INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 16 - Creation Myths

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February 5th 1975

Dear Mr. Nolte

At the end of my last newsletter I was telling you about the problem of creating for an audience the sense of danger and risk that would make it clear we were using a fiction as a means to another state of consciousness, not as an end in itself.

The solution we tried last December was only partially successful. We began in the most casual way possible, using naturalistic dialogue, the actors representing a group of people about to undertake something that might be hazardous, but also enthralling. Each had a character, and the fiction was made (deliberately) as close to reality as possible, but we didn't try to clarify for the audience whether this was part of the performance or not. We were probably too well rehearsed, too smooth in sliding into the actual experiments. By rehearsing it we had turned it into something to be observed, not shared, taken off the rough edges that would have created the friction of suspense. The next time, I decided, we would have to raise the stakes, inviting the audience into our own uncertainty, presenting them, not with the destination, but with the journey, including the possibilities of unexpected detours. Of course there have to be signposts; but there may also be booby traps.

Normally an audience makes the distinction automatically between the character and the performer. If the character dies, the performer can still live. For the purpose of the next stage of the work I want (among other things) to blur this distinction, and interestingly enough, when I began work later in the month at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, staging a play for their Young People's Theatre, I found that the company had been given a new direction since I last worked there, a direction that converged with my own interests of the moment.

Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow investigating our past and present mythologies and their capacity to be used in theatrical form as an aid in self-transformation.

The Long Wharf Theatre is one of the most active regional theatres in the east, sending productions regularly to Broadway (THE CHANGING ROOM and THE NATIONAL HEALTH are two of the most recent) and with a subscription audience of over 80% of capacity for its season. I had done a production for the Young People's Theatre there before. Since then there had been two changes of Artistic Director, and with the latest, there had arrived a new policy, represented by the hiring of an Associate Director called Bill Carpenter, whose special interests were in the use of theatre as a tool in education and therapy. Carpenter's organizing image, as he puts it, is the clown, and you may like to hear some of his ideas, as he expressed them in a recent conversation. I think they are indicative of a general movement (of which my own work is a part) that is gathering force in the professional theatre.

"A lot of things I feel about theatre," says Carpenter, "stem from the fact that actor creativity has been just about completely bred out of it. One of my interests is establishing a creative community art form, and the clown troupe is one way. A clown is really an archetypal image, and it helps traditionally trained actors to organize that tradition and at the same time bring imagery and improvisational material up out of themselves.... The Clown mask is a liberating thing because you can get behind masks and talk about the fear, and you can come out from behind a mask and talk about courage - and not necessarily with your mouth ... A clown is a way of representing yourself to the world. A persona. But underneath it all is the place from which those choices come... The first set of choices I find that adults make is to become children. Always. ...I want in my workshop to explore children's concepts of time, and a proscenium theatre is the least likely setting for the kind of work I like to do. But part of that work is also trying to carry the message of sharing into all spaces - including proscenium theatres ... The most positive things children have said about our show (the first show of the season, based on the above concepts) is that the actors are not out there pretending to be the King and the Queen, but came across as experienced human beings with something we want to share with you ... We go to the edge of the earth, the edge of the universe, in the show, and that means we have individually and collectively a universe and our job as actors is to get out to the edge of that universe and look for the boundaries ... If you want to see a finished product all polished and honed right to the sharpest edge, go to the movies ... In this age of movies and TV why else do you go to the theatre, except to participate in a human event, including the human risk of failure?"

Carpenter's aesthetic, and the kinds of demands he was making on the company, are very similar in spirit to my own - though he

is more overtly concerned with practical applications of the theory. He works, for instance, with disturbed children and adults in state institutions. On the other hand I have always maintained that healing was one of the primary benefits of an effective theatre, so I looked forward to working with the company - although I was staying away (for scheduling reasons) from strict improvisation. Instead I was to use a script, based on a series of myths of creation, some ancient, one new, some from the west, others from as far away as Melanesia.

