

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 15 - Five Finger Exercise

450 Humphrey Street
New Haven
Connecticut 06511

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

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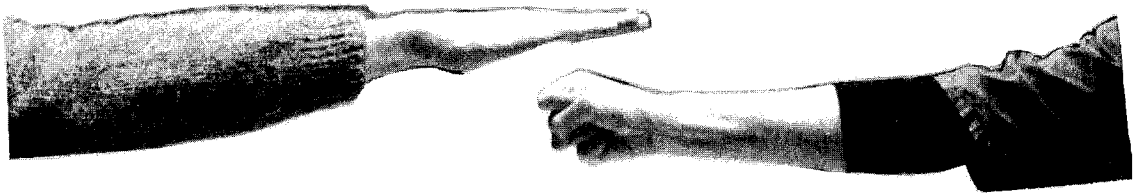
Dear Mr. Nolte,

In my last newsletter I mentioned the research I was beginning into finding a theatrical form for one of the images that formed themselves in the course of the spring workshops, and which I later wrote out as a little fable about a hand that developed an independent consciousness. I spent the first few weeks of the past month with a group of actors, most of them members of my original laboratory, the rest from the company I worked with in the summer at Williamstown, translating the content of that story into actions, some of them improvised, some based on set games, others programed by me.

We started with no other purpose than to give ourselves a certain number of sacrosanct hours in which to work, hours which could not be taken away by prior appointments, auditions, or carelessness. (I discovered in the spring how debilitating it was to the morale of everyone if we didn't impose that kind of discipline on ourselves, so I made it a condition of participation that the actor should commit himself or herself to every one of those hours - and they all managed to keep the commitment.) As I said, we started with a limited goal, one of exploration, to see how far we would get in the time, but after the first session, on one of those impulses that has no single source but seems to arise out of some collective subsoil of agreement, we decided to make the last two hours of the final meeting a public performance, to which anyone who cared to could come. This decision gave all our work a different slant, and took it out of the realm of pure research, but it turned out to be very important for me personally, as it clarified in a completely unexpected way what direction I should go in during the next few months. I'll return to this later, but first let me tell you how we went about the work - and describe (and illustrate) some of the results.

My starting point was the story, but before I gave it to the actors I wanted to see whether the kind of experiences I had imagined in the course of writing up the fable would occur to anyone else but me, or whether I was pursuing some private fantasy of my own that no one else could possibly share. So I started with a series of exercises, in which I invited the actors to try a number of experiments. These were:

- 1) To remind themselves of as many ordinary phrases and words of command, exhortation, judgment, etc., that could be expressed simply with the hand, or one of its fingers, without making use of other parts of the body and without becoming too ethnic or esoteric - a vocabulary for a language of the hand that would be more or less universally accepted. We came up with about thirty comments in this vocabulary in a short time.
- 2) A repeat of the experiment I had done in the spring of locating the source of the spoken word "I" in the hand.
- 3) An exercise in which one person sat in the center, with the others grouped around, and listened to descriptions of the scene, himself or herself included in the scene, as perceived by someone sitting to the side, in back of, or in front of the person listening. This description had to be as precise, vivid, and spatially oriented as possible. The person listening was not allowed to close his or her eyes, but was required to visualise the picture as described by someone sitting, say, behind them, and at the same time be fully aware of whatever was occupying their field of vision at that moment.
- 4) The actor was to let his or her hand take any journey it wanted, go anywhere, and was to allow the hand to do that without maintaining the usual conscious control over its actions.
- 5) The actors were divided into two groups, with one in the middle. Each group was given a hand, and was to give it instructions. Then the two groups were pitted against each other in a contest or competition which was to be played out as a miniature drama between the two hands. The actor whose hands they were had to stay out of the contest as far as possible, simply letting his hands respond to the orders given.
- 6) Play the children's game of STONE/SCISSORS/PAPER. (For those who have never played this game, it consists in a simple contest decided by chance. Two players simultaneously and independently choose to make one of three possible shapes. Two look like this:



The hand on the left has made the shape for paper. The hand on the right, stone. Since paper covers stone, left hand wins. If the right hand had made scissors (a V sign), it would have won, since scissors cut paper; and if the hand on the left had made the scissors sign, again the hand on the right would have won, since stone blunts scissors.

