

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 24 THE TWIN-ENGINEED PEGASUS

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, UMBC, is an Antonioni landscape in superscope, huge brick and glass structures strung over the hills on the outskirts of Baltimore, connected by pathways and endless flights of shallow concrete steps terraced into the hillsides. The parking lots are airstrip-size but nowhere can you drive up ^{to} a front door, so that a stranger taxi can probe, as mine did, for hours, seeking a place to let its passenger off - an office, a reception area, a dormitory. But they are all garrisoned behind strips of grass and pavement, without driveways, and there doesn't seem to be a center anywhere, or at least not at six o'clock on a Friday evening in the last week before Christmas, with the sun setting over Washington and a wind off the Chesapeake Bay slashing through the alleys between the buildings as I searched for one human being who could tell me where I was.

I was looking for the Fine Arts Building where my host was Herbert Blau, Dean of Arts and Humanities. Blau is one of the most interesting and unusual men in American Theatre. With Jules Irving, he founded the San Francisco Actors Workshop in the late fifties, and built it into a distinguished regional theatre, bringing Brecht, Beckett, Genet to the Bay area in intelligent and intense productions. I visited their theatre in the mid sixties and saw Aristophanes playing in repertory with Enid Bagnold there. The Actors Workshop achieved national recognition and soon after I was there Blau and Irving were invited to come to New York and run the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at the Lincoln Center. At what was supposed to be the National Theatre of the U.S. Blau opened with a production of Danton's Death that was advertised as a shot at the Johnson administration. More unorthodox and intellectually bristling productions followed. The board of directors was not amused and, under pressure, Blau resigned. He was then asked to join the faculty of the new multi-million dollar California Institute of the Arts, and in his dual role as Provost and Dean of the Theatre Department, he created a ferment of experiment and controversy. But C.I.A. (interesting acronym) is heavily supported by money from the Disney empire, and Blau

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is no Mickey Mouse, and so, in three years, there was the inevitable eruption. By then Blau had formed a group of actors in the style of Chaiken, Grotowski, Gregory, a few dedicated followers working with him in comparative obscurity. He went to Oberlin College with the group and there they produced a version of the Atreus myth and a piece on the Donner Party. In 1974, UMBC was looking for a new Dean for Arts and Humanities and offered the job to Blau. He said he would come only on condition that he could bring his group and continue to work with them using the facilities of the University. UMBC accepted. Blau reformed the group, started a new piece, and it was to see their latest work that I was picking my way through the monoliths that night last month.

The visit was of interest to me in a number of ways. Blau's saga is a paradigm of a certain kind of experience, a reverse Odyssey which many people in contemporary theatre have lived through in the last decade. Secondly, as you can see from the titles of the works his group produced last year, myths ancient and modern were on his mind, and his new piece deals with another of these - Hamlet. And then, serendipitously, I found out that in Baltimore an organisation called "The Theatre Project" was becoming a center for a new network of experimental theatres across the country that might take over where Off-off-Broadway is being forced to leave off. (See KC-22 and the comments I made there on the current situation between showcase theatres and Actors' Equity).

But first, Hamlet. The Fine Arts building contains a number of dance and rehearsal rooms. To someone starved of space, as I am, from working in New York, they looked like a banquet of playing areas, all paved with polished hardwood, mirrors on the walls, a variety of lighting, comfortable benches around the perimeter. The actors arrived in one of these rooms punctually at 7.30., as they do four nights of the week, working through until midnight. They work another five hours during the day on Saturday. The rest of the time they earn their livings, either in Baltimore or at UMBC in jobs which Blau has found for them. Theatre, for them, is something they have to make sacrifices for. They are all in their twenties, but they act as if they've no time to waste. They get down to work immediately, and start with an hour of exercises, body-wrenching gymnastics that send them toppling in cartwheels, head-stands, leaps and dives, contortions and stretchings. At the end of this session, they are ready to begin.

