

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 17 - Short Pieces and Ceremonies

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Dear Mr. Nolte

Two things are occupying me this spring (apart from the constant search for a space). They are connected, though for the time being I am trying to keep them separate in my mind. These twin projects, which will occupy the next four months, are (i) a continuation of the work interrupted last December by the experiment with myths of creation, and (ii) an expanded version of the legends of King Arthur, which I presented at Williamstown last summer.

The Arthurian legends will be seen in New York, as part of a series presented by Theatre at St. Clements, in June. The other work is more open-ended and I'm not trying to hurry it into production. I'd like to reserve for later newsletters the work I've been doing on the Arthurian project and concentrate this time on what I've been finding out in the past weeks as I went ahead with the other, more esoteric side of my activities.

Last December (Newsletter #15) I formed the conviction that the best way to proceed was not to keep in the shadows so much, but to invite the participation of strangers from time to time. This hunch of mine made me begin last month with the specific intention of finding out more about the process involved, what would be needed, and what the pitfalls were. I had two objectives. One was to expand the number of experiments being tried - in the hopes of finding a form for them, perhaps a ceremonial form; the other was to include more actors in the process, though not necessarily at the same time, as I wanted to have a larger pool of performers from which to draw.

Starting in early February, then, and gradually increasing the

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tempo of work, I had put together by the end of the month a series of short pieces, amounting to about forty five minutes of performance time, all of which in some way or other represented an inner state that could be acted out or expressed in words. Some of them I wouldn't wish to put in permanent form yet; others were non-verbal or improvised and not susceptible to a script. Since they are of varying degrees of effectiveness, and none of them is in any sense a finished work, I won't reproduce them here. Instead, I'd like to talk about the intentions behind the creation of each of them, and then to give you some idea of how they worked - both on the actors and on those who saw them - and where the whole experience left us.

I shall follow the routine I originally intended to use when the pieces were performed - i.e. explain what we were trying to do almost as if we were in a rehearsal situation.

Lighting was fluorescent, very restless and bright and white, we began with an attempt to bring about a sense of alertness and repose, a change in the psychic atmosphere between those watching and the performers. We began as follows:

One of the performers instructs the others to become "sensors", acutely sensitive to the slightest movement, in him and in others - the lifting of an eyebrow, breathing, a finger raised. They are to translate any of these movements into a vastly magnified gesture of their own. Then he takes his place in the audience, facing them. The task of the observer, and by extension of the audience, was to make the "sensors" absolutely still. This could only be done, of course, by their becoming absolutely still themselves.

The effects of this exercise are always the same: to create a tense membrane of psychic energy between observers and observed, and as you play it you discover some interesting things. As audience, it is easier not to focus on any one of the actors, or indeed on anything at all around you. So you become detached, objective. You have to find a position that is relaxed and imposes no strain that will make you want to shift. You realise how restless your body normally is and how the connection works between physical and mental stillness. Since the actors are responding to even the faintest movement, even your breathing has to be brought under control, to become regular and not too shallow, or else you discover that you're drawing in a large lungful of air and the "sensors" start to vibrate and shiver all over again just when you thought you'd got them to be quiet.

Defocussing. Muscular harmony and balance. Control of breathing. All techniques, as it happens, of eastern disciplines for meditation. But this is not the premise from which we had started - to im-

itate eastern disciplines. We had tried to create an invisible connection, what I can only describe as a thickening of the atmosphere, between witnesses and performers - without harnessing any dramatic content to the task.

Next, I tried something we had started work on last year - an actor speaking what was in part a description of a state of mind, and at the same time a suggestion that he or she was about to experience that state of mind. By varying grammar in unexpected ways, placing stress on the use of "you" in different contexts, the actor was to let the audience understand, subliminally if possible, that his state of mind was becoming theirs. The words kept coiling back on themselves. On the one hand they seemed to be asserting the unique reality of the tangible here and now, but this was expressed in such a way as to evoke the sense that the here and now was slipping away and that there was another reality approaching, one that was not sensed yet, or even defined, but which therefore made the present reality all the more desirable, and urging the person to hold on lest they slip away into that other reality as it now seemed they were doing ...

The speech, which went on for about three minutes, could have a very disorienting effect, especially in intimate low-key surroundings. The danger is that it can sound merely repetitive; the listener's thoughts drift, and he starts to argue with the sense of the words instead of being ^{cued} along by them. The person acting it has a choice. He can be uninvolved, dispassionate; or he can 'act', expressing some of the emotions that the speech evokes for them, and in that way try to draw the audience along. I have a feeling that the second is the wrong way, though it's the way the actor chose when we did it publicly. I think that emotion, instead of involving the audience, alienates them for some reason. By contrast, in the sessions when we had done it alone, or with only one or two strangers, the speech became detached from the speaker, and was more effective.

