

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 13 From Theory to Practice

Washington
D.C.

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

November 17th

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The Arena Stage, in Washington, D.C., is one of the longest established (this year is its 25th anniversary) and the most prestigious of the regional theatres in the U.S. Its Producing Director, Zelta Fichandler, wields considerable power in American theatre and her productions have toured the U.S., Europe and the Soviet Union, and launched a number of new plays in New York - The Great White Hope, Indians, Moonchildren. She employs a staff of 110 people, and her operating budget is in the region of \$1,600,000 annually. The whole enterprise is really two theatres, the Arena Stage itself, an 800-seat four-sided auditorium, and the newer Kreeger Theatre, a 500-seat horseshoe shaped house, where Boccaccio is being performed.

Putting together a production in a theatre such as this - as opposed to the theoretical and leisurely work of conceiving and writing it - absorbs all one's energies, and relegates the rest of the world, let alone other concerns and ideas, to a shadowy limbo outside the theatre. The theatre itself becomes a monk's cell, which you inhabit from early in the day till late in the evening, and even when you go out, you huddle with actors, the director, or other colleagues at the nearest restaurant, still talking about the work, planning the next day, analysing, arguing.

As I am still involved in that process, I thought you might be interested in a few of the stages along the way to that intensive rehearsal period, and an insight into what happened to the ideas I discussed in my last newsletter once they were translated into the realities of actors and stage situations.

The real preparation for this production began early in the summer, when the director, and the designers of setting and costumes, met to discuss the visual appearance of the show. This had to begin even before the final script was ready, for at that time the

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

Arena was already planning its production schedules for the fall. Three major productions were to be opened on the Arena Stage between the middle of October and the end of December and one - ours - at the Kreeger. There were therefore four shows to be designed, planned down to the last technical detail, and built, in a precisely choreographed procession. In the case of Boccaccio, although the show was not due to open until November 20th, set designs had to be presented and approved by the end of August, and the costumes very soon afterwards. In practice, this worked out slightly differently. The final costume sketches were not approved until some time in early October.

Synchronized with all this, the director, the composer and myself were auditioning actors. These auditions were arranged in the following way. The Arena Stage would contact actors' agents and T.C.G. (Theatre Communications Group, which acts as a liaison between actors and theatres around the country). The production office would give a brief description of our needs - in this case, young people, with singing^{ing} and acting ability combined, and preferably some experience in movement and dance. Then the Arena booked a space in New York, usually an old dance studio or rehearsal hall, at which the actors would congregate. Each was allotted ten minutes in which to show us the quality of their singing voices, and to act out a short monologue. The theatre provided an accompanist to play for them.

As you can imagine from my description in previous newsletters of the current employment squeeze on actors in New York, auditions were tense, nerve-racking for the actors, and, by osmosis, for us. The Arena Stage is a valuable opportunity for an actor, and competition to be cast in a play there is intense. In the meagre ten minutes allowed, the next three or four months of the actors' lives would be determined. We were looking for eight or nine people at most. About three hundred passed before us over the course of a month. We asked perhaps fifty or sixty to return ('callbacks' is the technical term for these second looks). One or two were asked to return three or four times.

After the first batch of auditions we felt that we could cast four members of our company, but of these four, two proved to be unavailable or unable to leave New York, and by the end of August we were still five or six people short. It took us until the weekend before the first day of rehearsal to finish the casting. Meeting off and on throughout September, and early October, sifting, balancing types and characters, and finally submitting our choices to the ultimate arbiter, Zelda Fichandler, our producer. A typical sequence of events would be: we would

select two or three actors we thought promising, Zelda would arrive in New York (where she was also casting her first show of the season at the Arena) and watch them go through their audition material. Then she would discuss what she had seen with us. As often as not we all agreed, but in some cases where we had been enthusiastic she was not. These people were placed, as it were, on hold, while we continued to search. In the end, of these doubtfuls, two were cast, and a few more were rejected. The last person to join the cast was auditioned in the composer's apartment, then hurried to Washington on the Metroliner the next day, approved by Zelda that afternoon, and attended the first reading of the script the following morning.

