

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

450 Humphrey Street  
New Haven  
Connecticut 06511

KC 12 - Old and New Fables

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York  
NY 10017

Dear Mr Nolte,

Last month I was discussing the problems of transforming the literary images of Boccaccio's The Decameron into a series of stage actions and characters that would carry some resonance for today and still be true to the spirit of the original. I laid out some of the material from the introduction that makes up the frame of the piece, and now I would like to talk about some of the developments the material underwent before reaching the version with which we shall shortly go into rehearsal. During rehearsal we shall no doubt make new discoveries, and these will alter once again the external aspect of the script. What you will see in November will therefore be the result of a long series of trials and errors.

The first version of Boccaccio, which I directed myself with the minimal resources of the Second Company at Williamstown, approached the problem of the opening as a crisis - in more ways than one. The play opened with a bell tolling, followed by the creation of a stage picture based on three motifs out of Boccaccio's introduction - the cast off clothing, people dying, and the all-pervasive presence of Death. Death was a veiled figure who spoke the opening narrative, and the first thing the audience saw was clothes, tossed on to stage to make a disorderly heap. These were followed by the actors, who became a pile of corpses on the clothes. There was a transition in which the funereal tolling faded out and plainchant faded in, and the corpses 'resurrected' as young people, put on the clothes, which turned them into their characters, and as the Narrator/Death figure retreated, they began to tell the first story.

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Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow exploring in theatrical form our past and present mythologies and our capacities for self-transformation.

This was the crudest possible solution to the problem and one that was put together in a crisis atmosphere about an hour before the show opened. As an indication of how hastily thrown on stage the whole thing was, the actress playing the Narrator was veiled from head to toe, not in order to create a special visual effect (though it worked that way, serendipitously) but in order to allow her to hold a script in her hands and not be seen by the audience. It was a thoroughly makeshift way of dealing with the problem but one that, interestingly enough, provided me with one or two ideas to which, after a long circuitous route through two other productions, I returned. Specifically, the Death figure, dropped for subsequent scripts, has reappeared in the latest version.

In order to do justice to the metaphor of the plague, with all its reverberations for our own times, it was essential to find a framework for the telling of the stories. The distance between a group of tales, however entertaining, told as an anthology, and those same stories told out of some inner necessity and subterranean logic may be small in terms of minutes on the stage or pages of script, but artistically it is immense. From the beginning there were a number of fixed points I thought useful as a way of solving the puzzle.

First, the stories were told by a group of young people. Secondly, they were told in the country, to pass the time. Thirdly, they are introduced in the original with little homilies or philosophical discussions about human nature. Finally, when the last of the stories has been told, at the end of the tenth day, the young people return to Florence. Boccaccio says nothing about the plague in his Epilogue, but the implication seems to be that it is somehow safe to return. The ten days become a symbolic, not a realistic time lapse. In the course of telling the stories the infection has passed. Somehow, I felt, this connection had to be preserved and possibly strengthened in the stage version.

Time goes by, stories are told, a plague passes, a city is cleansed. Young people create an idyllic community far from the corruption of the city, they find this garden of Eden boring, they amuse themselves with fictions about - what? Surely about the life they have left behind, about themselves, about their dreams and fantasies. Some of the stories are amusing; others are tragic; many are ironic and satirical. They all refer, in some way, to the life that has been left behind, or not yet lived.

As I thought about the implications of these ideas a pattern

began to emerge; the threads connecting different elements in the design began to weave together. Why do people tell stories, or listen to them? To put it more grandiosely - what is the function of a myth in a community? By associating the telling of the stories with the need to escape from the plague, Boccaccio seems to me to have created a potent and highly charged image of a condition that exists today as much as it did in his own time. There is always the urge to turn away from the distasteful, diseased, corrupt things in society; to create an ideal community separate from the rest of the world; to isolate oneself in some form of artificial Eden. Whether it is a physical or a spiritual isolation makes little difference. But such a reaction to the "plague" of our current dilemma leaves the situation unchanged. It may even make it worse by polarizing the conflict.

But what if the telling of stories was somehow connected with a solution to this problem? Suppose, in the course of the storytelling, that the young people were able to come to terms with the very things that had forced them into exile - the corruption, the disease, the breakdown of public and private morality.

In the second version of the script, this time with music and songs, we created a song in the opening scene, which was made up out of fragments of popular wisdom, cynical throwaway justifications for unethical conduct, such as "The only crime is to get caught" or "The law is an ass". Some of these we used literally, others were alluded to indirectly. This song became the centrepiece of the prologue to the evening, as it were, with a driving bitter melody; it was delivered fiercely, with a kind of defiant, desperate gaiety. At the end of the play, after the last story had been told - the last story, incidentally, concerned the adventures of a man in "Purgatory" - the song reappeared, but this time without the cynicism. By placing it after the story about the man in Purgatory, with its theme of cleansing and forgiveness, we felt we had made a start towards tying together beginning and ending of the piece in a way that would express some of the ambiguities of the original. What had previously been expressed in words and action, was now carried mostly by the music and the lyrics, though there still remained a narrative introduction, albeit a very spare one.

But there was another twist to the journey towards a solution, one that came out of the peculiar nature of presenting the material on stage, as opposed to reading it in a printed narrative. In the book, you are able to imagine all the different characters the stories depict; each is an individual, with his or her own physical characteristics. In our theatre production that was not possible. We had limited ourselves to a cast of eight or nine

at most; even with a selection of stories that took only seven or eight out of Boccaccio's original hundred (ten stories a day for ten days) we still had a cast list of over forty characters. On top of that the actors would have to represent the citizens of Florence, and the young people who decide to separate themselves from the community and live elsewhere. Three distinct sets of characters - or were they?

