

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 22 - Afterthoughts

New York
September 26th 1975

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

I am currently taking a short leave of absence from my Institute program - for two reasons. One is the sudden flurry of interest in BOCCACCIO, which has found a home at a New York theatre, the Edison (and should have been in previews the day before yesterday, but is currently paralysed by the musicians' strike). Though not at all what I had in mind for the script, when I started it over two years ago, a Broadway production (technically, the Edison, seating 500 people, is a so-called "middle house") was an experience to be lived through (anguished through?) and I had to give it fulltime attention for the past 10 weeks. The other reason was that the experience of mounting "ARTHUR" made me revise some of my ideas about what is and is not possible in the current state of theatre in New York, and I was glad to have an opportunity to take a deep breath before moving on.

In spite of all the political problems, "ARTHUR" had its positive side. The material proved itself in the sense that it had enough energy of its own to pierce the barriers thrown up by circumstances and reach out to an audience. The conflict of styles, which combined formal with relaxed dialogue, music that was, as the composer described it, "future primeval", the abrupt changes of level in performance style - all of this made it a difficult experience for an audience, and was all the more difficult because the intentions were not fully realised. But enough of it took on a life of its own to convince me that the material breathes. Regardless of its other properties as a stage set, the magic circle was an image of power. Actors felt it. I felt it. And it communicated itself to an audience.

Rehearsals of "ARTHUR" brought me more and more into conflict with some basic principles with which actors are instilled in their training - ideas about what constitutes a character, motivation, logic, justification for actions. In the end this had a liberating effect because, as we got into performance, some of the actors began to feel that they were inspired by this conflict to reassess their own ideas about these questions.

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

Specifically, they found in their contact with the images of these stories that their existence as characters was defined solely by action, and the inner life that would motivate this action came second. You are what you do. The gesture creates the thought. An act - to act - is a magical operation. This discovery came much too late to be of much practical use in performance, but for me it brought to the surface a lingering half-expressed doubt I'd had about the whole movement of which St. Clements and our production was a part - Off-off-Broadway, where all experimental and avant-garde theatre in New York has congregated over the past decade.

The dispute with Equity, which caught us in the middle, was an outward manifestation of a much deeper change. This dispute broke out into public debate soon after. A great deal of fervor and indignation went into the meetings that took place when Equity announced its new code for Showcase productions. These paragraphs from the New York Times of August 25th (the first day of BOCCACCIO rehearsals, as it happens) sum up the feeling that was abroad among actors and Off-Broadway producers:

By DAVID VIDAL

A special membership meeting of Actors Equity Association will be held today to try to solve a dispute that is crucial to the future of Off Off Broadway, the non-profit developmental theater movement that has become one of the liveliest segments of the New York theater scene.

"We are talking about what is probably the greatest theatrical laboratory in the world," said Mrs. Virginia Kahn of the 65-theater Off Off Broadway Alliance.

"We have to resolve this rather quickly," said William Lieberman, playwright, of the Quai Theater and the Dramatists Guild.

At stake for theater goers is the availability and the quality of productions in Off Off Broadway theaters that in past seasons have nurtured the talents of writ-

ers, directors, and actors, and spawned such hits as "Hair," "Godspell" and "A Chorus Line."

At the center of the dispute lie some new monetary provisions of a showcase code issued three weeks ago by Equity to govern participation by its members in Off Off Broadway or "showcase" productions.

The opponents of these provisions say they would kill the movement and prevent the experimentation that is vital to creating new ideas and new audiences for the theater.

Threat to Survival Seen

Playwrights, producers and even some Equity actors in the movement say the code, issued on Aug. 4, is onerous, unrealistic, and impractical besides constituting a real threat to survival.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, AUGUST 25, 1975

Here is what all the fuss was about, as printed in the same article in the New York Times.

Some Provisions of the New Rules

Among the controversial provisions of the new Equity code governing the use of actors in Off Broadway productions are the following:

Productions must employ only Equity actors and stage managers unless Equity gives approval for the use of nonunion personnel.

There will be a \$15 bookkeeping fee for administration of the code.

Equity members must be reimbursed for transportation to rehearsals or performances at the minimum of two subway fares daily.

Part of the box-office receipts, under the eye of an Equity-designated monitor, must be set aside to defray any additional expenses.

No Equity actor may be removed from the cast without union approval, and all members who have

rehearsed four weeks or less in a showcase production automatically become owners of 2 per cent of the present and future rights of a show.

This share increases to 8 per cent if rehearsals went beyond the normal four weeks, and ownership rights become effective after at least eight rehearsals or two weeks from the first.

If a showcase production subsequently goes commercial, or leads to a movie, television or other contract, the Equity members retain their ownership rights even if they do not participate in these new ventures.

The persons held liable for these payments are the author and the producer of the showcase, who also agree not to enter into any commercial contract that does not guarantee these rights to Equity members.

Subsequently, members of Equity voted to suspend these new rules, and have a new set worked out by Equity and the OOBroadway producers, to be submitted for approval to the metropolitan membership.

All very well, and I agree that the new rules, if put into effect, would have crippled OOBroadway. But what was never said, or even hinted at, was that the ideal situation implied by the quotes in the first paragraph of the article ("the greatest theatrical laboratory in the world" etc.), which implies a situation in which artists come together freely, using the best of their talents, to create new works in ways not available to them in the commercial theatre, does not exist. As "ARTHUR" demonstrated very clearly, there are strict limits on the laboratory aspects of OOBroadway - limits of time (no production can rehearse longer than four weeks); of concentration (actors are constantly thinking about jobs, auditions, how to get to and from unemployment offices); of production, staff, facilities. Moreover, the pressure to produce results, to attract an audience, and even to get good notices (which in turn attracts foundation support), has meant that OOBroadway has become virtually a mirror image of the system it once thrived on cheating.

What all this means for the practising theatre artist is that OOBroadway has become institutionalised, much like the regional theatres and New York based organisations such as the Public Theatre. And so, in OOBroadway as in any other theatrical situation, there are nervous producers, a sense of opening night, actors juggling engagements so as to appear in the best showcase - all of which constricts real exploration of new forms and new ideas.

For my own part, as a result of all this, I have begun to question some of my own working assumptions - among them, that New York provides the best arena in which to test new work, and that the professional acting community here can be counted on to collaborate whole-heartedly in this kind of laboratory. Ironically, I am doing this at the very moment when a work, originally conceived as a laboratory piece and performed as an Equity Showcase, is about to open on Broadway.

Whether it actually will or not is something known only to God and Local 802.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kenneth Cavander", written over a horizontal line.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on September 29, 1975