

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC-20 Trials and Tribulations

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

May 30th 1975

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In my last newsletter I was about to go into rehearsal with the developed version of my script based on legends from the Arthurian cycle, scheduled for performance at St. Clements, in New York City in mid June. The story of the past weeks is a classic of the frustrations and self-destructive tendencies of the theatre as it is now organised in New York.

As I'm in the midst of the crisis at this moment, this newsletter will be about the pot at the moment of boiling over. The irony of the whole affair is that it has nothing whatsoever to do with the production itself, the actors, or the rehearsal process - all of which were progressing well, with no more than the normal headaches of putting on a complex production with new techniques in a limited time on a small budget.

It all comes down to politics, in this case theatre politics, which are of a particularly messy and paranoid kind.

To fill in the background first. Legends of Arthur was scheduled as the last in a series of productions to be presented at St. Clements, one of the longest established Off-off-Broadway theatres, best known as the previous home of the American Place Theatre. Our production was not, in fact, to be officially mounted by St. Clements, but by the Stuart Ostrow Foundation, which promotes experimental works in musical theatre and uses St. Clements as a home.

As with most of the productions at St. Clements, ours was being

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

presented under the Equity Showcase Code, a system I described in Newsletter #8. Briefly, the Showcase Code allows actors who are members of Equity (the actors union) to appear without pay in productions that are limited to 12 performances, where not more than 99 people attend on any one night, there is no paid advertising, and other conditions, such as that there be no soliciting of fees for admission, are fulfilled. This code is administered and overseen by a committee of Equity, composed mostly of volunteers, all actors. It is very loosely enforced, partly because Equity is not an efficient organisation, and partly because its provisions are hard to apply to many Off-off-Broadway situations. An excerpt from the Off-off-Broadway listings in this week's Village Voice will give you some idea of how blatantly and frequently the code is violated - though not all the plays listed may be Equity showcases in the sense that Equity actors are appearing in them.

OFF OFF-B'WAY

Schedules and prices vary. So does reliability. Call numbers below for info TDF vouchers accepted at most theatres. Shows marked * are recommended by Voice critics. No all shows listed have been reviewed.

Theatre-Village

THE ACTING TEACHER, by Robt Madero, presented Thurs-Sun at 9 p.m. at Drama Ensemble Space, 108 Wooster, 925-9016.

AFTERMATH, by Tom Coble, presented Thurs-Sat at 7:30, Sun at 5 at Wood Thtr, 128 E 4th, 673-4989 (\$2.50)

ANTIGONE, by Jean Anouilh, dir. by Christopher Martin, presented on Wed May 28, at 7:30, Sat, May 31, at 10:30 at CSC Repertory Abbey Theatre, 136 E 13th, 677-4210.

THE BIG KNIFE, by Clifford Odets, dir by Rae Allen, presented to June 22, Thurs-Sat at 8, Sun at 3 at ETC Thtr, 182 5th Av., 924-9478 (\$3)

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY, by Harold Pinter, dir by Len Silver, presented by ACSTA on Fri, Sat at 7:45, Sun at 3 and 7 to June 8 at Greenwich Mews Thtr, 13th, 243-6800, PL 5-5120 (\$5)

BLUEBEARD, by Charles Ludlum, presented by Ridiculous Theatrical Co on Thurs-Sun at 8:40 p.m. at Evergreen Theatre, 42 E 11th, 474-0504

BOY MEETS BOY, by Bill Sally and Donald Ward, music and lyrics by Sally, presented Wed-Fri at 8 p.m. Sat at 7:30 and 10:30, Sun at 6 and 13th St Theatre, 50 W 13th, 924-9785

CONFESSION (OSIRIS, PART 2), conceived and dir: by Ken Rubenstein, presented on Thurs-Sun to June 1 at 8 p.m. at Henry St Settlement, 466 Grand, 242-3900 (free)