According to many ancient beliefs, there is a state between life and death when a person is between two worlds, neither alive nor dead. In Tibetan Buddhism it is called Bardo. The ghost of the dead person is able to observe the world, but not partake in it. We imagined that to such a being, in a state of Bardo, the events of this world would seem very different, passing by at great speed perhaps, or merging into each other with kaleidoscopic swiftness. To represent this feeling we adapted a simple theatre game, which consists in starting a gesture, then a second actor picks up the gesture and transforms it into another. Usually this exercise is

played with a whole group of actors but we played it with two. And instead of using gesture, they used scenes. Sometimes with a word, sometimes with a switch of emotion, sometimes with an action, or by a combination of all three, they would change the entire scene, along with the characters in it. They would do it extremely fast, often moving between three different scenes in less than ten seconds. These lightning fast protean shifts of context, character, emotion, began to have a surreal quality, as well as being extremely funny. I was lucky to find two actors who were able to do it with great finesse and skill, and in fact they improvised the whole episode - though of course it could be scripted. This technique is something I want to develop. As the scenes flicker past one's vision, I think it would be interesting to start inserting a theme that gradually grows in intensity, a recurring moment or gesture, that underpins all the rest. At the same time the transformations should go further and further afield, till the real and surreal, the ordinary and the fantastic are inextricably mingled. Finally, the playing out of the scenes should be placed in a context, whose impact on an observer would be enhanced by this maya-like play of illusions.

After this display we put the audience in darkness. In the darkness we let fall a series of single words, snatches of song, half-whispered exclamations, unfinished sentences, strung together like beads on the thread of the audience's attention. The object was to sense when that attention was starting to fade and then to recapture it with another phrase. We wanted to suggest the working process of the creative mind, when all other distractions are excluded, when one is solving a complicated puzzle, a chess move, finding the exactly right word, acknowledging a significant message, grappling with a mathematical problem, or simply just attending very carefully to some thought of your own with the rest of the sensory apparatus tuned down.

We did this unannounced, with no indication of what it was to represent. At the very least it was a soothing interlude, but whether it accomplished more I don't know. I think there is something to be investigated further here, analogous to the very first exercise, tracking the psychic connection between performers and audience, keeping it always in perfect balance at the right state of tension.

In the next section, as if out of that moment of contemplation, there came a speech I had written some time ago. It was a logical series of deductions that started from the premise that the universe is infinite and came to rest in the conclusion that if that was so it could only exist in the speaker's thoughts. The actor delivered the speech with great reasonableness and rapidity. I wanted it

to sound tongue in cheek at first and then to leave a residue, a second thought ... what if ... ?

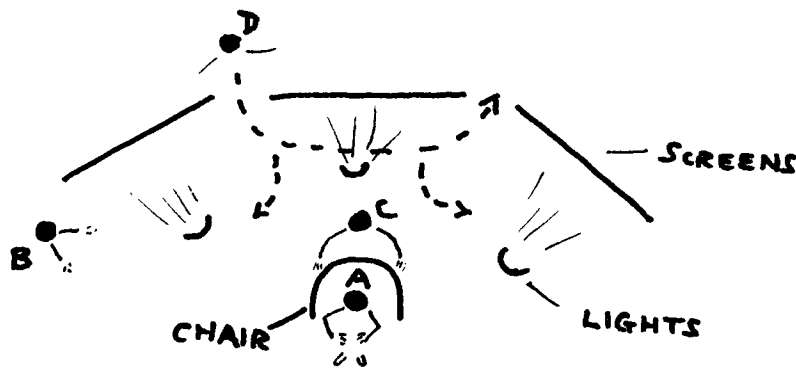
In Newsletter #2 you will remember that I described an exercise I called "The Power Game", which I had devised for testing the ability of an actor to exert some intangible force on stage, something that would compel an audience's attention and also reveal his inner adjustment to the necessity of winning in relation to another actor. Since then I have used it in a great many different circumstances - as a rehearsal technique, as an illustration of some specific task (for instance, the battle scenes in Arthur last summer), and as something against which an observer could project his own idea of what was taking place. But I had never played it in public, and I was interested to see what strangers would make of it. It is a very subtle and revealing game, one that takes many forms and changes momentarily in the hands of the actors, according to their moods and how they feel about each other. But in framing it within the structure of the other pieces I was showing, I diminished its intrinsic value as an exercise. The actors became self-conscious, and the two who played, played less out of a desire to win than to maintain their inner equilibrium. Forcing the game into a spotlight was a mistake. It took the fun and the daring out of it. The result was muted, strained, with none of the flourish that makes it so fascinating to watch when played uninhibitedly.

Next we told a shortened version of the story of the hand (Newsletter #15), ending it at the point where the two hands communicate. As always this was a curious experience. The piece starts innocuously enough, almost like a sketch. A story is being told, but as it unfolds you find yourself watching the actors and wondering where the fiction stops and real experience begins. By the time the two hands are 'talking' there is no pretense involved. The hands are allowed to express any message they like at random - or is it? As you watch, the hands seem to be endowed with personality, their vocabulary carries an enigmatic but perfectly intentional message that has nothing to do with their owners.

