

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 19 - Pupa and Imago

450 Humphrey Street
New Haven
Connecticut 06511

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World
Affairs

May 1st 1975

535 Fifth Avenue,
New York, NY, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In my last newsletter I mentioned one aspect of the work we had been doing over the past month - exploring the implications of 'sacred ground', a precinct, as a metaphor for certain kinds of stage situations. This was only an isolated instance of a number of techniques we were trying out, as part of the continuing effort to find in traditional methods of altering consciousness through ceremonies and action, a common link with contemporary theatrical forms, and a way of expressing contemporary needs and aspirations. I'd like to touch on a few more of these techniques in this newsletter, putting them in perspective, and then to go on to describe the further development of the project based on Arthurian legends, which I began last year and which is now due to go on to the next stage in a production at St. Clements in New York City in June.

When I got back to work in March with my group of actors, after the experience of February's semi-public showing (Newsletter #17), I brought into the workshop a much more elaborate set of texts. Whereas before I had been dealing with direct suggestion and the use of gesture and action to create an immediate sharp effect, I now wanted to offer the actors something more subtle to work on, something that would stimulate their imaginations and move them in the direction of assuming characters, enacting short pieces of narrative, entering into situations that could develop as improvised inter-connecting series of images.

One of these concepts was based on an idea which I had explored in a less methodical way in BOCCACCIO. This was the idea of masks, seen as aspects of the personality, split-off psychic contents. (Newsletter #12, p. 4). In BOCCACCIO this idea was used to present

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

the audience with a microcosm of a society. This time I wanted to explore the possibilities of using it in a slightly different way. So the objective I set the actors was, starting with the BOCCACCIO idea, to look for characters into which they could easily slip, as into a familiar coat, because they were aspects of their own natures. I wanted them to find characters so vivid that, representing one of them, the actor would hardly seem to be acting, and the audience would find it hard to tell which was the 'real' person and which the 'mask'. The next step would be to give the 'masks' names, finding them from wherever appropriate - everyday life, mythology, sci-fi, clown lore, anywhere. Ultimately I wanted these character/masks to become recurring figures in a collective myth/dream world. Stories would gather around them. They could reappear in different historical ages in various disguises.

One way to arrive at these characters was to investigate the metaphorical possibilities of certain situations. One such was the tightrope walk. In walking along a tight rope, the actor was not merely performing a simple piece of pantomime in the style of Marcel Marceau. He was to allow the action of walking across the rope, and the problems it posed, to become a metaphor for many other activities and situations. For example, in walking across a tight rope, the person had to ... use both his feet and his eyes, but independently - the feet feel the way, the eyes remain fixed on the goal ... see the rope as a bridge, something linking two opposites, two states of mind, two time zones (past and present, maybe) ... learn by doing it, learn by performing it, not by following a set of programmed instructions ... keep to the 'straight and narrow' ... know how to achieve balance, or fall into the abyss ... How a person dealt with these problems would reveal his character, his attitude to life, his moral stance. Another such image might be that of the fisherman - in which a person ... uses patience ... lets down a line to invisible depths ... lets an adversary fight itself into exhaustion ... looks for something ^{he} can't see ... draws things up from below to the light ... In the case of the fisherman the situation might become the metaphor for a relationship between two people. where one is the fisherman, the other - the sea.

We also used objects, made in whole or in part of some natural substance. The exercise required the actors to imagine this substance as it was in various stages of its creation - if it was wood, in the hands of a carpenter, or in a forest, or as the seed of a tree, or as one of its many possible incarnations

before it reached its present shape. In another exercise, I used a portion of the Demeter/Persephone myth, which was the basis of the dramatic part of the Eleusinian mysteries in ancient Greece (and, in turn, related to the Egyptian mysteries of Isis); the beginning of the story takes place in a meadow, where a young girl (Persephone) is picking flowers. She comes upon a Narcissus. As she bends down to pluck it, the earth opens up and a huge black chariot, drawn by four black horses and driven by Pluto, God of Death, clatters into the sunlight. Pluto carries Persephone off to Hades, and the meadow is deserted again. (The story continues with Demeter, Persephone's mother, discovering her daughter's kidnap, and searching all over the earth for her, but we did not deal with that part of it.) The objective in taking this fragment of story was to discover ways of telling the events in a non-linear fashion. We found ourselves choosing a central point, or image, and radiating out from it. In this case the image was of the flower the girl picked - the narcissus, with its associations of self-love, self absorption, sleep (narcosis), and death. Eventually the narrative came out in a spiral form. The effect was to make time stand still, and the event seemed to be happening in an eternal present.