One of the reasons I wanted to try out these stories was that I have seen many shows for children, and know that it is relatively easy to work a young audience up to a hysterical pitch of excitement. What is far more difficult to achieve than the shrieks and the cheers is silence. I wanted to see whether, using only visual images and very spare, non-naturalistic stories, I could hold a young audience for up to an hour in a theatre. I was taking some risks. The Long Wharf had recently accepted a large grant from a program called IMPACT, operating in New Jersey, which was intended to bring artists and performers into the schools in the state school system. This meant that a second company had to be formed, as my show had been selected as the one to go to New Jersey, and performances were due to start there at the same time as I was opening my version of it in New Haven. The IMPACT representative was concerned about what they were going to see, and even before I went into rehearsal I was warned that this show would be subjected to special scrutiny for its suitability for the young citizens of New Jersey.

Of the stories I used, only one, "How the Elephant Got its Trunk," by Rudyard Kipling, was modern, or even a children's story. I used it as a change of pace and color, but even this relatively lighthearted episode took on another meaning in the context of the other stories.

These others were extremely abstract. The nearest equivalent in modern literature would be the short plays of Samuel Beckett. Usually they took place in a void, or in a world with no people; they dealt in cosmic matters almost casually. The first, originally told by the Thompson Indians of the Pacific Northwest, described the creation of the universe out of a family of primordial beings, whose constant bickering and recriminations so irritated Old One, a patriarchal authority figure, that he turned them all into heavenly bodies - making one the sun, another the earth, the rest planets and stars. Here the metaphor of a miniature family, existing in chaos, and transformed into the orderly collaboration of the galaxies, gave the actors something concrete to work with.

The next story, however, did not. It concerned the creation of man, and comes from Winnebago Indian folk lore. It took place in a totally barren universe, inhabited by only one creature, Earthmaker. Earthmaker seems capricious and rather forgetful. Occasionally, for no apparent reason, he (or she, or it) falls asleep. Then, on waking up, Earthmaker weeps. Finally, to keep itself company, Earthmaker creates man, but forgets to give man a mind. Eventually Earthmaker realizes its mistake, but still the new toy doesn't work. Piece by piece the elements that go to make up a human being are installed in the new creature, until at last man as we know him is complete. In my version, Earthmaker, was bisexual, represented by two disembodied heads, one a woman's, the other a man's. Everything else had to be represented by sounds, and by the gestures of two sets of hands that emerged from parts of the set that looked like volcanic rocks. The first man had only one word - "Why?" (In my version the first man is a woman).

As the third story turned out to be the most controversial - at least with the New Jersey representative of IMPACT, and is the shortest, I'll reproduce it in full. It comes from Melanesia, and is played out using almost straight narrative, with only a few lines of dialogue.

NARRATOR:
(becoming, as he speaks, a figure of Death)

In the beginning, there was no such thing as death. Leaves did not turn brown and fall off the trees, animals did not seek shelter in a secret part of the forest and turn cold and stiff, parents and grandparents did not get sick and die and have to be buried ...

MAN #1:
(transforming)

When a young man became old, and sensed the approach of death, he would go to the great river, wash himself in its waters, and shed his skin like a snake, or a crab ...

(Action has been performed, and as MAN #1 bends down to bathe his face in the river - a blue semi-transparent cloth - MAN #2 rises up in his place, while MAN #1 goes underneath the 'river')

MAN #2
(leaving 'river')

And came out young again.

(As MAN #2 comes out of the river he encounters figure of Death but waves him away)

MAN #2

Not yet.

(Death turns towards a WOMAN (#1) with her child)

WOMAN #1:

One day, a woman who was getting old thought it was time she became young again, so she left her child and went to the great river to shed her skin.

(Action as before)

WOMAN #2:

When she came out, all young and new, she was so beautiful that she paused for a moment to admire her reflection in the water. She was really beautiful.

WOMAN #1:

As she did so the skin she had cast off floated away down the river and got caught on a branch. She noticed it there ...

(A moment of recognition between the 'new' WOMAN and her 'skin', before she disowns it)

WOMAN #2:

... but she did not say goodbye to it.

(WOMAN #2 goes over the CHILD)

(CHILD sees her, and jumps up, backing away with a frightened cry)

WOMAN #2:

Come here.

CHILD:

No!

(CHILD continues to back off, WOMAN #2 follows. Meanwhile ...)

CHILD:

Don't come near me.

WOMAN #2:

What's the matter?

CHILD:

Go away ...

WOMAN #2:

Come here ...

(pursues CHILD)

Come here, I said!

(finally corners CHILD)

Now what is it? What's the matter?

CHILD:

You're not my mother.

