INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 18 Spaces, Sacred and Profane

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Among the stacks of papers, books, cuttings from newspapers and magazines, assorted scripts in various stages of disrepair or construction, and manila folders, that litter my shelves, there is one file, more thumbed and dog-eared than the rest, which bears the title, written in large green magic marker letters:"SPACES". It is my nemesis and lode stone. It is the one I carry everywhere I go in New York, yet hate to open. It is the secret refuge I go to when, twenty four hours before I am due to start a workshop, I hear that the Manhattan Theatre Club, or whatever dance studio or rehearsal hall I have been using, cannot accommodate me the next day. It is the one file I most fervently wish I could burn, shred, or deep six.

But I can't, because I don't yet have a space, and until I do that file will be with me, growing surreptitiously fatter, gormandizing assorted scraps of paper with addresses, names of landlords and real estate companies, dimensions, and leads to contacts to rumors to possibilities.

It's curious, and perhaps significant, that the word most commonly used in theatre to describe your place of working is not "stage", "rehearsal room", "studio", or "theatre", but "space". This is partly a refelction of the fact that a great deal of theatre is created in locations that could never, by any stretch of the imagination, be dignified with any of the other descriptions I just mentioned. But I think it's also something to do with the fact that we are working at a time, and in an art form, whose boundaries are completely undefined; free-floating; subject to gravitational pulls from all around. It has other associations too: emptiness, something that is waiting to be filled, loneliness, room to move.

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

But it's not the mytho-poetic associations of the word that I want to talk about in this letter. Over the past few weeks, in the interstices of my other work, I have been looking for a more permanent 'home' for my work, a center. At the same time, not so coincidentally, one of the questions I and my actors have been investigating is the concept of sacred ground and its relationship to a stage. These two searches are connected at root. They can lead you into some intersting areas - of the mind and of New York City.

As you know, the housing crunch in New York has led to a number of ingenious attempts to adapt buildings to residential use. One of the most popular solutions in the past few years has been the loft - a floor of a building that was built as a warehouse, or a place of business. Artists - painters, sculptors, writers, musicians - have moved out of Greenwich Village, south to the Soho area, bounded by Houston Street and Canal Street to the north and south respectively, and (roughly) by Broadway and Sixth Avenue to the east and west. The area is a maze of narrow streets flanked by warehouses. The streets have names like Wooster, Spring, Broome, Crosby, Sullivan - shadowy valleys between eight or ten storey buildings, often with grimy doorways and only a creaky old freight elevator through the gap in whose roof you can see sky at the summit of the shaft as you rumble slowly up to your destination.

On the streets themselves trucks stand tilted half on and half off the sidewalks. Many of the buildings are still in use as warehouses, shipping offices, or the locations of seedy small business enterprises. If you get off the elevator at the wrong floor you find yourself in a long room with row upon row of middle-aged women, talking Lithuanian, Albanian, or Spanish, bent over scraps of printed fabric sewing button-holes, and you realize the day of the sweatshops isn't over. And yet, on these same streets, alongside the fast food eateries and the tiny bars catering to delivery men, you find signs for galleries, banners announcing sculpture exhibits; a perky streetlife wakes up after dark and on weekends; fliers for dance programs, avant garde music programs and theatre workshops spatter the walls.

The buildings in Soho offer several advantages for artists. First, they're cheap. It's possible - less so now, for times are catching up even with Soho - to find 2000 square feet with 10 or 12 feet-high ceilings, for $250.00 a month or less. Floors are often good hardwood which, after sanding, sealing, and polishing, show up rich honey or russet colors. Huge windows on the upper floors

flood the rooms with light, and the abundance of space encourages clever renovations, rooms within rooms, sleeping, dining, and working levels, and airy contemplation.

It's not all bohemian bliss, though. Nowadays you are offered loft co-ops, at a price of $30,000 - 40,000, with a maintenance charge of up to $400.00 a month. Many places for rent at seemingly reasonable prices are asking a fixtures fee of anywhere between $500 and $15,000 to compensate the outgoing tenants for improvements. Often they have had to instal kitchens, toilets, even new floors, to make the space habitable. And they also want to make a profit.

Not surprisingly, people are starting to explore new areas of the city. Last week I was sent down to the New Frontier - south of Canal Street - where the names become a little less familiar - Walker, Duane, White, Chambers ... already you can hear the intimations of Wall Street on the horizon. Here the "For Rent" signs hang on buildings that start to look like the New York of the old vaudeville days. The terrain is a lot less dingy and claustrophobic (to my eyes), but it seems a long way from Manhattan and everywhere you go the World Trade Center dominates your vision like the beginnings of a glass and concrete Grand Canyon.

