esoteric material I have been developing from my spring workshop.

Sincerely,

Kenneth

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on 9/11/74.