

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 23 - THE SIBYL OF FIRST AVENUE
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Dear Mr. Nolte

Five months, three postponements, two directors, and one musicians' strike after we started work on the revised version of BOCCACCIO the show opened at the Edison Theatre in New York last month. It had played nearly fifty previews, thanks to the above-mentioned obstacles, and everybody was tired and confused. Most significant critics, unlike their colleagues in Washington, did not like it - and up to a point I don't blame them. The show was a much debased version of its Washington version, which in turn did not really represent what we (Dick Peaslee, the composer, and I) had started out with over two years ago. This was the fifth time the show had been produced, and the first time it had aroused such antagonism. As authors, we felt that the show's greatest assets for an audience - its spontaneity, its sleight-of-hand quality, its understated details, had been replaced by a singleminded emphasis on sex, frantic playing for laughs, and a superficial gloss that invited comparison with more conventional Broadway musicals - to our detriment.

Would people have liked what we wrote if they had liked the show as a whole better? Would they have liked it better if it had been done "our" way, as opposed to the way the producers, the director they fired, and the director they brought in to replace him, not/mention the two choreographers, all devised for it? We'll never know. It's not an experience I care to relive at this moment by describing. I took a leave of absence from my Institute work because I had a feeling that it would not contribute much to my understanding of the possibilities of theatre to have lived through this production. And it didn't! Perhaps some time in the next few months I'll be able to look back and see it in perspective and say something coherent about its significance in the overall scheme of things, but at the moment it feels like a time in purgatory from which, at last, and none too soon, I've been released.

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One of the questions I'm planning to explore over the next few months is, what happens when the kind of experiments I've been conducting as laboratory work are performed by people who are unfamiliar with the background of my work, maybe not even trained actors? From time to time I've touched on the possibility that this kind of theatrical experience may have its roots in other kinds of experience, healing, for instance, or mystical revelation, or an increase in self-knowledge. (KC1 & 2, KC 16 & 17). An opportunity to find out more about this came up this last month, when I was invited by the School of Fine Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to come and work with their theatre department on some of the ideas I was developing this spring. It was some time since I'd had any contact with students, and so I was interested to see how these exercises would strike them. Would they be useful to a theatre major in the midst of his training? Would they have a general educational value?

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is a 35,000 student campus, the largest of the state system, with an active School of Fine Arts offering courses in Dance, Art, Music, Theatre, Film, and Video. The theatre department is undergoing some reorganisation right now, and my visit was part of a series of guest appearances by professional theatre people. I had no idea what the students were expecting and I didn't want to try to meet - or go against - expectations. I thought I would learn more by exposing them to the work, explaining as I went along.

I was there for about two weeks (with a side trip back to New York for a rehearsal of BOCCACCIO). I met between 30 and 40 students, in groups of 8 to 18. I never quite got the hang of how their classes were organised; sometimes there seemed to be overlaps from ^{one} class to the next, at other times I would arrive at what I thought was the next session of the same class and see an entirely new set of faces. When I started, I got the feeling that they were enjoying themselves but couldn't quite understand what all the things I was doing had in common with theatre. By the end, they could see the connection better, and some were anxious to continue, but what really struck me was the way the exercises I put them through started to work as an educational, not a theatre-training experience.

Let me explain what I mean by this. University theatre programs at an undergraduate level are a hybrid. They combine

a number of courses in literary history and criticism, with courses in other subjects inside and outside the humanities, mixed in with a certain amount of practical training, such as scene work, voice and body training, experience on actual productions. The students I talked to at UWM seemed to think of the theatre major as a trial period for themselves, giving them a chance to decide whether or not they wanted to enter professional theatre. A few were thinking of using theatre as therapy, or going on to teach drama. But most were openminded and undecided. This is all very well, and I suppose it can be educational, or even inspirational, but from my point of view, frankly, it seemed pretty dismal. It was neither fish nor fowl as a program of study. It certainly wasn't anything like the "real" thing - earning your living in one of the performing arts; nor did it seem powerfully concentrated as a humanistic education. What's worse, the students seemed to know this, and so, up to a point, did the faculty.

Coming in from the outside, I was faced with this situation, and couldn't do very much about it. The students were locked into their courses and programs of study and the theatre department production schedule. The Dean of the School of Fine Arts, who is new, made an interesting suggestion, however. He said I should think of what I was doing as a way to lead them into other areas, to open up their minds generally - not to try to shoehorn the Arts into education but to treat the Arts as education. In practice, this meant that I shouldn't try to adapt what I was doing to what they thought they wanted out of a theatre major, but simply to expose them to it and see what happened. The results were enlightening - for me, at any rate.