The problems of casting a production such as this were rather unusual. A great deal of the show involves a combination of song and movement, integrated with split second timing. So it was not enough for the actors to be proficient interpreters of character - they had to be able to sing well enough to fill a 500 seat theatre with their sound, and to be almost dancer-like in their movements. In addition to this, as I mentioned in my last newsletter, they had to represent between thirty and forty different characters between them. It's not surprising, then, that by the time we had finished casting we felt we had auditioned practically every young actor in New York.

During this time we were also searching for a musical director, whose job it would be to teach the actors the music, rehearse it with them, and then lead the group of musicians during performances. This also proved difficult, as the right kind of person is hard to find - someone flexible enough to work with actors, and at the same time enough of a disciplinarian to drill them in the sophisticated requirements of the score. Our musical director, like our last actor, was appointed only the weekend before rehearsals.

By the time we all reached Washington the costumes had been approved - a set of designs representing not so much the individual characters in the various stories, as the basic personality of the actor. The set designs had also been approved and ground plans drawn up, from which a replica of the dimensions of the set were taped out on the stage. The set itself is a large tilted dish, with a number of Tarot card figures drawn on its surface; behind this is a semi-circular drop showing a panoramic view of Florence as seen from the south side of the Arno. The actors never leave this dish throughout the show, except to retrieve a costume or a prop pre-set just over the side. The costumes themselves are in three parts - a cape-like overgarment, a basic everyday dress

corresponding to the character of the storyteller, and a further stage of undress for additional transformations.

The idea of these costumes, with their three levels reflects one of the problems I was discussing in my last letter. That is, the actors have to portray not only the young people telling the stories, but also the characters in the stories, as well as the citizens of Florence from whom they are trying to separate themselves. As we have worked on the show over the past weeks, it has become more and more clear to us that the sense of the different layers within a person, the connection of the stories to the inner and outer life of the people telling them, is the most important problem to be solved.

One way we have tried to do this is by providing the actors with a background, an individual history or biography, which at some point in the evening is revealed. We deliberately did not try to make these little biographies tally point by point with the stories the characters told. Rather, I created the biographies out of what I felt about the actors themselves, and then based them on incidents that actually did or might have taken place during the plague in Florence, moulding each one around a nuclear incident that brought him or her to the church of Santa Maria Novella. This is where the costumes contributed to the effect we were trying to create. As far as possible, the basic everyday garment corresponded to the character I had indicated in the miniature biography given to that actor.

In the course of working with these capsule life histories, an interesting thing has happened - the actors have found that the stories they tell do indeed feed off the imagined roles they play in "real" (i.e. Florentine) life, and as I have got to know them better, to the roles they play in real life in the 20th century. In a moment I'll explain how they are dovetailed into the structure of the piece as a whole.

With six stories to be told, each of them representing a different fictional world, and nearly two score characters, it's not surprising that some of our original casting decisions proved wrong once we got into rehearsal. In theory, this would seem to be an easy situation to correct, but in practice it turned out to be one of the most sensitive issues of the production. Each actor arrived with a contract that stipulated he would perform "as cast" - which is to say he could be asked to play all the major roles, or two minor ones, according to the decision of his director. Only one actor (for reasons too arcane to go into here) had a clause specifying which roles he would play.