DIVINE ANIMALS, presented by Seamus Murphy on Fri and Sat at 11 p.m. at Night House, 249 W 18th, 691-7359 (\$3.50)

DUNKARD, adapted by Tanden von, dir by Hamp Watson, presented on Fri and Sat at 8 p.m. at Cabaret Thtr, 129 8th Av. E, 2.50)

VG WITH EDNA ST. VIVIAN, adapted and performed by the Village Rep. Co on Fri, Sat at 7:30, Sun at 6, 677-7359

starting June 6 at 8:30 at the Back East, 196 Av B at 12th, 228-3857

LOVE STORIES, one-act plays dir by Curtiss Sayblack and actors on June 5-7, 12-14, at 7 p.m. at Corner Loft Thtr, 121 University Pl, CH 3-5689 (\$2.50)

LA MALQUERIDA, by Jacinto Benevente, in repertory by Compania de Teatr. Repertorio Espanol at Gramercy Arts Thtr, 138 E 27th, 889-2850 (\$5)

THE MAIDS, by Jean Genet, dir by Christopher Martin, presented on Sat May 31, at 7:30 by CSC Repertory at Abbey Thtr, 136 E 13th, 677-4210.

MEMORIES OF AN UNSAVORY PAST, presented by Brother Theodore on Sat at midnight at Green Thtr, 53 E 11th, 477-0504 (\$3.50)

LES MONSTRES SACHES (THE HOLY TERRORS), by Jean Cocteau, dir. by Richard Taylor, presented May 30-June 29, Fri, Sat at 8, Sun at 7:30 at Little Theatre on W. 26th St., 150 W 26th, 675-9689 (\$2.50, \$3)

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY, adapted from the Turgenev, at 7:30 p.m. at Colonnades Thtr, 428 Lafayette St, 673-2222 (\$2.50)

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN, by Bertolt Brecht, trans by Ralph Matim, music by Paul Dessau, presented by Performance Group Fri-Sun to June 1 at 7:30 p.m. at Performing Garage, 33 Wooster, 966-3651 (\$1.99-\$4.95)

THE MOUSETRAP, by Agatha Christie, presented Thurs-Sat at 8 p.m. Sun at 3 and 8 p.m. at National Arts Thtr, 25 E 4th, 77-9642

LUNCH, by Wm S Burroughs, by Chicago Project NY, dir by Wm S Burroughs, presented Fri-Sun at 8 p.m. Thtr, 70 E 4th 673-9800

ACTION, by Wm Inge, presented to June 15 at 3 p.m. by Bar 125 W 22nd, 677-7359

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At some point in the current season St. Clements was among the violators of the strict terms of the Showcase code. Specifically, they admitted more than 99 people to some of their performances, and they advertised a "suggested contribution". In doing so they were following standard practice among Off-off-Broadway theatres.

Earlier this month, the administrator of the Musical Theatre Lab. season at St. Clements was informed that Equity wished speak to her about violations of the code. The appointment was fixed for a certain day, but for some reason was inconvenient. She tried to reach Equity, left many phone calls, and was not answered. (This is her side of the story). At any rate, the meeting never took place.

Meanwhile, we had started rehearsals of Arthur, knowing nothing of all this. Most of our company members are Equity, and we had to get the standard signed release for them to appear in a showcase. The form was sent to AEA, but not returned.

Then, after we had been in rehearsal about a week, St. Clements heard, indirectly, without any direct notification from Equity, that a letter was being sent out to all the actors in the current productions at St. Clements, including ours, barring them from appearing there. This was done without any prior notice or discussion of the alleged infractions of the Showcase code.

As soon as St. Clements heard about the letter, they called Equity to try to discuss it with the officers there, especially the chairman of the Showcase Committee. They received soothing and reassuring answers. There was nothing to worry about, they were told. The whole thing could be settled by negotiation. The next meeting of the Showcase Committee was on Wednesday, the 28th of May. It would be discussed then.