Out of the dozen or so exercises and techniques to which I introduced them, I'd like to tell you about three that seemed especially useful. The first is something I first did about 18 months ago and described in KC 3; it involves two spaces - one real, one a 'place of dreams'. In the 'real' space, two characters enact a scene which ends in deadlock; in the other space, which they enter as soon as they have reached deadlock, they experience a 'dream', which is acted out for them by the other actors, who have been watching the scene in the 'real' space. The dream comes about at the instigation of the first two actors, but may be elaborated and interpreted by the others as it unfolds.

At the end, the two original characters go back to the space where they enacted their deadlock scene, and try to describe to each other a dream, the dream, which they have respectively just dreamed.

There are several aspects of this exercise that are of use to actors in their training, but I was less interested in these than in seeing how the students opened up during the "Dream" part of the ceremony, and learnt something about their own motives and emotions at this moment in their lives. "Dream" was a metaphor, in other words, that enabled them to manifest some of their common concerns and anxieties. They created a temporary collective myth. In this case, the specific situation that triggered off the action taking place in the dream world, was one that represented the ancient conflict between art and personal commitment. The improvisation that expressed this conflict was not particularly inspired, but once they took it into the other dimension and handed it over, as it were, to their imaginations to play with, it became the source of some worthwhile insights for them. Perhaps a condition for such an exercise being successful is that everyone should share a common starting point, a common set of needs. Probably so. But granted that condition, I could see exercises like this being integrated into more formal psychology and sociology courses, and allowing students to have an emotional and personal experience of something that otherwise would stay on a purely mental plane. The point is that performance is not important. No one is criticising, there is no pressure to 'act' well. As a result 'acting' (in the bad sense) stops, and actions (representing unspoken thoughts and feelings) begin. In the telling of the 'dreams' to each other afterwards, there was a noticeable change in the two young actors. They had become more sincere, more relaxed, in a way more grown up.

Another exercise, leading in a different direction, was one I invented for the occasion. The instructions I gave to the students were as follows: divide up into groups of three or four (there were enough students to make four such groups); each group is to devise an "obstacle" that a traveler might encounter on a journey; this obstacle can be physical, or words may be involved, or it can be a creature, or a mystery of some kind; the one requirement is that the obstacle should have a key which, when it is discovered, enables the traveler to continue on his way; each group was to think up one such obstacle

independently of the other groups. Then a traveler was chosen, and, just to make things more interesting, the traveler was given a helper, in the shape of a person (or creature) who could not speak, but could communicate through signs and who was allowed physical movement and powers denied to the traveler. Then we sent the traveler off on a journey, to meet first one obstacle, then another, along the way.

The obstacles the students made up ranged from a line-up that looked like a football team, a Venus fly-trap (in order to pass you had to feed it a fly), to a mysterious organism that tightened its hold on the traveler the more he struggled, but responded to passivity by relaxing. Again, it wasn't so much the imaginative achievement of the students in the creation of the obstacles (which was mixed, at best) that was important so much as the first hand experience it gave them of what had up till then been a purely literary exercise. For what I had given them was the skeleton of a group of hero myths, in which a hero, such as Hercules, or Gilgamesh, or Krishna, or Sir Gawain, or Hiawatha, sets out on a quest and achieves (or falls short of) perfection, but along the way learns and is transformed. After the exercise was over the students suggested some changes in the format which would have made it more interesting, they thought - and these changes were perfectly in tune with the ancient mythological motifs I've just mentioned. The aspect of this exercise that intrigues me most is the problem-solving (and problem-setting) in physical action - which in turn becomes a lesson in dealing with similar situations in life (such as the person who confronts you and cannot be made to relax so long as you struggle with him), which in turn leads back to the social and ethical function of the stories every culture tells itself in the form of legends. And to me, this has much more to do with a general educational function than simply teaching prospective actors mime and improvisation.

Lastly I introduced them to the 'reincarnation game' (I think I described this in KC 19), in which a person is led back, by a series of images and actions, to a previous existence. I put the word 'reincarnation' in quote marks, because I don't want to imply any belief (or disbelief) in the phenomenon. It's simply an image, a tool for the performer. The students thought it pretty funny, and started to giggle when they were doing it - partly because the person who volunteered to return to a 'past life' was rather unprepossessing. He looked younger than his age, was inarticulate, and seemed

shy and out of place in an acting class. And then, as the exercise continued, someone jokingly suggested that he might have been a monk, and this suggestion was presented to him as part of the exercise, which he had to use to create a different reality, whereupon a change took place, in him and in the others taking part, so that no longer was it a joke. It seemed really possible, the giggling died away, and the reserve and inarticulateness in the student who was the subject became part of a character that commanded respect, a person who was inward, thoughtful, and sincere. When the exercise was over we talked about it at some length, and the student told me that he had been spending most of the semester on a history project; the project had taken him all over the state, researching the life of a figure in the early political history of Wisconsin. He was fascinated by this politician, but didn't know why. Then, very recently, he had discovered that he shared the exact same birthdate with the object of his research. In this case, it's less easy to see an academic connection with the exercise I was doing and I can't do more than guess at the possible uses it might have. But I do know that the best learning takes place when one is, as this student was, fascinated by a subject or a person, so that it ceases to be a labor to find out more about it, but you are drawn on by some unknown connection between yourself and the object of your research. These connections are private, and personal. Often you are unaware of them until they 'happen' to you. But suppose you could be guided in the right direction ...? This was the last exercise I did before I left, but in a way it was the most impressive, and when I have the chance I would like to try it again, over a longer period, with a group of students.