WOMAN #2:

I am your mother. But I became young and beautiful again.

CHILD:

You don't look like my mother. I liked the way my mother looked.

(CHILD makes good her escape.

WOMAN #2 gives up)

WOMAN #2:

What should she do? If she kept her new skin she would lose her child ... If she went back to her old skin she would lose her youth and ...

(Death walks by. They exchange glances
- no need to finish the sentence)

And she was so beautiful.

(WOMAN #2 returns to the river,
looks at her reflection)

So beautiful.

(She looks at her old 'skin',
still caught on the branch)

WOMAN #2:

She loved being young.

(Looks at WOMAN #1, who acknowledges the beauty of her younger self, then looks at CHILD)

But she loved her child more.

(Return to the river.

WOMAN #1 substitutes for WOMAN #2, gets out of the river and is recognised and welcomed by her CHILD)

WOMAN #1:

Ever since then people have kept their skins - and their children.

The story has a very slow and even rhythm in performance, punctuated only by the moment of confusion and pursuit when the CHILD runs away from her 'young' mother. There are no jokes, and the action is confined to one or two simple, formal gestures. But by one of those accidents that I can never explain it has a a dramatic 'rightness' that we all sensed, even in rehearsal. The question was, how would children react to it?

The IMPACT representative singled out this story for special criticism when she saw it in script form. She felt it was not suitable for children - though since her objections always reached me second hand I was never able to find out exactly why she thought that. I think it was principally the subject matter - although she may also have had doubts about its capacity to hold a young audience, some of whom may have been no more than five years old.

I had the same doubts, but I liked the story so much that I decided to persist with it. When it came to performance in front of a mixed audience of adults and children at the Long Wharf, and later to a predominantly young audience in schools, we found that it was the one story that commanded almost total silence. I can't analyse the reasons, and questioning the audience has produced no results; children remember vividly episodes and characters and actions from the other parts of the play, but when I quiz them about this one even my own children, who have

seen it more than half a dozen times, don't seem to recall anything about it. Not that they are frightened, or bored. It simply seems to go to a level for which they have as yet no language.

In spite of the obvious holding power of the piece, the IMPACT representative was not satisfied, and kept up the pressure. When the time came for the second company to complete its rehearsal period, and the days were becoming crowded, the director of the "New Jersey" version decided to make a virtue out of a necessity and drop it from the production - to save himself time, he said, but he admitted it also helped to mollify the IMPACT official. On the two occasions I met her, she was very reasonable and low-key about this, and other parts of the show, which she thought was too sophisticated for children. I said I thought it was good for children to have questions raised, and to be introduced to images and concepts that were not already familiar from TV and conventional children's books. She said she absolutely agreed and then went on to tell me, "But it's the teachers. The teachers, you see, they aren't always up to explaining things very well. They need to have everything spelled out for them, and it's hard for them to answer questions from the children about this kind of thing ... " I had no answer to that.

Subsequently, I talked to a number of schools which our version of the play had visited in New Jersey (before the second company was ready for the road), and found no such qualms on the part of the schools themselves. One principal remarked that the story seemed to be accepted as an alternative version to the normal explanations of life and death (which was exactly what I had hoped would emerge); another said that we were right to present it head on, as many children had lost parents and asked those questions anyway ... and so on. Meanwhile, it continues to appear in the version being performed at the Long Wharf and in Connecticut.

The other two stories were a contrast - in length and in tone. One was a Just So story by Kipling, about the origin of the Elephant's trunk, and was played as farce, though there was a serious aspect in the narrative line, as the Elephant (whose nose became long by being caught in the jaws of the Crocodile) arrived at its predicament by asking "Why?" - a question that was discouraged by everyone, family, friends, and authorities alike. Asking why leads you into danger, but (in this case) it also provided the asker with a useful new appendage, which could be used for all kinds of tasks, including the meting out of rough justice on those who had originally discouraged asking questions at all.

The last story - the Sun's Musicians - was taken from a 16th century Nahua manuscript of pre-Colombian Mexico. It described the origin of music through a bargain struck between the God of the Earth and the God of the Sun, using the Wind as intermediary. It allowed me to end the show with color, music, and dance, though in itself it probably deserved longer and more elaborate treatment.