If you are looking for a space in which to rehearse, you look for one thing above all - absence of pillars. There was (there may still be) a regulation that forbade the construction of buildings with less than about 25 feet of lateral unsupported floor. As a result the vast majority of the lofts you see are divided by a row of columns marching down the middle of the space. In one direction there will be a clear run of up to 60 or 70 feet; but in the other, after twenty feet of floor, a column - and then another ten or twenty feet before you reach the side wall. For living, this is no problem. The pillars make convenient supports for dividing walls; delicately fluted on upper floors, they can be decorative focal points. For artists and musicians they create no difficulties. For a theatre group, though, they are a serious drawback. A space twenty by ninety or a hundred feet long can only just be converted into a small theatre, with the audience packed into one end, and the performers into the other: I've seen a theatre in which the audience sat partly on the side, behind the pillars, and partly in front, on another side of the square. The result - one part of the audience couldn't see the other. It was unnerving.

None of these discomforts need prevent a theatre company from

existing and working, of course. When I was involved in the final stages of the Manhattan Project's Alice in Wonderland, which now runs in repertory in the palatial Martinson Hall at the Public Theatre, we rehearsed first in a classroom at NYU Theatre Department on Second Avenue and 8th Street, and later in a tiny 'loft' with a seven foot ceiling painted black (as were the walls) on Bleecker Street in the Village. Into this space, which resembled a section sliced out of the IRT subway during a power failure, a hundred members of the public could squeeze, at grave peril to their breathing.

All the same, I feel that for my special purposes a less brutal environment is necessary, and for a number of reasons I have been rejecting spaces that would (with a little work) be quite adequate, even pleasant.

Location is one of those reasons. Though I don't doubt that audiences and actors will make the trek to areas like Soho, or even further out of the way, there is something wasteful about the extra energy needed to do it, and then, having done it, to forget that you've done it and concentrate on something that demands calm nerves and a temporary extinction of the jangle of day-to-day city life. Proportion and flexibility are also important. 2000 square feet arranged as a 50 x 40 area is closer to the ideal than one 100 x 20. In spite of the columns-every-25-feet rule, there are buildings with such column-free space, and I think it worth while waiting for one to come along, taking my time to investigate other areas of the city, where lofts may be harder to find but where other kinds of space may exist - vacant for some unforeseen reason or because no one can as yet see a use for them.

Why all this fuss? Why is it so important to find the right space? Normally, when a play is rehearsed, no one makes a special issue of the surroundings. Actors and directors naturally like to work in comfort rather than squalor, in quiet rather than clamor. But beyond the basic amenities, the question of where you rehearse is usually determined by very mundane considerations - schedule, cast size, etc. - not decor. A large institutional theatre, and many smaller regional theatres, have a number of rooms in the back or basement of the building where a new production can be rehearsed while the current one is in performance. A Broadway or touring show will rent one or other of the rehearsal spaces around New York, available at $5 - $7 per hour. These spaces vary from pleasant, if antiseptic, like the sub-sub-basement of the Circle in the Square Theatre in the Uris Building on Broadway, to gruesome. The Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven

rehearses all its productions in a building called (aptly) "the New Haven Terminal", a vast abandoned warehouse buried amongst oil-spill polluted wharves, gas holders, railway tracks leading nowhere, and mouldering trash dumps. Yet the complaints are muted and half hearted. Real energy is reserved for the time when the show goes into the theatre. In short, rehearsal space is something shared, with other companies, other ventures, even other businesses; it is neutral, functional, impersonal. Why make it a priority over, say, actors, or production values?

There are two sets of reasons - one practical, one psychological - and they are bound up with one another; they also lead to the specific theatrical problems I have been dealing with recently.

The practical reasons are easy to describe. When you are trying to work with a group of people, all on different schedules and with different life and career problems, the existence of a single unchanging location makes scheduling much easier. If, in addition to the other difficulties of getting people together, you have to keep looking for and renting space, just getting started on a project can use up all the energy you need for working on it. The psychological reasons are much more complicated, but more interesting.

The precise and subtle ways in which people are affected, often subliminally, by their surroundings is a recognised science in architecture and interior design. Calculations of exactly how many feet and inches people should sit from each other in an airport or an office, what kind of lighting and colors enhance or obstruct the working process, are commonplace in industry and large corporations. (Interestingly enough, the psychological effect of color was also a closely guarded secret of such arcane groups as the Rosicrucians, Cabalists, and the Order of the Golden Dawn). In theatre, which is supposed to be so much more sensitive to such nuances, this is not so. Granted, there has been a movement in the past few years towards so-called 'environmental theatre', in which the actor-audience relationship is refreshed and intensified by the design of the total space. Thus, in a recent play about the slave trade, the audience is made to feel they are sitting in the hold of a slave ship. Andre Gregory's original idea for Alice ... was to have the audience enter into a basement playing area by way of a sliding board, whereupon they would find themselves in a gigantic child's playroom, filled with disproportionately large toys, jungle gyms, and cribs. But this approach is still a design concept, applied only to the play's performance; it is created for a specific script or production like any other

set built on a proscenium stage. I am talking about something different - a space that is altered by the totality of the work done there, whose unseen details are as significant as the particular visual effect created for any given occasion. This can't be done altogether consciously. It has to be the result of the aggregate of all the time spent working there, as a result of which an accretion of accidental events changes the face of the surroundings. The analogy would be to a haunted house, or the site of some great historical event, where you can sense the presence of the past.