Although the letters had not reached my actors, who had already been rehearsing for a week, I warned them about the dispute, and passed on to them the reassurances I had received from St. Clements, who in turn had had them direct from Equity.

All this was happening just before and during the Memorial Day Weekend.

May 27th,

Finally, on Tuesday, the letters arrived, but my actors were not particularly put out by them, and continued to work. For my part, I felt that our production was so indirectly involved

with the theatre, and the charges so trivial and formalistic, that nothing could happen to us. I was wrong.

On Wednesday, the 28th, the day after the letters had reached the actors and 2 days after Memorial Day weekend, the two actors appearingⁱⁿ the production before ours, due to open that night, received personal phone calls from one of the high officials at Equity, threatening them with expulsion from the union if they went on. Apparently the two actors were so thoroughly intimidated that they didn't even dare consider moving the show to another space - although with a production that size such a move was perfectly feasible. Meanwhile, critics, first night guests, and general audience had to be turned away.

Astounded, St. Clements called Equity yet again and asked them why, after the verbal assurances that the whole matter could be settled by negotiation, Equity had done this sudden switch and at the eleventh hour decided to show their muscle. "The timing was deliberate" was the only answer they got. Could they come and talk it over at the Showcase Committee meeting? ... No, was the answer, the matter was not on the agenda for that day. It could not be brought up till the following week, Tuesday June 3rd.

And that was how it was left, the day before yesterday.

Various theories were being presented yesterday to explain the mystery. St. Clements had been tricked, and the whole procedure was shady and manipulative, but to what end? Some people think it is to show Equity's muscle. There is a new man in charge there, and Equity is a laughing stock amongst actors for its ineffectuality and bumbling, self-defeating method of operating. The new man may have wanted to show he could take a stand, and face down a prestigious organisation like St. Clements.

Another theory is that, as the present Showcase code is being revised, this gave Equity an opportunity to find out its strength in future bargaining over the terms of the new code.

One of my actors told me that Equity felt that Off-off-Broadway was threatening Broadway, drawing audiences away from commercial theatre and actors away from paying jobs. If that's in fact what the Equity hierarchy feels, it's one of the more outlandish fantasies of the 70s.

Be that as it may, we were caught in the crossfire, and yesterday I was presented with a difficult problem. We are half way through rehearsal. Things are going well, and yet there is a lot of work to be done still. I need all the enthusiasm and energy my company can muster. How do I keep them going, in the hopes that the situation will be resolved, and yet be honest with them about the problems?

There was no question that I had to keep them abreast of developments, and this is being done today. What happens next is the hard part. I feel we have to work on two fronts simultaneously. One is to make it as easy as possible for Equity to come to a negotiated settlement with St. Clements; the other is to look for alternate working spaces - if that's possible. It may not be, as we need a very special area in which to perform, and the timing must be right.

This morning we started calling places around New York where there might be a theatre or performance space that could house the production.

At the same time, to generate some sympathy for our dilemma among the Showcase Committee members when they meet next Tuesday, I have written them the following letter, which also serves to set out my own feelings, and those of the actors, on the matter.

450 Humphrey Street
New Haven
Connecticut 06511

May 30th 1975

Member
Equity Showcase Committee
AEA
New York, NY

Please forgive the impersonal format of this letter, but I wanted to reach as many people as possible, as quickly as I could, to ask for help in settling a painfully unjust situation that has arisen as a result of the current dispute between AEA and St. Clements over alleged infractions of the Equity Showcase Code by St. Clements.

