

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 14 Verdicts and Prospects

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535 Fifth Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Now that I have been released from my state of imprisonment in Washington I have been able to start, by the end of November, two projects which have been in the planning stage for some time. One is the next step in my exploration of various altered states of consciousness in theatrical form; the other is the application of some myths that interest me, in this case myths of creation, from cultures as far apart as Mexican and Melanesian, before a variety of audiences, mostly young people, both in Connecticut and New Jersey.

The first of these is at present in rehearsal. It is based on one episode out of the many that formed part of my spring workshop, and concerns an attempt we made at that time to displace the center of consciousness from wherever it normally resides to another, specific part of the body - namely the hand. The fable that grew out of this earlier attempt, and which I described in a previous newsletter (#12) was the starting point of this work. In my next newsletter I will give you a fuller report on it, with illustrations, I hope. The myths of creation, now written in script form, are to be performed initially at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, and then will go on tour throughout the state, with a second company taking the play to various schools and communities in New Jersey early next year. The myths I have used are all phantasmagorical versions of the origins of one or other aspect of the universe - the heavenly bodies, or man, music, or, in one case, death itself. As I go into rehearsal with these (which I'm directing myself) I'll discuss the experience, and the problems, and also try to take you on tour with the company.

Meanwhile, it might be interesting to tie up the loose ends of the Washington experience. The play opened to generally good reviews, and the audience reception has been excellent, so that

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the run has been extended through January 19th, 1975. Apart from the general relief at getting over the first night hurdle and the morning-after notices, my main feeling was one of curiosity to see how much, if any, of the ideas I had been playing with in rehearsal had taken hold in the mind of the audience. The critics tended to fasten on what was clever and witty and amusing about the production; one, however, in the Sunday Washington Star-News, was inspired to a long philosophical reflection on the changing psychic conditions of the Middle Ages. In the end he commented that the play seemed to reflect the "breakout of life itself from rigid rules made ridiculous by the sudden prevalence of death." Another critic, in the Baltimore Sun, noticed the triple levels of the characters - but drew no conclusions from this. From informal private polls, and hanging around the auditorium after performances I get the impression that people find the production liberating, and understand very clearly the emotional journey that the young people go through. It takes them a little while to become used to the convention of the miniature biographies, but once they realise that they are being given additional information about the story-tellers, not about the characters in the stories, they find it a welcome change of pace and color.

I would have liked to interview audience members and quote their reactions, but I thought that might spoil their evening. However, I was able to interview some of the actors and tape their feelings, now that the rehearsal period is over, about the various tricks and hoops we have been putting them through.

The actor who plays the Priest, the teller of the whole story, feels that his part is not sufficiently developed.

"I mean, if he's going to be Death he has to have an appropriate role," he said. "If he's going to be the Priest, then he should have a relationship established between him and the young people. But you don't have such a scene. He should say, 'These are the sons and daughters of families I have known for years. They came to the church because they had nowhere else to go, because the city was devastated.' They come to him for answers. They question him. Their lives have been completely destroyed and they ask him these things, but he has no answers ... Then at the end he says, 'I never saw them again'. He's acting out his relationship with these kids, as it happened and as it is happening. He cannot give them answers, and they leave him, they're escaping from something - their responsibilities."

He wanted all these things made explicit in dialogue. I believe they are clear enough, and implicit in the situation. Another actor (who was in my previous production) disagrees, though for different reasons:

"I think this (solution, proposed by the other actor) creates more problems than it solves. We've eliminated one level we had before, the level of the modern-day actors, playing the Florentines playing the stories. Because you see, basically, we're playing a game, and I think the game worked a lot better the last time, when we made it very clear from the beginning that it's a game. What we've done now is we've made believe we're not playing a game. We're really Florentines, with a real problem, and it hasn't been written enough ..."

At this point I asked him whether he thought the bios. added the necessary information, because to write the kind of information he was asking for into a scene would be terribly cumbersome. He replied:

"The only way theatrically you make somebody care about somebody is by letting them experience that person. And the only way they can experience that person is to give that person a scene and something to say for himself. You can't say, 'Here's this guy, this is what he's just gone through.' It might help as a plot twist but it doesn't make people care."