Whether or not you believe in ghosts, you would probably agree that a person or a group puts their stamp upon a place. A room or a house becomes soaked in its owner's character, as if energy had set up sympathetic vibrations in walls, furniture, floors and ceilings. Everyone has had the sensation of feeling 'at home' in a place, or of being rejected by it.

One of the things that interests me is how this experience can be translated into theatrical effect. For the time being, lacking a place of my own, I have being trying to find out whether there are ways to make <u>any</u> area susceptible to these forces. In two of my early newsletters (#2 and #3), I discussed some of the techniques that were available for this - such as, having an actor discover for himself a particular area of the room that had been secretly designated "forbidden ground" by the other actors present, or marking off a part of the rehearsal space as a place where dreams and fantasies have free rein. And so, continuing the work begun last month, I included in the experiments some possible ways of endowing one part of an otherwise neutral area with special properties.. For these, as with most of the other things I am doing now, I tried to use concrete images, fragments of stories, rather than abstract techniques. One of these was based on a situation which occurs often in dreams, as well as in fairy tale and myth - pursuit by hostile beings or forces, who must be appeased, and from which you are only safe when you seek refuge in a sanctuary of some kind. Here the result of the exercise seemed to be that you could create an area of safety about as large as the radius of some strong personal emotion. It's hard to pinpoint it any more exactly. The nearest comparison is to the range at which you feel you have joined a conversation at a cocktail party. Outside that range, you are alone; within that range, you are part of a group.

Another method we used was to make the journey to the place as difficult or as complex as possible. Simply getting there at all

became a process that required much concentration and ingenuity so that when the person arrived at the destination, the place itself seemed unique and worth all the effort. In a variation of this, I had the actors prepare spaces for each other. One would decide on a feeling or experience he or she wanted the other to have. Then, without telling the other actor what that experience would be, he prepared a space in any way that seemed appropriate. One actress, for example, wanted to convey to another that the space she was preparing would make the person stepping into it feel safe, secure, hidden from sight. She constructed a very logical series of actions that should have brought about this effect, but in fact didn't. The effect she succeeded in creating in the other person was of acute self-consciousness. What had happened was that the gestures and instructions she had given were all a perfect expression of a state of mind in which one is very aware of the slightest sound, movement, spark of attention from other people. In drawing the other actress's attention to all this she had made her so alert to it that she could not take her mind off it. Another actor found a different solution to the assignment. He created a space bounded by pieces of fabric, which he had knotted carefully and with great ceremony. Then he suggested that entering the space so created would be dangerous. The other actor began to feel that this was indeed so. We did too, watching. Then the actor who was being challenged to enter the space solved the problem for himself by untying the knots. One person created a mythology, the second demythologized it. In these, and several other experiments we tried along the same lines, actions spoke louder than words. In fact, we scarcely used words at all, and started to develop a sign vocabulary, or, to be more precise, a vocabulary of ceremonial actions, that could be used to alter an audience's (as well as a performer's) perception of space. These experiments are at a mid-way stage. None of them is intended to be used in isolation, and so I want to reserve judgment on them for a later newsletter, when I can place them in context with the other work we have been doing, using fictions from both traditional sources and our own fantasies.

To return to the question of space. Theatre is more than simply an audience and a stage, more than simply Peter Brook's "empty space". No performance space is empty, and the question is: What will it have been filled with by the time an audience enters? Most spaces are crammed with the equivalent of psychic debris, a junkpile of assorted leftover thoughts, feelings, emotions, past work, discarded ideas, frustrations, and the detritus of a host of unharmonious personalities.

Think of the different ways in which a space has traditionally

been set aside for some collective purpose, and you'll appreciate why I am so eager to use the power that seems to be latent in these 'consecrated' areas ... Temples and sacred precincts - Ground made numinous by some memorable event that took place there - Sanctuaries where healing and prophetic visions appear - Magic circles drawn by tribal shamans - Laboratores of alchemists - Caves of anchorites and mystics - the Arthurian Siege Perilous, in which a person is endowed with enormous power or else is consumed by an alien force ... and many more. Whatever the explanation of all these phenomena may be, their existence points to a force (if only the force of belief) that can be harnessed powerfully in the theatre, I'm sure. It also explains why the file on my shelf grows fatter, and my shoe soles thinner, as I crisscross New York City, always searching for space.

Sincerely,

Kenneth

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on April 10, 1975.