

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC-21 The Unarmed Circle

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June 30th 1975

Dear Mr. Nolte

Friday, May 30th, the company of ARTHUR spent in music and dance rehearsals, while I and the staff of St. Clements addressed ourselves to the problem created by the action, taken the previous Wednesday (the 28th), in closing the show that was due to open that evening at the theatre. Actors' Equity had made it clear that any activity in the theatre was barred, so the company of ARTHUR was moved to another location for that Friday's rehearsal. By this time we ought to have had St. Clements at our disposal, to have been getting used to the space, to have the feeling of a constant place to rehearse. In view of Equity's attitude, however, we thought it best not to appear to violate their injunction in any way, so another rehearsal hall was found for Friday; yet another was discovered, after a lot of phoning, for Saturday; Sunday, June 1st, was a day off; on Monday and Tuesday we went back to our original rehearsal space, on Fifth Avenue down at 14th street; on Wednesday, if all went well for us at the Showcase Committee meeting, we would be back in St. Clements.

All this time St. Clements was busy lobbying members of the Showcase Committee, while I had the task of maintaining morale amongst the company. On the surface, spirits were high - a little too high. The rehearsals during those days of transition were heady, superficial. Though no one mentioned it openly, the shift of location from day to day was clearly upsetting. Though we (that is St. Clements and the project producer and myself) made light of the situation, the actors knew that things were not going as smoothly as we had first led them to believe. Four days went by in this way. Four days of work at half speed, wheels spinning - and the opening now less than ten days away.

On Tuesday, June 4th, the Equity Showcase Committee was due to meet. Representatives of St. Clements were to go before the committee and state their case, answer questions, give assurances, if necessary,

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that the infractions would not be repeated. The company knew what was going on uptown, and kept asking me during the course of the day whether any news had come through. Their minds were only half focussed on the work. About 1:00 p.m. I got a call from St. Clements. The General Manager and Executive producer of the Musical Theatre Lab. series had been before the Committee; they had been well treated; the questions were gentle; a vote would be taken later in the day and they felt sure the result would be favorable. But so far they had heard nothing.

By four o'clock they had still heard nothing. Five o'clock - still no phone call. It was near the end of the working day, so they decided to call and find out whether a vote had been taken, or whether there had been some unforeseen postponement.

At five thirty, in our Fifth Avenue studio, I heard the result - the vote of the Showcase Committee had been favorable - though with a minority opposed. There was only one snag. A Cease and Desist Order, once issued, could not be rescinded by the Showcase Committee alone. It had to go before a full meeting of the Equity Council, and the next one would not take place till Tuesday, June 10th, three days before we were due to open. Until then the Cease and Desist Order was to remain in effect. I dismissed the actors, called a meeting for 1:00. p.m. the following day at the theatre, and took a taxi uptown to St. Clements to try to figure out our next move.

Why had we been led to believe that our troubles would be over if the Showcase Committee voted in our favor? Why had St. Clements not been informed about the rule governing Cease and Desist Orders? These questions were, and remain, a mystery - but we didn't spend much time discussing them. The real questions were practical. If we had to wait until June 10th to find out whether we could continue, there would be no time to gather momentum for an opening on June 13th. Worse still, if we could not use the theatre, when were the actors to get used to the set, the space, the acoustics? What were the possibilities of finding an alternative space to perform in? Where would we rehearse, and at what cost? Our minimal budget had been put together on the assumption that we could use St. Clements for rehearsal, not some outside studio costing upwards of \$40.00 a day.

A lot of time and energy went into discussing these problems. At the end of it, we all went home having agreed to find out, indirectly, from Equity, whether rehearsal would be permitted in the theatre for the period until June 10th. The General Manager of St. Clements was to do this by calling Equity and asking whether the other show, which had been stopped short on opening night, could stay in rehearsal and if it could, we thought, so could ARTHUR.

A pretty feeble scheme. And, having slept on it, I arrived at the theatre the next morning convinced that it wouldn't work. Equity would see immediately what St. Clements was trying to get at, and all that would be accomplished would be to seal the fate of the show decisively. So, while a couple of other people started making calls to look for alternate performance spaces, I argued for a different approach to Equity, one that came either from the actors, or from Dick Peaslee and myself - but at least something informal, not an apparent attempt by St. Clements itself to get around the Cease and Desist Order.

By 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday, June 4th, I was convinced that the actors should not be burdened with the responsibility of speaking to Equity, so the task fell to Peaslee and myself. We called the Executive Secretary of Equity, Vincent Donahue, and managed to get an appointment for 12:30. The actors were due at the theatre at 1:00. In that half hour we hoped to get (a) permission to continue rehearsal (b) assurances that if we found an alternate performance space we could mount the show there (c) if possible, permission to use St. Clements for rehearsal, assuming that (a) and (b) were granted.