In this and the next piece, the theme seems to be that of communication - with and without words, or in spite of words. I moved on from non-verbal to verbal exchanges, and followed the Hand section with a short scene in which two people, using identical dialogue each time, repeat a scene and always come out at the same point - like a maze that leads you back to the beginning. Someone watching, who had worked with trances, got the impression that they were exchanging trances, but it was nothing so esoteric. What was interesting about the technique is that it relativised the dialogue; the words became counters in a game, which was not about what the words were saying at all; it was about the dynamics of any game - a jockeying for position, or power, and an attempt to communicate, or find a relationship. And since the two people

always arrived at the same point it seems to me a possible starting point for exploring the use of dream and fantasy to break these deadlocks in which we find ourselves so often in everyday life, when words, instead of extricating us from a bind, only seem to tangle us up more hopelessly.

The last episode was an elaboration of an experiment I had been using last year. The core of it was an elaborate verbal suggestion - but this time I placed it in a ceremonial context. Four people were involved; for clarity's sake I'll call them A,B,C,D. A, the "subject" is led to a chair and seated by B. B reassures A that everything will be done exactly as it was before, there is nothing to fear, and A can stop the proceedings any time he likes. Meanwhile several small lamps have been placed by the others a little behind the chair on which A^ssitting, and beamed towards three white screens that form a background to the action. The set up looks like this:



A was instructed to imagine a spirit with whom he would like to communicate. Actor D was to embody this spirit, which might speak or move through them. But A would not be able to see D, except peripherally, for D would appear from behind the screens. Moreover, D would also be unable to see A, as they would be wearing a blindfold or mask. Meanwhile actor C took up a position behind A's chair and on a signal from B began to tell A, very evenly, very calmly, that her hands would rest on A's temples and that after a while her hands would merge with the bone of A's skull, and that when hands were opened again the skull would be opened at the same time, letting in air and light, and into the space so created the spirit that A had wished to meet would appear, or might be heard, or could be communicated with in some way. The speech was quite long, and was carefully written to induce a sensual impression that would extend as much as possible to anyone watching. At the end, on the last words of the speech, the fourth actor, D, made an entrance, and the rest was left to chance, and to whatever sensations or images the two actors might exchange.

As always when we did this piece, there was a strange correspondence between the movements of the seated actor (A) and the blindfolded one (D). Whatever they were working off - impulses, energies, wordless communication, shared images - there was no question that a relationship existed, and if some of it was in the eye of the beholder, that in itself was a valid experience. The mind fills in and gives meaning to events, and much of the work I find myself doing consists in allowing an audience the freedom to have its own dreams, and not so much to interpret the material as to interpenetrate. We give the audience a scaffolding, a grid, a net, on which to weave their own images - which perhaps not very surprisingly turn out to have a collective content; and the metaphor of the net stretches to include everyone who participates.

What the audience saw this time was of course a curtailed version of the full possibilities of this 'ceremony'. For a few minutes the two actors maintained a slow mysterious private ballet and then the blindfolded one retreated, the atmosphere relaxed noticeably, and the actor in the chair walked over to the wall and switched on the fluorescent lights.

In talking to people afterwards I was particularly taken up with one couple, both psychiatric social workers in their fifties. They were very disturbed by what they had seen. They felt it came too close to the borders of madness, to schizoid states, solipsism. They were not convinced, for example, by actor B's assurances to actor A in the last piece that everything would be all right. They were sure something terrible would happen. At the same time as the actors' skills were involving them in the action, they said, they kept wanting to pull back and tell themselves that it was 'just theatre'. 'Crazy' - 'cynical' - 'disorienting' - 'fragmenting' were some of the things they said about it. For others who had seen it, actors especially, the performance techniques (the scenes transforming very rapidly into each other, for instance) were the most interesting part. Their main criticism was that they felt they were witnessing something too personal; they were aware of the performers' physical tenseness, the strain of showing, presenting, proving, and it made them uneasy. Others, who had had experience of research into altered states of consciousness, felt that several of the episodes were about to touch on trance states - as in the repeated dialogue, or the last fragment - and then drew back; they wanted to go a great deal further and felt frustrated that it ended so abruptly.

For myself, I haven't assimilated it all yet, and I keep changing my mind about the experience. I think some of the reactions, especially

those that talked about the uneasiness of not knowing when the borderline between actor and person-really-experiencing had been crossed were, from my point of view, positive and encouraging, even when they were expressed as criticisms. Nevertheless, no theatre piece should have as its aim to make the audience feel uncomfortable. The psychiatrists' comments only reinforced for me my longstanding conviction that the territory breached by this kind of work is very ambivalent, and that the old legends about Dionysos, bearer of wine, madness and inspiration, are all true and apt.

Perhaps, in the end, all such work acts as a kind of invocation - and the message of this experience corresponds to the advice given to the would-be initiates who presented themselves to mystery cults and secret orders. The message was always that the candidate must be prepared to go through a long preparation and purification before crossing the threshold. Because so much of your own self is brought into the process, better be careful that as little sediment as possible comes along. Finding the correct translation in one's own experience for the those archaic and apparently meaningless practices is one of the rewards of even the most ambivalent experience in this area.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth." with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on March 12, 1975.