But why do these stories at all, except as mildly fantastic entertainment? Especially as they all purported to give explanations for phenomena that nowadays are treated as the exclusive domain of rationalistic science - the origins of man, the appearance of an animal. I thought this could be a valid objection to these stories, or the straightforward telling of them, so I introduced another element - a framework set firmly in contemporary society. This framework was provided by a group of people, who were all victims of the current economic turmoil. They had all lost their jobs, and they were looking for a home. They arrive at the place where the action of the play takes place - whether theatre, school, whatever space was being used, and start to set up house there. But before they have entered, the place has been claimed by someone - or something - else, represented by a mysterious figure, a man, dressed in colorful, non-contemporary costume, who sings and plays a flute. On the arrival of the other characters this person reappears and proceeds to interrogate them. He asks only one question, the question 'why?', and in their attempts to answer this question, starting from the most trivial beginnings, they are brought to the ultimate questions of the universe, which in turn leads into the first story, HEAVENLY BODIES.

You will remember that this story concerned a family of beings at odds with each other, who were gradually brought back to harmony by the intervention of a cosmic father-figure. This mythical narrative is elicited from the group of unemployed contemporary characters by the mysterious musician, using first his insistent 'why?'s, then his music.

The creation of this musician character was at first an almost arbitrary act, except that it 'felt' right. Later, (after the play was on the stage, in fact) I came to see that it had a certain logic. He had started the show by creating a space that was subject to his will and influence. He carried a musical instrument, and sang. Then he left, promising to return. Then, a group of people came in, all concerned about practical problems, how to live, where to stay. They are forced to improvise, because their everyday lives have come to pieces. But they are also blinkered by their predicament,

they don't realise what kind of place they've arrived at.

Once in this space, though, they invoke its power, and this power is embodied in the musician whose questions force them to stop, reflect, look deeper; and eventually he brings to the surface their disagreements and doubts. They start to argue about how the universe began. From thinking they can answer his questions easily they slide into conflict with each other over whose theory is right. The friction provides the impulse that lifts them into the first story, in which their dissension becomes a metaphor for a universe in chaos, brought into harmony with itself by a power that insists they all co-operate with each other.

From that moment the musician has them in his spell, and each story raises further questions which in turn have to be answered, and give rise to another story. Challenging them, tricking them, causing discord, he unlocks the dreams they have stored away and forgotten, dreams that could help them come to terms with their present situation. In the end ... the ending was never satisfactory. The music created in the course of the legend from Mexico transforms the people one last time, and they become all music, dancers and players and singers, and they leave, never returning to their 'real' world. But I would have preferred some indication that they had incorporated this change, or that -alternatively - they have become absorbed entirely into the realm dominated by the musician. There was no time to work this out in rehearsal, and the problem never presented itself to me clearly until I had started work with the actors.

None of this was conscious at the time, nor do I think the young audiences understood any of it in this way. It would have been interesting to have followed up the performances with discussions that presented the children with this interpretation in one way or another. They were mystified by the musician character, though not troubled by him. The teachers, as far as I could see, dutifully read up on myths beforehand, but didn't know what to say about them, beyond using them as illustrations of different cultures. Our schedule never permitted us to linger in the classrooms, and the actors were always anxious to get home, but I hope that some of the children got the idea that there can be more than one answer to the question why.

Once again I had found myself, as in Boccaccio, dealing with stories-within-stories, and different layers within the characters. This time the stories came out of a contemporary situation, yet were as far away as possible from it. In another sense, though, they all had to do with one contemporary issue - what has happened,

in the midst of our present obsession with solving practical problems, to another side of our nature which, though apparently not at all practical, might help with the solution?

The problem is, to pose this question in such a way that it does not become merely a fictional conceit, but something that engages an audience with real suspense and identification. That is where the distinction between performer and person becomes crucial, and blurring it seems to be one possible line of approach. "Character", like Bill Carpenter's "clown", becomes a mask, a persona, that enables the human being (not just the actor) to penetrate areas normally closed off by the barriers we erect in order to get on with our everyday lives. Breaking down those barriers can be an effort. And scarey. For then our precarious condition is revealed. As we watch a tightrope walker we know that his training and skill will get him to the other side. Nonetheless, we can see the abyss beneath him, and if he's a good performer he takes us along on his journey.

Sincerely,

Kenneth.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on February 10, 1975.