Through these and similar exercises (I have already described, in my last newsletter, some of the work we did with 'space'), we reached a point where both the actors and I felt that it was time to cut ourselves loose from the confines of separate and often thematically unrelated experiments, and try something more extended. As the time was approaching when I would have to turn my full attention to the production of LEGENDS OF ARTHUR, we decided to conclude this phase of the work with an intensive marathon session spread over three days. For this period of time we gave ourselves only one task - to create a series of improvised narratives using as the triggering image the concept of previous lives. None of us had any convictions about reincarnation or the various theories of karma currently in circulation. The idea of previous lives was simply a tool, a metaphor, which enabled us to apply a number of devices we had been working on for the past weeks, in particular the device of 'masks', which I have just mentioned, and the rapidly shifting cinematic effect of scenes dissolving one into another, which I described in Newsletter #17.

The result was a series of elaborate improvisations, none of which lasted less than an hour, in which the actors were able to sustain a remarkably consistent level of coherent dialogue, action, and changes of mood. They were always introduced in the same way, by a group of ceremonial actions built around the

image of the tightrope, which served as a connection between this life and whatever previous life the actor was imagining himself or herself to be visiting. Having arrived in that previous life, the actor was seen by the others to have assumed a 'mask', a specific character, to which they adjusted, and which became the focus of whatever drama then took place.

This process was repeated over and over again with different actors taking the journey, while we tried various ways of organizing the surroundings and the mental 'set' with which they approached the next event. The most interesting and heartening result of all this work was to see how the preparation we had done over the previous weeks paid off. The length of the improvisations could have been a great temptation to self-indulgence and meandering. But because the actors had been working on consciously structuring their perceptions, concentrating on a few, interrelated themes, and had even been enlisting the aid of their dreams in the process, the images that surfaced were remarkably coherent and held interest just as any contrived narrative ought to. The big difference, of course, was that they were not contrived, they were spontaneous, so that the actors were in the position of being both performers and spectators in their own dramas. Exactly the position of a person in a dream. Except that they were awake.

That last statement ought to be qualified. "Awake" is a relative state, and there were times when it seemed that the constantly shifting kaleidoscope of images had a trance-like effect. This was not something consciously striven for, and it only made itself felt at moments when we found ourselves in a state of what seemed to be suspended animation.

The content of these improvisations would take several thousands of words to reproduce. In general it reflected, in a variety of recurring characters, situations and verbal allusions, the following themes: the discovery of a secret, sometimes represented by a box which no one was allowed to open, sometimes by a sound that only one person could hear, at other times by the presence of a messenger from an unknown country: encounters between a stranger and two balanced characters, one male, one female, who had access to special powers and might teach the stranger how to use them: the search for a small girl, sometimes referred to as a spirit or ghost, but if you found her you might, in that moment, lose her - and does she exist?: the use of drama-within-the-drama to demonstrate something to a visitor - but always in a mocking, disconcerting way: a desert, or wasteland: readiness, the right time, kairos.

When it was over, and we were discussing the results, certain points were agreed on by everyone. The most important of these (to me) was that the subjective experience was like entering into an alternate way of thinking, and that it made a rigid response to events impossible; but once the performer had become used to the fluid nature of the experience, endless possibilities were opened up and the feeling was refreshing and liberating. In that sense it had an initiatory effect. I found this significant because the objective experience was similar, and it seemed that we had come some way towards making it possible to share the experience between performers and audience without making the audience go through all the preparations the performers had had to submit themselves to. Another comment was that the time spent working on the isolated pieces of technique and consciousness-altering devices had been necessary, and should be expanded, but that the movement towards more complex themes and situations had been right. Someone also pointed out that in the previous workshops we had been exploring the alienation that exists in society, finding images for it and translating it into personal statements, and that now, with the latest experiments, we had begun to work towards a reintegration.

Big words. For my own part I would simply say that the events of the six weeks leading up to the marathon session were a training period for the performers, in which they learnt to trust their own creative impulses and liberated their imaginations sufficiently to allow them to yield some of their store of archetypal and, if you like, mythic images - always expressed, of course, in a personal way. In this case the images all revolved around the matter in hand - the quest for an alternate state of being, what it feels like to set out in search of some secret knowledge, and what it means to be initiated.

There seems to me a definite survival value in the ability to free one's psychic process in this way. The mind becomes adaptable, more supple, categories are broken down, small events that one would disregard or pass over as insignificant become incorporated into a larger pattern. I always take it as an omen when echoes of a particular project begin to find their way into the press, into television, into a spate of new publications, or simply into the conversations of people I meet from day to day. I have been collecting some of these omens over the past few months, and perhaps I'll extract them and put them in a newsletter soon, but for the time being it's enough to refer to the fact that, in no particular organized movement, but almost slyly and surreptitiously, references to the importance of fantasy, of day-dreaming, of ser-

endipitous logic, have been creeping into the media and popular folklore. It is not a question of a revival of drug-culture thinking, nor of a leftover Consciousness III fad, but a more sober recognition of the healing and compensatory effects of these processes at this moment in history. Meanwhile, I have been collecting stories from a variety of sources, and I want to put these stories to work as soon as possible, applying the results of the last few weeks to their presentation. With any luck, I should be able to do this starting in July of this year.