In retrospect, all this effort, thought, second-guessing, and time devoted to dealing with the mounting of a Showcase of a play as if it had been a major constitutional crisis, all this frantic expenditure of mental and emotional energy, should have warned me. But the momentum of the production, the determination to get it on, to meet the challenge of the predicament we found ourselves in (so unfairly), the very difficulties we were encountering, all became in their own way an issue as important as the quality of the work itself. But of course, in the circumstances, it was impossible to devote to the production the care and attention it needed. At a time when all our thoughts and psychic resources should have been poured into our work, we were concocting diplomatic messages, letters, approaches to Equity, calculating budgets of moving the show, estimating time and technical problems that should never have had to concern us. I think that, oddly enough, in my mind at least, solving the problem with Equity had become equated with doing a good job on the production. The one would follow from the other. We were all, as it were, living through one of the stories from the show. Presented with a challenge, we had a duty to face it. Beyond that, we did not think. Yet the stories themselves were there to tell us we ought to think further. We didn't look at the stories, though. We were too busy planning what we would say to Mr. Donahue at 12:30.

Peaslee and I arrived a few minutes early and were shown into his office right away. We had decided to be as straightforward as possible. Our approach was: as creators of the show our main concern was not with the dispute between St. Clements and Equity but with seeing the production through. Therefore any help or suggestions that Equity could give us would be welcome. We wanted to preserve the work done by the actors, and their investment of time and energy, a point which we felt would be appreciated by Equity. Mr Donahue was extremely courteous. He had obviously been through many such meetings in the course of the years since the Showcase Code was adopted. He seemed to be ^{as} anxious as we were to separate the immediate issue of code violations from the fate of this particular production. The meeting was brief and relaxed, and boiled down to one question - were we determined to get the show on or not? If we were, Mr. Donahue, on behalf of Equity, was prepared to give us permission to continue rehearsal, and at St. Clements. In return, he wanted assurances from us that we would look for an alternate performance space for the show, in case the decision went against St. Clements at the Equity Council meeting the following Tuesday; in addition, he wanted to be sure that, if the decision was negative, the actors would not come to the Equity administration with complaints about the result of the vote. In other words, he did not want us to use the actors' feelings as a way of applying pressure on Equity to reverse its decision, or to make an exception. In the circumstances we felt that these conditions were fair, and we agreed to them. We went back to the theatre with a feeling that a major hurdle had been surmounted.

When we presented the actors with the situation they were obviously relieved, but still in two minds. After all, the sword of Damocles still hung over the production. They were especially concerned with the question of alternate space, and in the debate that followed they wanted to be reassured that we would not try to squeeze the production into a space that was too small, or with the wrong audience-actor relationship. We said we felt the same way and on this basis everyone agreed to continue in this limbo condition till the following Tuesday.

There were both good and bad results from that day's work. On the one hand we had secured a reprieve for the production, and we were able to work in St. Clements, which gave us an ideal central location and rehearsal area. On the other hand, having made the promise to find a suitable alternate performance space, we were now committed to finding one, and spending time on the contingency plans for a move to another theatre, a move which might have to be made in very short order, with a minuscule budget and, as it turned out, no technical staff.

This last point was only the latest in a series of surprises that the show was providing for us. Because of the late date of the opening, and the peculiar nature of staffing showcase productions Off-off-Broadway, we found ourselves with less than even the skeleton crew we had expected to mount the production. It would be hard enough to build the set, put in lights and sound equipment, and put together props and costumes, in time for an opening at St. Clements. If the production had to be moved to another space, these difficulties would become staggering.

Nevertheless, we continued. While rehearsals went on in as much order and concentration as we could muster, the search for another theatre soon turned up a number of possibilities, but no certainties. For some reason, Off-off-Broadway was having a lively June season, and there was almost no space available. Eventually we found one, Westbeth, down near the river on the outskirts of the West Village - not an easy place to get to, but a decent theatre, well equipped, almost identical to St. Clements in size and layout, well enough known for audiences to find it if they had to. Meanwhile, all this uncertainty about the opening had created another problem.

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In order for us to/opening as projected, on Friday, June 13th (we had long since passed the point of making jokes about the date) a lot of decisions had to be made about expenditures for materials for set and props. We had already held some of these up dangerously long. With our by now almost non-existent technical crew that opening was in serious jeopardy. If we waited any longer it would be an impossibility. On the other hand, if we built the set for St. Clements and then had to move the show, the cost and effort of moving it might be beyond our capacity. Eventually, after a great deal of ingenuity on the part of our project producer and designer, plus some calculated risk-taking, enough money was committed to production elements to provide us with at least a chance of opening. By now I had almost decided that Friday, 13th, was too soon and that we should try to be ready for the public, at the earliest, Sunday 15th.

You'll notice how little I've talked about the production itself - the script, the concept, the rehearsal process, the actors, what we were discovering, what we were attempting. In a way this reflects quite realistically the relative share of our attention that they received as opposed to the legal and administrative hassles. Of course, a lot of work got done, and the actors applied themselves to the task of learning lines, solving acting problems, and creating characters. But something was missing.