I both agree and disagree with this. I think that it's generally true as a rule of thumb in playwriting, but I wasn't trying to apply the rules in this play. I was trying to create a sense of perspectives - and in doing so I knew that I wasn't necessarily going to satisfy the actor's need for a firm character which he could round out and play to the audience.

Some of the other actors accepted the idea of the bios., but had structural changes they would make:

"My feeling about all of the pieces is that there's a bio. at the end of the first one, and it's repeated again, and that sets a pattern. They (the audience) know there's going to be a bio. ... If there was some way that, in the middle of the most frenetic part of the piece, it could just go zinnng!, and then some kind of column spot could come down and the actor could be isolated, and he just started talking - 'This happened and this happened and then this happened ...' I think the way the bios. are set up just now, at least for the young people, it gives it away. You know there's going to be something tragic. But if it was in the middle of an up and then all of a sudden it was a down, then it would go right back up without any reaction time allowed and I think that, for us, would mean a little more."

This is in fact an idea I'd considered and rejected during the rehearsal period, mainly for lack of time to try it and then restructure a piece if it didn't work. In theory it sounds interesting. In practice, you might do such violence to the audience's concentration that they never recovered. Attention would be all on the next moment, when the action would freeze, instead of on

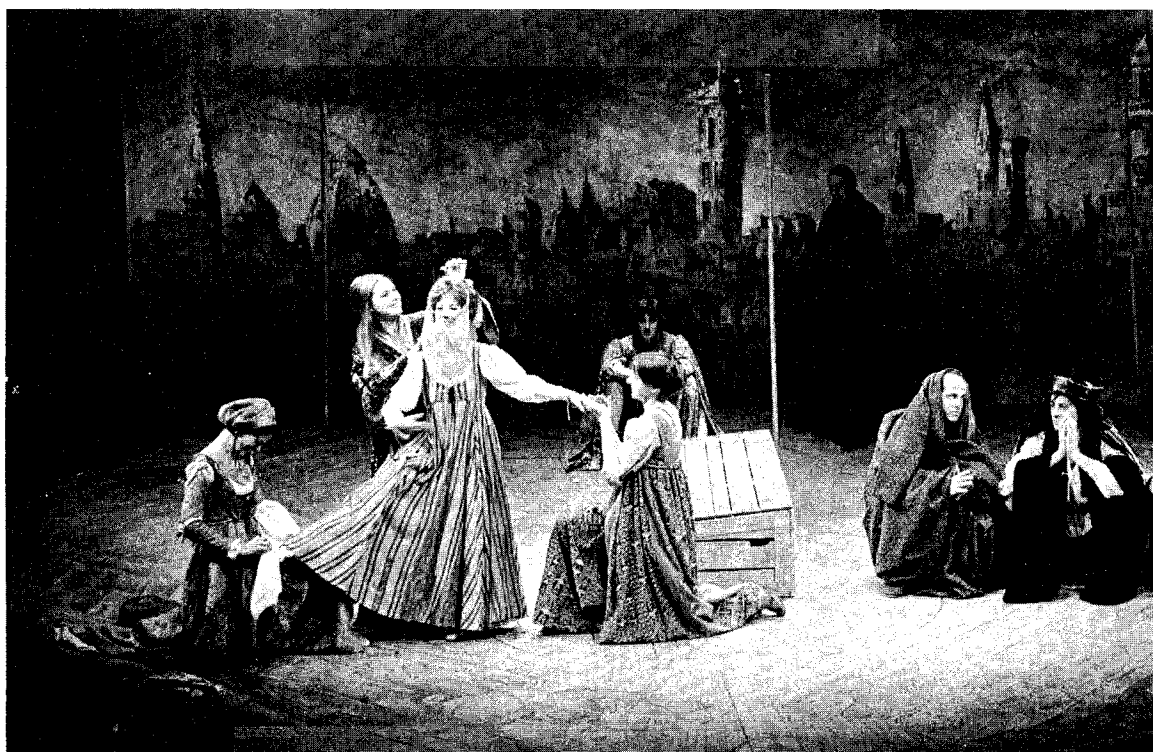
the flow of the story.

I asked them how it affected their playing of the piece knowing that there was some extra information to be given to the audience at the end of each episode. One actress said:

"What I've done is personalize the bio. If I were this woman who had been attacked, I would not consciously be thinking of those emotions. I am trying to escape them in telling the story. It's like acting out a wonderful dream. And in the story itself there are not really, unless I'm missing them, perfect parallels with the bio. The audience of course recognizes when he (the Priest) says ..." studied classical Arabic" that that woman is bright. They obviously see a connection. Now I'm not consciously acting that ..."

I asked her about the other actor's suggestion for a bio in the middle of the story.

"It would probably reinforce for the audience and the actor the need to tell the tale. It would make it like Brecht. When you're watching Mother Courage pulling that wagon around, you're also watching the actress struggling to pull this thing after her. If the bio. came in the middle the audience would be watching that tale, and then see the young person striving to tell the tale - it would add that level."



The picture on the previous page illustrates the three levels very clearly. A story is just beginning (set in Turkey, hence the eastern bias of the costumes, which the actors have created a moment before). The girl in the veil has started to tell the story, turning her head around to make a veil. Downstage are some of the characters who will join her in telling the story. Upstage center, watching the action, is one of the 'Young People' who has not yet joined in and become a character in the story. He exists in a different world, on a different level. Standing upstage left of him, to stage left of one of the poles, is the Priest figure, who exists in yet a third world, the world of the Plague which he has created through his narration at the beginning, and to which he will return at the end of this story, by telling us something about the girl downstage right of center, who is about to enact her tale. You can see a variation of this effect in the following picture.



The scene takes place in "The Pot of Basil", a famous story which has been told over and over since Boccaccio's day (Keats wrote a narrative poem on it), about a girl whose lover is killed by her three jealous brothers (it takes place in Sicily). The girl doesn't understand why her lover never returns from an outing in the country with her three brothers; in fact they have murdered him and buried his body in a glade in the forest. One night he appears to her in a dream and leads her to the place of the murder. She isn't strong enough to pick up the body, but she manages to sever the head, which she takes home, and plants in a large urn used for growing basil. The basil sprouts tall, and she spends all day with the urn, patiently watching it, weeping over it. Eventually her brothers become suspicious, take the pot away, discover the head, and realize that their crime is known. They leave town. But the girl dies. In the picture the girl is in the forest. Her long hair - or one strand of it - has been transformed into a knife, with which she is about to cut the head off the corpse. The three brothers, who are dye merchants, are stirring a vat of dye in the background. They are in a different time scale from the girl - moving, at work, functioning as an animated backdrop to the foreground action. Half hidden in the shadows, two young people watch. They have nothing to do with the story, and do not become characters in it. But at the end, after it is over, they will have been affected by it, and this will change their approach to the next part of the evening.

Juggling with an audience's sense of time is one of the most interesting aspects of this kind of work. You can, for instance, have one character talk to another of something in the future and then have the second character go into that scene which is about to happen, play it out with a third character, while at the same time the first character continues to describe, or ask for, or give orders about, the event that is going to take place. So you can talk about something in one time-continuum and see it happening in another, simultaneously. It's a lot less complicated to do than to describe, and we do it several times in this production. You can see an example of it in the picture on the next page. It is an incident from a story in which a young woman is trying to fulfil the conditions set by a man she is in love with for agreeing to marry her. He will marry her, he says, on the day she can show him his child in her arms. She fulfils the conditions by an age-old device, substituting herself in a dark room for another woman the man is in love with. (It's the basis for Measure for Measure, for instance.) In this scene the heroine has found an accomplice, and is instructing her in what she has to say and do in order to bring the man to her room. As she does so, the scene happens. In the picture one of the women is seen by the man, the other is not. The hand he is kissing does not belong to the woman he thinks it belongs to... So there is a real and a ghost person in the scene with him: the woman he sees and believes he wants; the woman he does not see

and who thinks she knows what he really wants. Can you tell which is which?



For the answer, see the show.

Best wishes

Kenneth.

Kenneth Cavander