* * * *

For the next six weeks, until mid-June, I will be rewriting and directing the showcase production of LEGENDS OF ARTHUR, of which I did the first sketch last year in Williamstown. (See Newsletters #10 and #11) The reason it has taken so long for this version to see the light of day is that shortly after its showing in Williamstown ARTHUR was selected as one of the projects to be presented by Theatre at St. Clements, one of the better Off-off-Broadway showcase theatres, as part of a series of Musical Theatre Laboratory workshops sponsored by the Stuart Ostrow Foundation. (Stuart Ostrow is a Broadway producer, The Apple Tree, Pippin, who is trying to encourage innovative and experimental musical theatre.) There were advantages to us in becoming part of this series, especially in the area of production. Because of its association with the Stuart Ostrow Foundation, St. Clements could offer us a far larger production budget than is usually available for a showcase. As we had learnt as much as could be learnt from a shoestring operation in Williamstown, it was important for us the next time the show was presented to have enough resources to make the experience a real step forward. An additional advantage for us was in the fact that the Musical Theatre Lab. did not invite critics, which theoretically takes a great deal of the pressure off the work. So, having accepted this situation, we became one of a series, and our turn in the series didn't come until now.

In the two newsletters I wrote you last summer about the Williamstown production I synopsized the stories and told you most of the technical problems we were trying to solve, as they related to the use of synthesized tape music and narrative conventions. Since then, as I thought about the best way to develop the material, I have had to deal with some further problems that revealed themselves as a result of that previous production. The most pressing of these is: What are we, the audience, watching? A recreation of a historical period? A complete fiction? Modern actors telling stories? Or what? I am very anxious to avoid any suggestion that

this is a 'costume' drama, in the sense that "CAMELOT" was. Nor do I want to fall into the trap of presenting it in a self-consciously distanced way - "we're just a bunch of actors telling these stories". In the course of thinking about this problem, and others related to it, I made some notes to myself, which I've passed on to the designer, and to other people involved in the pre-production work. Here are some excerpts from them ...

... The stories are challenges, probes, games that reveal strengths and weaknesses of the soul. Those playing the games must be prepared to meet every challenge, whenever it is offered, and in whatever form. They must play by the rules because only if there are rules does their success or failure make sense.

... See the stories as a series of obstacle courses, of ordeals and trials set up to test the mettle of a group of people, who wish to find out something about themselves, or to remind themselves of standards they must live up to ...

(The stories, you will remember, are: GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT, in which a Green Knight challenges anyone who dares to chop off his head, in return for allowing the Green Knight to do the same to him a year from hence: LANCELOT, KNIGHT OF THE CART, in which Lancelot has to follow Guinevere into a mysterious kingdom, reached by crossing a sword bridge, where she has been kidnapped; BALIN AND BALAN, about two brothers, one of whom, BALIN, acquires a miraculous sword and refuses to give it up - although it causes nothing but pain and disaster, and in the end causes him to kill his own brother.)

... The test is always the same - Death - coming in a variety of disguises. This single test, though, is open to infinite variations, Death can take any number of forms. Death assumes any mask it wills in order to entrap and confuse the Knight.

What is a 'knight'? A knight is a type of ideal man, a 'hero'. He can wear many masks - a "Gawain" mask, a "Lancelot" mask, a "Balin" mask. Put on the mask and you are in touch with the power of that particular type of ideal man. And if you re-enact the deeds of that knight, you invoke the power that gathers around that 'mask' like a magnetic field.

One person chooses to assume the mask of the "Challenger", and someone else chooses to rise and accept the challenge, whereupon everyone else joins in the game (Story/adventure), by creating obstacles, constantly changing situations and crises, according

to the rules of the story (Game/adventure).

Initiations. Adventures played out as initiation ceremonies.

The people are testing each other as well as testing themselves.

So the characters in the stories - Gawain, Balin, Lancelot - are not so much individual characters with personal histories as incarnations of different ways of meeting the supreme challenge. They are no less human for that, but they are masks, assumed by the players, which will determine how they react from moment to moment. He who puts on the Balin-mask will be destined to have a certain way of reacting to events, which in turn will lead to certain results, which in turn ... etc. etc ... But Balin's way is only one way, suitable for a specific temperament and moral point of view. There is also Gawain's way, Lancelot's way, Agravaine's way ...

Part of our task in working on the piece is to strip away the trivial and sentimental associations of the characters and penetrate to the essence of the individual knights. What is the constellation of human traits and attitudes that constitutes Lancelot as distinct from Balin, and how to recognise him? The real task is to uncover the myth hidden beneath the romance....

As you can see, some of the changes to be made in ARTHUR grow directly out of the work of this spring. This work also affects the physical production and the character of Merlin, about which I will tell you more in my next newsletter. Meanwhile, as an antidote, I am suggesting that everyone go visit MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander

p.s. The title of this newsletter refers to the life cycle of the insect, which I have often felt parallels the life cycle of one of my works. In this case, the experiments referred to in the first part of the newsletter are in the pupal stage; ARTHUR is about to become an imago (the mature representative of its species).