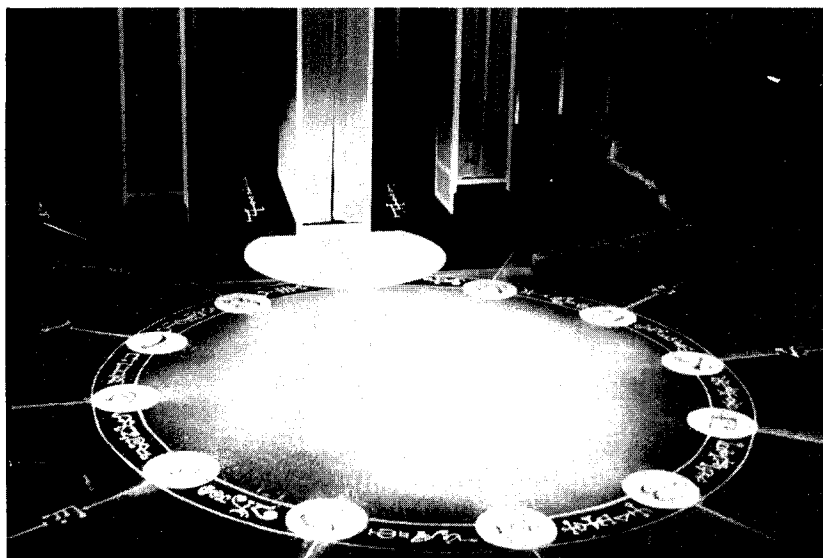
What was missing, as I suggested earlier, was the sense of what made this piece different from just another show that had to go on. In our determination to overcome the obstacles we had acquired a "I-won't-let-this-thing-beat-me" psychology. It became a challenge to our professionalism. We would prove our craftsmanship with it. With some plays, cast in a more familiar mould, where everyone was on firmer ground artistically, this attitude might have been ideal for the situation and could have welded everyone into a coherent group, perhaps even enhanced the value of the piece. But in this instance it created an intolerable conflict (I'm speaking now with the advantage of hindsight). The last thing ARTHUR needed, artistically, was to be treated as a technical problem to be solved. As the actors came to grips with the material, as the characters and stories began to work on them, as the idea of the set (a genuine magic circle created by Robert U. Taylor with authentic elements from the Cabalistic Lesser Key of Solomon) took hold of their imaginations, as the tension between naturalism and formal movement, between mask and character, started to force its way to the surface - the one thing above all the everyone needed was freedom, time to take in the implications of these contradictions, and to be able to explore and investigate them till we all felt that that we had at least some tentative answers. But that was not to be.

Instead, as the days seemed to grow shorter the closer they got to June 10th (the date of the Equity Council Meeting), we began to try to run through the stories as if we had been a summer stock company preparing for the July 4th weekend. By coincidence, the schedules of my leading actors started, at this time, to be filled with TV or filming commitments. When we had started rehearsal, these commitments had appeared easy to work around. Now, with the time we had lost, they turned into yet another booby trap along the way.

On the morning of the 10th we learned that the agenda for the Council meeting was a long one (17 items, someone told us), and we were last. The administrator for St. Clement's was in and out of the Equity Offices all day, waiting for her turn to appear before the meeting. It never came. By five thirty, only the first two or three items on the agenda had been dealt with; the rest were postponed till next week. This time there was no delay, and (fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view) Equity decided to deal with the situation in the most common sense way. They made an executive decision to allow us to continue working, and to open, subject always to the result of the vote the following week at the next

Council meeting. We calculated that once we had opened, and had been allowed to run for a few days, the Council was not very likely to vote to close us for the remaining five or six days of our run. And indeed that's what happened. The following week the Cease and Desist order was lifted.

But that was the following week. The story was not yet over. We now had two and a half days left before we were officially due to open. Props, set, costumes were all late, because of the debate over whether or not to spend the money. Now, at last, they started to come in, and the actors were taken aback. Though we had talked about them, and shown the company sketches of everything, nothing had prepared them for the reality. There were real swords, heavy enough to kill. There were strange objects made of plexiglass that twirled and winked in the lights. And there was the set itself, whose properties were untried, in both a physical and a psychological sense. It looked like this, as I photographed it in black and white after a couple of days of use:



That strange glowing effect, like a galaxy seen through a telescope, was hypnotic to work inside. It affected the actors powerfully,

and became a center for (as yet undifferentiated) energy. Bob Taylor intended to 'arm' the circle - that is, ground this energy by reciting certain ritual phrases and performing a ceremony. He was finally able to do this on the Saturday night, i.e. the 14th. Too late.

On the evening of the 12th, as we were running through the play for the second time that day, using set, masks, lights, and full quadrophonic sound, the actor playing Gawain, David Dukes, began to leap and jump dramatically during his journey 'home' from his encounter with the Green Knight. The music ^{was} up full blast, and even when David fell to the ground I thought it was part of an improvised addition to his rehearsed movement. Then I saw that he was signalling frantically for the music to stop. We cut the sound. He had torn a ligament in his knee, aggravating an old injury and, as we learnt the next day, he was out of the show.

We opened eventually, though not with the show we had all planned. All the same, in spite of everything, a few interesting things emerged from the experience of trying to put on the fragments of the by now shattered production. What they were, and how they relate to some of the concepts I have been exploring this year and describing in previous newsletters, I shall try to explain next time.

Sincerely,

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

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on July 15, 1975.