By raising this question a very interesting possibility suggests itself, which the very limitations of a stage production (assuming we do not employ a cast of thousands) can enhance. If all the people we are to be introduced to in the course of the evening - victims of the plague, young people, and imaginary characters - wear the same outward mask, as it were, appear to us as the same group of eight or nine individuals, then their identities will start to blur. What the people who decide to leave are fleeing can be made to seem an aspect of themselves, their own worse natures. The idealists who go to the seclusion of their country estate are the versions of themselves they would like to believe are more true, more real, more principled. Who, then, are the characters in the stories? They can be anything - aspects of their own selves which they have tried to deny but cannot; personal demons that need to be exorcised; the Plague itself, in personalized form.

The Plague, in this case, would be something that is impossible to escape. The young people take it with them when they leave the city. It is inside them and - so that the audience should not forget what is going on outside the periphery of this idyll the group has created for itself - it should be there, tangibly present for us, if not for them, to see.

This has brought us full circle, for the version we are presently working on includes a presence, a character, who also acts as narrator, and who stands partly outside the action. His objective eye records what happens, reveals secrets (in the form of information about the young people who tell the stories), and where he goes, or touches someone, he can also bring death. From time to time throughout the drama he tells us something about the story-tellers. He also appears in the stories in various disguises, a constant reminder of mortality.

How this memento mori figure will work, and how successfully he will convey the impression we wish, remains to be seen. At the end of the play he will return with the young people to Florence. Perhaps, after all, Boccaccio's silence on the question of whether the plague is over or not, has a deeper meaning.

Perhaps it means that they return to the plague, in full knowledge of what they are doing, but determined to deal with it, not run away from it.

As the rehearsals progress I'll return to this question, and keep you in touch with the development of the idea, how it appears to be working, what changes it undergoes in the course of putting the material on stage.

Aside from the Legends of King Arthur and the material from Boccaccio I was also at work during the summer on the results of my spring workshop, trying to find a literary form for some of the effects and impulses that sprang up in the course of that series of meetings. One of the techniques with which we were experimenting was the transference of the sense of identity to a specific part of the body - the hand, for instance. (See Newsletter #7) At the time this was just one among many unrelated experiments that we were trying. In the course of the summer, however, the situation which the actors created came back to me, and in writing drafts of the text the hand exercise turned into a story or parable. Subsequently, I have started work on dramatizing this story, but the theatrical version will have to wait until I can collect my actors again and work on it with them. Trying to do it in the abstract is much too difficult. Meanwhile, in case you are interested in the story as it came out, I can try to reproduce it for you, with perhaps some indications of possible action. As yet, I have no way of knowing what it means, or how it connects with other parts of the work; that, presumably, is what will be turned up by further exploration.

An actor, after certain preparations (which are part of another exercise), starts to tell the following story:

A man became identified with his hand. He came to believe that his hand was controlling him, and to feel that it was taking him places he had not consciously thought of visiting.

(Imagine that this story is being told to another actor, while the rest of the group reinforce the reality of what it being told)

He experienced the outside the world as before, his thought processes were the same as before, but some other center seemed to be forming within -

or rather, without - him. Emotions troubled him less. Fear, pride, jealousy seemed to affect him more feebly. He became detached.

(The actor to whom the story is being told now becomes the one who enacts it - if possible)

As the hand took on a life of its own, it made demands and decisions, leading, exploring, judging, sentencing.

(These are functions expressed by the hand. Watch your own hand perform these functions, see what the outline of the gesture is, see how independent it is of conscious design)

He lived to please his hand, in awe of it, for it was wiser - or so he thought - more succinct and balanced.

It had no mouth, so it used his. It used all his senses, and sometimes he pitied its dumb groping existence. But then, he reflected, it was in no way more helpless than any other part of his body - his head, for instance, or his torso - and, now that he came to think of it, every complete being, man or animal, relied on eyes, ears, nose for guidance, so why should not his hand?

If anything, his hand was superior, for it could say truthfully, 'I am above my body; I can look down on it; I can go a certain distance away and approach it from another angle.' And while it was true that the hand could only move so far away on its own before it came to the limits of the arm to which it was attached, even that restriction could be represented as an advantage. 'I still have a connection to an organism,' it could say. 'For all my independence, I have roots.'

(Now the other actors begin to react as if the state of affairs being described was real to them, as individuals)

Sometimes his hand would grasp another hand, and then it seemed, for a moment, as though a connection began to be formed between the two members until the owner of the other hand, reacting through some other part of his body - his head, perhaps, or his heart - withdrew his own hand and forbade the link to be forged more firmly.

The hand, now sovereign, attracted all power to itself, concentrating all the energies his body had hitherto shared out as fairly as it could amongst all its parts. Its five fingers became a quintessence of the whole organism and people, coming close, could feel a sensation of warmth even before the hand touched them. Wherever it came into contact with living tissue, open flesh would be closed, damaged cells made whole.

But the owner of the hand, now divided from its authority, unable to subdue it, began to feel that its life was being lived at the expense of his. He instigated the opposite hand to discipline the usurper. The usurper put it in a glove. He imagined ways to chop the offending hand off, but could not summon up the strength ...

(The actor now reaches a stage where he speaks alternately as the character he is describing and the narrator telling the story. As character he wishes to be released from the subordinate position, as narrator, he continues the story, thus forcing the character to live through the further evolution of this situation ... How far can he go - dare he go ...?)

For the time being I have no wish to interpret this fable, which obviously could be continued, and which has potential for farcical as well as serious treatment. In a few weeks I hope to collect a group of actors again for a short period and then I will report on further episodes and changes in the story.

Sincerely,

Kenneth.

Kenneth Cavander