I am the author/director, in collaboration with Richard Peaslee, (Marat/Sade, Indians, The Serpent, The King of the U.S., etc.) of a project which was scheduled as the last production of the Musical Theatre Laboratory season, due to open June 13th. This project, Legends of Arthur, is an extremely complicated piece, involving taped electronic music, elaborate movement and design effects, and has been over a year in the making. When we started rehearsal earlier this month, we had gathered an exceptionally talented group of people, including Allegra Kent, of the New York City Ballet, Robert U. Taylor (Obie winner this year for his designs for Polly), actors such as David Dukes, David Ackroyd, Tricia O'Neill, Berkeley Harris, and a number of younger Equity actors, who were attracted by the special interest of the project. In addition people had already been working for weeks on pre-production - making masks, building set pieces, devoting a lot of time and energy, as well as personal expenditure, to the work. A great sense of occasion had been created, because we all felt that the combination of talents was unique, and it was a stroke of good fortune that we were all free to be together at this time.

Funds were committed and spent, including close to \$1000 of Peaslee's and my own, and we started rehearsal at a downtown studio, knowing nothing of the problems at St. Clements.

Then, as you know, the Equity members of the cast, were sent a letter barring them from appearing at St. Clements. At the same time, I was told by the St. Clements administration that they had spoken to officers in the highest position at AEA, who had given them assurances that the matter would be resolved speedily by negotiation. I passed these assurances on to my cast and we continued to work.

Then, the day before yesterday, the current St. Clements production was closed, and we were told by St. Clements that they had been instructed to wait until the next meeting of the Showcase Committee for further discussion of the problem.

I don't know whether the assurances of a negotiated settlement were intended to reach me. The fact remains that I took them on trust, as did my actors. I assumed they were genuine and sincere, because it is only by chance that our show is due to open at St. Clements (it is not a St. Clements production and several alternate spaces were considered by Peaslee and myself), and I couldn't believe that we, as innocent bystanders to the conflict, would be penalised.

So this is the situation: over a score of gifted artists, some with long years of service to the theatre and with awards to their credit, have sacrificed time, money and labor to come together on this project. The combination of talents is unique and unrepeatable. It is not a simple 2-character piece that can easily be revived and done elsewhere. Nor is it a commercial proposition, which will easily find new sources of revenue. The money already spent is irretrievable. And beyond the money, months of care and labor have gone into it, from people who asked for no reward except to see their work realised, and to have others see it. In short, it is precisely the kind of project which the Equity Showcase Code was designed to encourage.

And now all this is in jeopardy because of a disagreement in which we are in no way involved.

I am appealing to you, therefore, as a fellow member of the theatrical profession, to understand our predicament and to find a solution at your next Equity Showcase Committee meeting that will bring a prompt and amicably negotiated settlement so that we may continue our work and present the piece as scheduled on June 13th.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander

p.s. As a courtesy, I have informed St. Clements that I am writing this letter, but I have not shown them the contents or discussed it with them in any way.

So there, until the Showcase Committee meets next Tuesday, the matter rests. I wouldn't want to predict the outcome, as none of the events up till now has been predictable. Obviously St. Clements, by choosing to ignore provisions of the code, even though other theatres were doing the same, had to be prepared to pay a price. The question is, what price? And how, in such a collaborative art as theatre, to avoid hurting the least powerful (in this case the actors, and other back stage personnel) more than the institution, with its greater powers of survival? St. Clements will no doubt continue, funded by its grants, and supported by its past reputation. But the people who gave up time and energy to the project, may never have a chance to work on it again in quite this way; while the project itself

may receive a serious setback.

The realities of theatre in the U.S. have left organisations such as Actors Equity far behind. In trying to codify the conditions under which actors may practise their craft, the union has come close to shouldering the art out of existence. In trying to protect actors from the overwhelming power of institutions, Equity has paradoxically made them more subject to that very power - since only wealthy producers or large institutional theatres such as Papp's Public Theatre can afford to create the conditions which will satisfy Equity's desire for protection for its members. As a result, actors cannot choose what kinds of plays they will appear in because only a limited number of individuals are allowed to offer them the opportunity to appear in a play.

If you want to know whether this story has a happy or a sad ending, read next month's letter. You can't be more anxious to find out what happens next than I am.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on June 4, 1975.