Needless to say, they are not "rehearsing" Hamlet, Shakespeare's play as written, although they carry copies of the text with them all the time, and Blau expects that all eight of the actors (four men and four women) will have learnt almost the whole of the play

by the time work on the project has been completed. Instead, the play is an organising image for their work, the story being treated as a germinal egg from which their theatrical ideas will hatch. Blau has given them the text to use as a jungle gym. They swing on a line here, a scene there, and use the action of the play as a trampoline to jump into other dimensions, unconscious associations, sub- and pre-human areas of behavior. Fragments of the play become splintered and reassembled in a montage-like effect which may present, within the space of a few minutes, Claudius trying to pray, the murder of Polonius, the Hamlet-Ophelia scene ("get thee to a nunnery"), and the closet scene with Gertrude. Often there is simultaneous action and speech from two or more of these scenes going on at once. When it is pushed to extremes, this technique can result in an undifferentiated stew of sound and mangled action. But when it comes off, as it did once or twiceⁿ the rehearsals I witnessed, layers of meaning are peeled off the text, old and quote-worn lines become charged with new meaning, there seems to be no gap between Shakespeare's words and contemporary thoughts, even 20th century expressions (which the actors throw in on occasion), and you begin to feel at close quarters^{to} some of the primordial violence and passion that lies behind the story - all made more intense by the control and elegance and sophistication of Shakespeare's text.

Blau's work is a development of his own artistic interests. But like Dean Corrigan at UWM in Wisconsin (see KC-23), Blau sees the presence of his company as an educational instrument, not just a private aesthetic pursuit conducted in stolen hours when the University is quiet and only the janitors roam the corridors. It's going to take time, but already some members of his company teach classes and train students. The impersonal mammoth blocks of complexes like UMBC desperately need some other form of life to force its way through the concrete of their utilitarian degree-oriented schedules, classes, and nine-to-five student bodies. My image of Baltimore is of dark stretches of uninhabited wintry stone and in the middle of it, barely discernible, the intensely active focus of energy created by nine people pulling Hamlet apart and in turn being pulled apart by Hamlet, all in preparation for being born again.

This summer, UMBC will be host of the Experimental Theatre Festival, and while I was in Baltimore I discovered that there exists, strung across the country, a chain of experimental theatres which constitute an "under-underground", certainly as far as the theatre-going public is concerned. Whereas a certain audience may exist for, or at least know of, companies such as The Manhattan Project, The Open Theatre, Mabou Mines, The Performance Group, all of which

are based in New York, have made their reputation there, and receive grants from state and national sources, even have permanent homes and production facilities on an institutional level, how many people know of the ProVisional Theatre of North Vermont, L.A., the Omaha Magic Theatre, the Empty Space Association, of Seattle, the Dream Theatre, Chicago, Kelly's Seed and Feed Theatre, Atlanta, and dozens of others around the country, where, more than possibly, the center of real experimentation in U.S. theatre may have shifted. Or, to be more accurate, there is no center any more. It used to be in New York, with companies such as those I mentioned, which have now achieved a status and a reputation that has attracted the freezing winds of publicity. But in so doing, they have become rigid, no longer hot beds, but cold storage. While I was in Baltimore I visited what has become the headquarters and clearing house for this new non-centralised activity, a place called "The Theatre Project", housed in a building that used to be the home of Baltimore's prestigious Center Stage (now an establishment regional theatre offering a season of Chekhov, Moliere, and the moderns in its new well financed downtown building).

Some people call it free theatre. The title of its news organ, published in Baltimore, is "Alternative Theatre", but neither title is really satisfactory. Some of its tendencies, characteristics and concerns could be summed up in the following way ...

There is an impulse towards collectives, groups without impresarios, or without a single charismatic artist at their head. They are not interested in a museum approach to theatre or in showcases intended to enhance the careers of writers or performers. These theatres settle in a community and adapt their work to the life and needs of the immediate audience, and send out feelers to local educational, social, and rehabilitation organisations. Their approach is less production than process-oriented. They are mobile, physically and mentally, always prepared to adjust to a different performance space or audience. There seems to be a pattern of affiliation with local colleges or universities, either financially or in terms of the audiences and creators (the Theatre Project, for instance, was founded as an extension of the Antioch College Arts Program, and still receives about 15% of its funding from that source.) They are literally 'free' - donations are accepted but not required, as they are in almost every New York showcase, and a great deal of energy is spent on strategies for survival (this probably differs only in degree from every other theatre venture).