When we assigned the roles originally, we tried to give everyone a fair share of both major and minor parts, but as the work progressed we began to see places where we had chosen wrong. These wrong choices were corrected quickly in the first few days - but not painlessly. For each adjustment another adjustment had to be made (the domino theory); one actress found her voice unequal to the demands of the music; another actor, who was well suited to a role, was nevertheless so associated in the audience's mind, we felt, with another kind of character that his presence in other role was a distraction. Dealing with each of these changes was always a crisis. Nothing would persuade the actors that the changes were not a reflection on their talents but our attempt to show their talents off to best advantage. They complained that they felt they were constantly auditioning throughout the rehearsal period, at a time when they should have been working. In a sense they were right, and I sympathized with them. On the other hand, when they came to me with these troubles, I felt I had to say that every line I wrote was, in a sense, also being auditioned. Just as I had to be prepared to give up my favorite scenes and ideas under the reality of performance, so they had to be prepared to test themselves against the cold facts of the overall balance of the piece, the chemistry of their acting talents in conjunction with the particular role they were playing. When all is said and done, though, I have to admit that this kind of juggling of actors and parts is a coldblooded business, and not the ideal way to work. It would be better to have a longer rehearsal period, use some of it for improvisation and games, and only cast the piece when everyone felt secure working with their fellow actors. The director, faced with the responsibility of getting the show on within a strictly limited time period, handled these changes briskly and summarily. I would probably not have had the heart to perform that kind of surgery, but no doubt the production as a whole benefited from it.

To speak personally for a moment, the greatest difficulty I've encountered during this period has been to curb my instincts to solve problems as a director would, and to stay within my role as a writer. For instance, whenever we arrived at a place in the script that called for a certain transition to be made, or an action to be performed with a certain timing, it was expected that I should wait for the director to solve the problem in his own time, even though I might have a solution ready as a result of my previous experience in directing the show. In fact, much much of the script was written in such a way that only one way of staging made sense, but the etiquette and politics of the

rehearsal situation make it impossible for the writer to intervene actively and dictate these solutions to the actors as they work. I had to wait till the psychological moment, and then make my suggestions to the director, privately and tactfully, out of earshot of the actors. In theory, all this could have been talked through beforehand, and we did spend many days discussing the script over the course of the summer. But no director likes to have all his work done for him in the script, and nothing prepares you for the minute by minute problems that come up in the course of the work itself. Fortunately, by the time we started rehearsal, the director and I had arrived at a sufficiently clear understanding of each other to be able to speak freely on most issues as they came up. As rehearsals progressed I was able to cross some traditional boundaries without arousing resentment, although there were a few times when the director felt I was feeding him more information than he cared to hear, or when I felt that he was stubbornly pursuing a line of attack on the script that would not work.

As I said, the trickiest maneuver was to dovetail the capsule biographies into the structure of the piece. Here is how we did it, and if you see the production you may judge for yourself how successful we were. The evening begins with the description of the plague I referred to in Newsletter #11. The character describing this event tells us about the despair of the times, which are also referred to in a song given to the 'citizens of Florence', and then goes on to tell how there arrived, on a certain morning, at the church of Santa Maria Novella, a group of young people. The citizens now become these young people, and each is given a line or two, expressing some attitude to the plague, or some antecedent event that has happened to them. So far, though, the audience knows very little about these young people. The narrator, who, it is now clear, is the Priest of the church, starts to tell us something about the young people, and their decision to escape from Florence and go live in the country. He acts, in other words, as a super-Storyteller.

Once the young people arrive in the country, and begin to tell their own stories, this super-Storyteller recedes somewhat into the background. But - and this is the difficult part to bring off - he returns from time to time, to bring us more information about the young people who have been entertaining each other and us. This additional information is conveyed in the form of the miniature biographies, which also include indications of how the Priest/Narrator came to know the person he talking about.

The hardest part of this Chinese box arrangement of storytelling levels (which so far as I know hasn't been tried in the theatre before) was to make clear that the biographies refer not to the characters in the story being told, but to the young person telling it. We tried several methods - lighting, freezing the other actors, a return of musical and sound effects to suggest the church from which they started out. We placed the biographies after each story, on the theory that one is more interested in knowing more about a person you have had a chance to get acquainted with first. All this has had to be integrated with other connective tissue between the stories - reactions to the time of day, to the moral of the story just told, to the mood it engendered, and so forth.

In describing all this, I realize what an elaborate structure, in theory, has been built up. For an audience watching the show, however, there is no time to meditate on these elaborations. It all has to be clear as it happens, when it happens. If, after it is all over, people come out unaware of the technical complexities, then we shall know that we have done our job.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right from the end of the word.

Kenneth Cavander

p.s. Boccaccio plays at the Kreeger Theatre, Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., through December 29th, 1974.

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