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I had an experience this month which crystallised some of the issues of the kind of theatre I'm trying to create. There are many fortune tellers, psychics, handwriting experts, people who will paint your 'aura' for you, around New York. One of these works out of a bar on First Avenue. She reads your palm and I will call her Sibyl, because that's what she is.

Sibyl sits on a banquette against the wall furthest from the bar where a handful of people are sitting at four in the afternoon, waiting for a date, watching TV, sipping their drinks, gossiping with the bartender. She sits where, later in the

day, a small rock group will perform, but right now there are only empty tables, and a small platform where the rhythm section of the group has left its instruments. At the tables closest to Miss Sibyl, as the bartender calls her, two or three people are waiting. The woman consulting her now has both hands on the table. A tiny night light attached to an extension cord illumines the woman's palm, highlighting curves and wrinkles. The lights in the bar are dimmed, and in the glow from the nightlight Sibyl's face, elongated and parchment stiff, looks like an Egyptian mummy. She will be eighty on her next birthday, I'm told. They say she was once a Ziegfeld girl. As she talks she puffs on a cigarette, then lays it down to pick up a glass filled with a clear liquid. From time to time the bartender walks up to refill it. Most of what she says barely carries across the table. The woman sitting opposite has to lean closer to hear everything. For minutes on end Sibyl holds the other person's hand, kneading the bones of the upper part of the palm between her thumb and third finger, talking all the time. The interview comes to an end with one last squeeze of the woman's hand, half way between a push and a handshake. The woman fumbles for a five dollar bill. Sibyl takes a long pull on her cigarette, says "Thank you" in a curt brisk voice, and it's my turn.

"Put your hands on the table." She gives me no time to reflect. The first words are spoken almost before I've sat down, and she goes on with a quick rush of judgment based on the way I obeyed that first peremptory command. She talks fast, scarcely seems to think. She sprinkles what she says with little recurring phrases like, "You annoy me, child ..." or "Now this may sound silly ... Does that sound silly to you?" (but she doesn't really want an answer). "I'm going out on a limb here," she says once or twice, and often she's dogmatic, even accusing. She doesn't seem to care if I approve or like what she's telling me, and yet in the midst of it all there's a subtle undercurrent of flattery. She's so concentrated it brings a lump to my throat; she's talking about a whole life in a way that makes me want to beg her forgiveness for not being better than I am. She makes me want to reform, almost.

People come to her primed, after all. They're seeking, restless, self-questioning. And she gives you a generous chunk of time, thirty-five, forty minutes, so she must care about you, right? And she's quick, she's always ahead of you, there's no time to think or make judgments. Objectively, as you analyse it afterwards, there was nothing too specific in what she said -

a few dates, a few facts, with perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of accuracy. But so long as you sat there you believed. Time stopped. With the light on her face shining from below, sculpturing the little crannies and pouches into something dispassionate and eternal, the murmured words, which you have lean over the table to catch, and above all with her holding your hand, taking you back to a child-like state, when an older person also held your hand, and led you through the mystery of the world. Now it all happens again. This time the mystery is yourself, and she is leading you through it in a way that makes it all fresh, a revelation. Maybe she told you nothing that you didn't know already. But then so do dreams, psychoanalysts, your best friend, your wife or husband, but do they ever make a difference to your life? Perhaps she won't make a difference to your life either, but if the experience of sitting across the table from her can become a screen on which you project some message of change or healing for yourself, then she has earned her five dollars.

The truth is - it's a performance, and Sibyl is an actress. The lighting, the wait, the suspension of disbelief, the personal need you bring to the table with you, the drawing of you into an emotional orbit where you become a child again - all this makes it possible for you to read into the simplest of statements and images profound truths that may change your life ... if you will let them. The Mysteries of Eleusis, over the course of a thousand years, forbade initiates to reveal what went on there, not because what went on was so strange or weird or complicated, but for the very opposite reason - because what went on was so absurdly simple that if it was exposed to the cold light of day it would die and become useless for those who had gone through the experience. The secret lies in the experience itself, in what you took away that is uniquely yours, and something only you can know. It comes from you and not from Sibyl, and yet only the sibyl can elicit it from you. Somewhere in that is another secret - of a new relationship between actor and audience in a theatre of the future.

Best wishes



Kenneth Cavander

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