I'm not suggesting by any means that all virtue has fled from

New York and that the fine and daring experimental groups who have been working there for over a decade are no longer worth serious consideration. But I think that a new urgency and seriousness has come into the small companies who have formed in various communities across the country. They are matching the better known, more established metropolitan groups in terms of dedication and willingness to take risks. In the course of the next few months I hope to visit a few more of them and report to you on their work.

In my own theatre work during the past month I've been concentrating on the structures and texts derived from workshops I conducted in the months before the ARTHUR and BOCCACCIO productions. I've also been preparing a stripped-down version of ARTHUR itself. The first of the texts I took up was a Dream Incubation Ceremony, using some of the techniques I'd been exploring earlier this year. I'm doing this with the help of two psychologists, one a therapist, the other a researcher, both of whom have been drawn by their professional interest to investigate the relationship of dreams to theatre.

One of them, the therapist, has a loft space in New York where she had conducted a number of experiments before we met. Her approach had been to act out actual dreams. In a paper she wrote on this work she said:

... We do not decide what to do, we just do it. Someone creates the setting with a few props. Someone else becomes a character. A scene develops. Usually the dreamer remains a passive observer at this stage.

In our work so far, we have found that some of the dreamer's energy is bound or blocked by an indecipherable symbol or sequence. This may be due to repression in the Freudian sense or it may be due to unfamiliarity with the message that the dream is trying to present. The dreamer is frustrated until this energy is released ... Often the dreamer is afraid to look at the dream image because he thinks he will disapprove of what it is saying. Or he is embarrassed that others will disapprove. The actors, by becoming that which is feared and by playing it to the hilt (i.e. with pleasure as actors) demonstrate that whatever it is is in their repertoire too. Sometimes the actors, by making mistakes, help the dreamer refocus. Often the dreamer cannot say what the dream is about, but he or she can always say what it is not about ... Sometimes an actor unconsciously tunes in on a meaning ... or playing with simple phrases can give access to deep truths ... *

The other psychologist had been using a more literary approach, based on the ancient temples of Isis and Aesculapius, where a priest would prepare a suppliant for a night in the sanctum, during which he would dream that the god would appear to him, offer him advice on his sickness, and then, the next morning, the priest would interpret the advice for him. Translated into modern terms this becomes a series of exercises involving the keeping of a 'dream journal', the instructions for which read (in part):

The keeping of an intensive personal journal requires that you commit yourself to a process. Journal writing is a process that unfolds slowly and organically and needs time and nourishment to bear fruit. Commit yourself to this process, a process that is often taking place invisibly and without "you" knowing it. There is a part of you which knows what it is doing, believe that part and be faithful to a process at work within you ... In order to do this kind of writing we need to prepare ourselves in a special way ... *

This preparation, as the journal instructions describe it, is the equivalent of the purification and dedication process that the person approaching the temple god would have gone through in the ancient world, and we incorporated some of these ideas into the experiment we did this month.

We met first to set up the ground rules. We all agreed that we were interested in creating a public ceremonial that would stimulate helpful and healing dreams, drawing on a collective source of images and mythic situations that is universal. (There is of course a hypothesis behind this which we were all taking for granted, but part of the interest of the project is to see whether the hypothesis is proved). We also agreed that we did not want to act out existing dreams as an end in itself (though we might find ourselves doing this as part of a larger form). We did not want, at this stage, to deal with neurosis or pathological states. We wanted to find a way of stimulating useful and constructive dreams in generally sound and well-balanced people.