The purpose of these exercises was to see how many, if any, of the experiences imagined by me in the course of conceiving the fable could be had by the actors, spontaneously and without any outside prompting. Most of them were able to create a sense that they were watching their hand in a detached way, without interfering in its activity. They attributed characteristics to it - the hand was noble, arrogant, childlike, sycophantic, etc. They discovered that they could see themselves from outside, and this was both exhilarating and fragmenting. Some of them described it as a feeling of perceiving everything in two dimensions, with proportions jumbled, as in a medieval painting; for others, the image they saw was sectioned, with blank areas. Everyone, at one point or another, had a sensation of warmth or energy in his hand. And the exercises as a whole produced a consensus, which I found very interesting.

This consensus was that everything we had done amounted to a variation on a single theme - the question of whether, and how much, to let go, to give up control, to relinquish authority to another, less rational center. Different people reacted in different ways, of course, and out of this we found a number of 'characters', or characteristic attitudes:

- The one who does it as a joke - although at a certain point you wonder how much of a joke it is for him.
- The one who gets infected by the experience, till it happens to him against his will and he can't stop it.
- The one who finds it exhilarating and deliberately encourages it even to the point of risking more than he ought.

- The one who wants the experience desperately but can't have it no matter how hard he tries.

- The one who refuses to have anything to do with it because he believes in it too much and he thinks it is dangerous.

These attitudes became mixed and combined in the course of working, but each of the performers found one with which he felt most comfortable and used it as a dominant theme.

The question of whether or not to 'let go' comes down, I think, to another, more frightening issue. From a certain point of view, the decision to let go rational control is a choice in favor of oblivion, annihilation. So the apparently innocent game of ascribing an "I" to the hand started to take on a serious coloring, one which in the simplest dramatic terms gave a suspense to the work: how far dare you go?

The creation of this suspense involved an effort on the part of the actors which paid off as an emotional energy generated right from the start of the piece. We spent some time discussing where this energy could come from, and how it should be expressed, and in the end we settled on something which in turn provided the clue to the way a more elaborate piece might be done in the future. I would like to reserve discussion of this till later on, as it will make more sense in the light of the episodes that I'm about to describe, and also leads naturally into the work I'm currently doing for the Long Wharf Theatre here in New Haven.

Once the actors had had a taste of the kind of subjective experiences the story, or fable, could stimulate in them, I gave them the literary form of it, along with a rough breakdown in terms of miniature scenes, or stages along the way. These were expressed in lines of dialogue, unattributed. I left it to the actors to find a line they liked, and which they felt they could express in terms of the character they had chosen; of course more than one actor could choose the same line, giving it different readings and intentions. A typical group of lines would run as follows:

- It can see all around you.
- You can float around your own body.
- NO, I don't want to.
- It uses your eyes, the way you use your eyes.
- It uses your mouth to say "I", but it says "I", not you.

- Can you get back?
- You can go further if you want to.
- Dare you?
- Careful.

I had broken down the narrative into five sections. In the first, a person experienced and explored the shift of viewpoint that came about when consciousness was placed in the hand. In the second, a character was taken on a journey by his hand, following wherever it wished to go, however inconvenient. In the third, it was somehow to be demonstrated that the hand was wiser, more intelligent, than its owner. In the fourth, its power begins to be felt. In the fifth, the conflict between the hand and its owner becomes overt.

We spent a considerable amount of time with each of these sections, improvising in a more concentrated way than we had at the beginning but trying to incorporate the original experiences into this stage of the work, which was, in fact, much more like a conventional rehearsal process. It led to some very interesting moments. In one, for instance, the actor found his hand traveling into his own shoe, which he had taken off earlier in the day. We eventually built this into a set piece in the course of the next few days, because it seemed to contain the right mixture of the comic and the sinister which we were trying to create - or rather, which seemed to be creating itself. This became the final version of section two, when the hand takes a journey - an early stage in which looked like this.



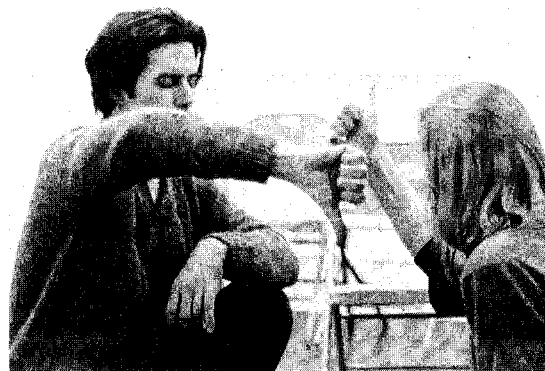
Leading to this.

In the first illustration, on the previous page, the actor is half scared, half exhilarated, by what is happening. In the second, he is more detached, letting his hand go where it will.



An example of the way the original exercises which I described on page 2 became transformed is the third section, in which the hand's superior intelligence is shown. We adapted the stone/scissors/paper game, and used, instead of the three signs to which it restricted the players, as many of the items in the vocabulary of hand gestures as the actors could remember. Then, instead of playing the game with eyes open, the actors played it with eyes shut. The results were fascinating. Often the two hands would make identical patterns. At others, a whole series of mirroring and echoing images. Often we got the impression that the hands really were carrying on a private dialogue of their own, independent of their owners' consciousnesses. Here are a few of the juxtapositions that turned up, out of many hundreds.





The actors, as you can see, had no idea what their hands were doing in relation to the other hand. For the audience watching, though, the effect was by turns funny, eerie, and like a strange kind of sporting event. One became very involved in seeing which combination would come up next, and people read in to the successive statements the hands made a whole miniature drama. We also found that it worked much less well (i.e. the combinations were less interesting, more fortuitous) if the players had not been warmed up beforehand. The best warmup, we discovered, was to play through some of the earlier stages of the drama up to the moment when the hands start their 'conversation'.

Eventually, after some time spent working on each of the episodes in this way, we arrived at a set series of actions, lines which were attributed firmly to the actors, and some quite complicated blocking - in fact, a small play lasting about 15 or 20 minutes. The actors learnt their lines, and began to run it through

technically, while I tried to see what the separate stages might add up to for a completely unprepared audience.

The encouraging thing about that performance in front of an audience was how few surprises there were. Most of the moments when I had predicted a reaction of one kind or another turned out much as I had expected. Everyone was curious about the sensation of seeing yourself from a variety of vantage points outside the body. The episode in which the hand took its owner on a journey took people by surprise at first - they couldn't believe it was really going to happen and when it did they were delighted. The game based on stone/scissors/paper kept them in suspense and engaged them like spectators at a sporting event. Only at the end did I feel their attention wandering, and this slackening of the tension was connected, I think, to the problem of how to begin the piece.

That problem is, stated in its simplest terms, to answer the question: Who are these performers and what do they think they're doing? The solution we settled on - and tried out last month - was a step, a very tentative first step, towards creating a technique for achieving in a theatrical, consciously created situation something which has the unpredictability of life at certain moments of crisis and extra effort. That is, we hoped to persuade the audience that there existed uncharted areas in the fictional situation, a danger zone into which, at any moment, any one might stray; and at the same time we wanted to make it clear that this danger zone was the very reason why we were performing, that the fiction was only a means, a tool for reaching another state, a method of invoking other forces.

As I said, the necessity for dealing with this problem in very concrete terms led me to a clear idea of what the next stage should be. In my next newsletter I'll take up this question in greater detail, and add some more thoughts on the subject that have been suggested by the work I was doing in the latter part of the month, at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, when I put into rehearsal some very abstract myths of creation and the origins of things, to be presented to young people here and in schools around Connecticut and New Jersey.

Sincerely,

Kenneth.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York January 7, 1975