The first step was to use ourselves as guinea pigs, and we met with a small group of like-minded people (non-actors) to work on this. One of the basic instruments we used was chanting and drumming, which both of my collaborators had used extensively, but I had not. Improvised chanting and drumming is a standard technique for altering consciousness in almost every traditional religious and magical ritual. Here are a few of the notes I made

* "Dream Realization" prepared for the A.R.E. Dream Research Project by Henry Reed & Thomas Verner

as a result of our sessions ...

As a participant you don't hear the whole effect. It becomes a challenge - to try to hear the totality of the sound while being part of it. Sometimes one particular element of it swims to the surface. You try to respond to it, the other sound responds to you ... You try to create a dialogue, and you think you hear them answering ... But do they really ...?

At times you slow down or speed up and you realise that others are doing the same. Did they do it because of you? You deliberately increase the tempo, the intensity. Or you change the rhythm in some marked way. The rest follow. Power!

The observer is always there, inside you, on the alert. Can it ever be absent without some other outside force to take over and hold your attention? Without that outside force there is an irresistible temptation to analyse, become self-conscious, ask questions ... do they lead, or do they follow? Is the sound musical? Questions like that.

Another temptation: to impose a form, or to search for one. Sometimes you think you've discovered a form, or that it constellated itself out of the general sound. You imagine that you found it but in the very moment of finding it you start to impose. Perhaps the lesson is - every time you discover a form, you ought to break it. Discover - break - discover another - break again ... and so on.

One of the exhilarating, and at the same time troubling, experiences - to find yourself, stopping, relaxing, deciding to take a rest, thinking that you are doing it on your own, then to find that everyone else is doing precisely the same thing at precisely the same moment.

This feeling of synchronistic communication, communion if you like, was one of the things that made us decide to build drumming into the first draft of the Dream Incubation. I won't describe what we did moment by moment because I consider it a work in progress and until I've written the more or less final draft it muddies the working process to recapitulate the old version in detail. But, to synopsise it, the ceremony lasted a couple of hours or so and involved, along with the drumming, some theatre games, the use of props, the construction of an informal 'altar', some exercises in fantasy, and an induction delivered by one of the psychologists. The revisions on which I'm presently working take this raw material

into a much more formed state, a short drama of about 8 or 9 scenes, with set speeches, action, and as little improvisation as possible. Already, as a result of our preliminary work, I think we managed to create for ourselves an environment in which we opened up a pathway, on an individual basis, to the dream-producing areas of our psyches. This environment, this habitat, focussed concentration and helped us to plant images to which our unconscious could respond. We consulted ourselves as oracles.

Everyone had a dream. Mine was the first for some time that had a beginning, middle, and end that I could remember. And there hasn't been another as clear since that night. It took place in a house, like the one we rent now, and on the floor were two heavy objects, jet engines, it turned out, on which I am to take off. There is no plane, just the engines, but that doesn't bother me. Can I pilot a jet, someone asks? ... I've done it before, is my feeling. The engines are lit, like firecrackers, and at first they just fizzle and sputter on the floor. Then they start to zoom across the room, out the window, into a field where they plunge to earth with a great crash. I'm left behind, hoping the damage will be kept to the minimum. But the engines take off again, soar across the house and into the distance where, far far away, there is a fairground. We can just see a ferris wheel. The engines finally dive into this fairground and disappear. Someone worries, did we kill any children? In the dream I feel guilty, having started all this random destruction and wonder whether I could possibly keep quiet about it. But I know I can't ...

In Greek mythology Pegasus is an immortal and winged horse sprung from the body of the Gorgon Medusa. No one can tame or even catch Pegasus (who later became synonymous with poetic inspiration) except the hero Bellerophon. Bellerophon, however, needs divine help, which he gets in the shape of Athene. The goddess comes to him as he sleeps and puts in his hands a bridle. When he wakes up the dream bridle is still there and with this, he catches and saddles the winged horse.

In my dream there was no horse. Instead the flying was to be done in a machine, reduced to disembodied power (jet engines, but no plane). I was expecting to be transported but I was unexpectedly left behind on the ground. The power took off without me, unbridled and destructive. What is needed now are the means to tame and guide this power and, as in the myth, I'm waiting for Athene to appear in a dream.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander