

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC. 25 - BLACK LIGHT IN BRIDGEPORT
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Dear Mr. Nolte

The most intriguing and complicated part of my day-to-day work at the moment is finding ways to apply the techniques I developed in the past year to the needs and interests of a broader audience than the one which attends theatre, for duty or pleasure, whether it be Broadway, or some loft in SoHo. Resisting (for the time being) the temptation to mount another production I have been looking for the bases of personal myths in non-professionals, and trying to find a theatrical form for them, using as my sources dreams, collective fantasies, and the work of various spiritually oriented groups I have tracked down.

I am going to take you with me on one of the investigations I have conducted in recent weeks, but first a personal note - which I'll try to make relevant later on. I woke up the other morning with a pain in the muscles of the left side of my neck. To turn my head to the left was almost impossible; it was as if I'd been wrenched there, or bruised. It may have been the position in which I'd slept; I certainly hadn't pulled or strained the muscle in any way during the previous day. It stayed sore for many hours. Without being able to pinpoint frequency or circumstances, I remembered other instances of the same discomfort, in the same place ...

The scene now shifts to Grand Rounds in a prestigious teaching hospital in the Eastern U.S. I quote a surgeon friend of mine describing what is happening:

"On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital there had appeared an announcement ... "Yeshi Donden," it read, "will make rounds at six o'clock ..." Yeshi Donden, we are told, will examine a patient selected by a member of the staff. The diagnosis is as unknown to Yeshi Donden as it is to us. The particularities of the meeting are

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followed by a notation: "Yeshi Donden is personal physician to the Dalai Lama." ... We are further informed that for the past two hours Yeshi Donden has purified himself by bathing, fasting, and prayer.

... The patient had been awakened early, told that she was to be examined by a foreign doctor, and requested to produce a fresh specimen of urine, so when we enter her room, the woman shows no surprise ... Yeshi Donden steps to the bedside while the rest stand apart, watching. For a long time he gazes at the woman ... I too study her. No physical sign nor obvious symptom gives a clue to the nature of her disease.

At last he takes her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down in the collar of his robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot and for the next half hour he remains thus ... All the power of the man seems to have been drawn down into one purpose. It is palpation of the pulse raised to the state of ritual. From the foot of the bed, where I stand, it is as though he and the patient have entered a special place of isolation, of apartness, about which a vacancy hovers, and across which no violation is possible. After a moment the woman rests back on her pillow ... All at once I am envious - not of him, not of Yeshi Donden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, received. And I know that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have not felt a single one.

At last Yeshi Donden straightens, gently places the woman's hand upon the bed, and steps back. The interpreter produces a small wooden bowl and two sticks. Yeshi Donden pours a portion of the urine specimen into the bowl, and proceeds to whip the liquid with the two sticks. This he does for several minutes till a foam is raised. Then bowing above the bowl, he inhales the odor three times. He sets down the bowl and turns to leave. All this while he has not uttered a single word.

... We are seated once more in the conference room. Yeshi Donden speaks now for the first time ... He speaks of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying ... Between the chambers of her heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened.

Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath. Thus he speaks, and is silent.

"May we now have the diagnosis?" a professor asks.

The host of these rounds, the man who knows, answers. "Congenital heart disease," he says. "Interventricular septal defect, with resultant heart failure."

A gateway to the heart, I think. That must not be opened. Through it charge the full waters that flood her breath. So! Here then is the doctor listening to the sounds of the body to which the rest of us are deaf ..."*

I have quoted at length from this article, which many people may have missed, because for some time now I have been curious about such reports as this. In a number of newsletters I've referred to a connection I perceive between the powers of healers and the theatrical event. In one, very general sense, the connection involves an ability to change the nature of reality by the power of belief, or by a concentration of energies. In the above description Dr. Selzer mentions the purification and prayer, the concentration ("... all the power seems to have been drawn down into this one purpose ...") the physical and metaphorical nature of the process ("... listening to the sounds of the body ...").

Healing, outside the medical profession, is practised extensively as an individual art. Healers can be found through an underground information service that will pass telephone numbers from contact to contact. More public are institutions like THE FOUNDATION CHURCH OF THE MILLENIUM, with branches in Chicago, New Orleans, Toronto and New York, where you can attend seminars and workshops in individual and group healing. Healers will help you to develop your own healing powers, and the proceedings have a strongly religious, Revivalist atmosphere.

I was more interested, however, in something informal, so I started to look closer to home, and I found that there are a number of groups with a healing orientation in Connecticut, all reachable through the Southern Connecticut Chapter of the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. I talked to a few people, and went to one or two meetings in the area, looking for something that would relate to my own interests as a theatre person. At first I found only small

*Richard Selzer, Harper's Magazine, January 1976

groups, three or four people meeting in rather bleak circumstances, like the office of an elementary school attached to a local church. Here the proceedings were like a small discussion group, with some use of guided fantasy techniques to bring about a state of tranquillity, but I felt they lacked a center, a strong sense of purpose. I recognized the problem from certain rehearsal situations, when the director is absent or confused. Everyone sits around, knowing they should be doing something together, but not quite sure what. The only difference was, all the lights were turned off, and we sat in the glow reflected from the snowy streets outside.

A few days after the meeting in the church I had a call from another of the contacts I'd made through the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. She was an energetic woman who worked in a public utility company in Bridgeport. Her group meets every Friday, and she invited me to come along. We were to meet at her apartment, another couple and myself, and then we would all drive to the house where the others would be waiting for us.

Bridgeport is a sprawling ugly town on the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound, about half an hour's drive from New Haven, ringed with extensive suburbs and shopping centers. I found my way to the apartment block on one of the endless highways that crisscross the city where my guide/hostess lives. Her husband had already settled down in front of the television set, and the rest of us quickly bundled ourselves into her car to be driven to the meeting place.

We threaded our way through more and more winding streets, developments of small ranch houses and Cape Cods, until I lost all sense of direction. By the time we stopped outside a neat split level on a dead end street it was past eight o'clock.

The house was furnished neatly and carefully. Plants and a TV set, two love seats, and chairs with small mats of the same material as the carpet laid out in front of the chairs to save wear and tear. A harmonium in one corner. A candle burned in a crimson glass jar and a rheostat dimmer had been set low to light the dining room table, which was laid out with cups and spoons for about a dozen people.

Most of them had already arrived, and the downstairs living-dining area seemed full. They were couples in their forties or just over, with teenage or young adult children, alone now in their immaculate homes. They were all friends, joking about mutual acquaintances, and my guide (I'll call her Mary) steered the conversation. She

was the obvious leader, dropping in little snatches of information along with the gossip, talking about auras, and chakras, foot-noting them colloquially as she went along.

It turned out that we were waiting for two other people - a couple who had expressed interest in finding out more about this work. They were unknown to most people there, and tonight they were to be shown the repertoire of the group, or rather, of Mary, for she defined the limits of what was done, chose the agenda, and acted as MC at all times. Very soon I became irritated by her need to take center stage, her endless asides, the psychic gossip. And yet, as the evening went on, I saw something else happen, and I began to understand that this was a role for her, which she was playing as a way to hold the group together. It was her way of cementing the bonds between them, at the same time making light of something that to most of the people present was a rather frightening experience, strange territory. By the end of the evening, though her style still grated on me, I had come to admire Mary.

The couple we were waiting for arrived at last. They were in their late forties - the wife a sales auditor in a local firm, pale, tired and a little fretful, the husband a supervisor in an engineering company, stocky and warm, inarticulate but always quick to smile. These two were introduced, the lights were turned off, leaving only the dim pinkish glow from the candle in the jar, and Mary led everyone in the chanting of AUM.

AUM, or OM, the three sacred sounds that together encompass the cycle of creation and destruction and re-creation, is intended to calm, reorder the senses, produce tranquillity and harmony, and it became a sound of the flower-power sixties, associated with Hippies chanting it to National Guardsmen, freaked-out acid heads squatting in lotus positions around incense, shaven-skulled occultists who were "into" Eastern religions. It's hard to convey the incongruity of sitting in a suburban home with a group of eight or ten middle-aged citizens all soberly intoning the sound that I had last heard, as it happened, on the track of a film of Tibetan monks who had learned how to resonate a whole chord. Between chantings of AUM, Mary threw in short fragments of information about its purpose, joked with the newcomers about our "weirdness" and what the neighbors would think, and exchanged matter-of-fact notes with one of the other members of the group, her psychic second in command, the only other person she trusted to pick up signals with the same sensitivity as herself, notes about the level of energy in the room, whether the 'vibes' were right yet, all in the manner of a flight control operator tracking an incoming jetliner.

Our purpose that evening was healing. One of the women wore an elastic bandage on her wrist, the result of a recent fall. But before the moment came when the healing energies were directed to her injury, several hours passed, and a number of other ceremonies took place. (Some meetings of the group, I discovered later, had lasted until 5:00 in the morning. We broke up around midnight.) After the chanting of AUM had cleared the psychic air to Mary's satisfaction, we began a series of meditations (I would call them 'guided fantasies') to recorded music. I recognized the record. It was one I had used myself about three or four years ago as incidental music to a children's play I was directing - jaunty electronic versions, played with synthesized trickery, of traditional popular tunes like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm". There were more extended reveries to the accompaniment of soulful abstract pieces, in which the group, relaxed and spread among the chairs, coffee tables and harmonium, was asked to fly as a seagull or feel rooted as a mountain. Throughout all this Mary kept up her running commentary of jocular, sometimes satiric asides mixed in with assorted scraps of occultist learning.

The climax of Act i of the evening came with a 'psychic reading' (given by Mary) of the two visitors. The man was visibly impressed. She correctly identified some troubles he was having with his boss, a 'white-haired man, very set in his opinions, very rigid, but he's his own worst enemy, so you can take comfort from that - not that you should wish him ill, but he is too rigid for his own good, his health is weak ...' - to all of which the man nodded agreement, smiling now and again as she touched on something no one but he could have known about.

His wife was a tougher proposition. She resisted Mary's readings. Mary would see a trait, a habit, a propensity, and the woman would balk. "No, I don't do that," she would say, "it's not that way ... no, not really ..." not aggressively, but doubtful, cautious, reluctant to admit anything ... Her husband encouraged her to see the truth in Mary's insights. "That's the way you are," he insisted, "that's you!" And Mary would add, as the woman still murmured her doubts, "Oh well, it's hard to see ourselves as we really are ..." "That's right, you can't see how you are," her husband said. The woman fell silent.

"I'm impressed," the man said finally. "I didn't think I would be before I came, but now I'm impressed." The dimmer over the table was turned up high and we broke for coffee and danish.

The main business of the evening was a healing ceremony. After the coffee cups were put away a black screen was brought out and unrolled, to be hung from the curtain rods. A lamp fitted with a bulb that casts "black light" (actually a purplish glow that picks up anything white - shirts, teeth, paper - and gives it an eerie bluish luminescence) was set up and directed against the screen at a sharp angle. Then every other light in the room was turned off and the woman with the injured wrist was asked to stand in front of the screen. The black light directed against the screen left her in silhouette, with a wispy halo of mauve hair. We stared hard at her outline. People said, "I see it ... yes ... there it is ..." and as I gazed at the screen with the woman in front of it I too began to see shapes, a shadowy purplish haze around her head and shoulders.

"It takes practice" said Mary reassuringly to those who were having difficulty making out what she saw. Mary had detected a denser haze, filaments of black emanating from the area of the injury. She went over to the woman and began to make wiping motions with her hand down the woman's forearm, as if she was pulling off cobwebs which she then had to shake vigorously from the tips of her fingers. One imagined the black haze as something half way between cotton candy and bubble-bath froth. When this ceremony was complete, the woman claimed she felt better. Mary, rejoining the audience, said the black haze, though not completely vanished, was greatly reduced. Everyone else agreed.

The next person stepped in front of the screen. It was the man whose aura Mary had read earlier in the evening. "See, he has a helper," she exclaimed. "There's someone there," said another woman.

"It's a shadow," said our host, a heavy set man who had kept silent most of the evening. His wife shushed him, and Mary went on to talk about the shape she saw on the screen behind the engineer, who stood patiently and good-humoredly in front of the screen. It was his guardian angel, she said, his higher self, his protector. "You've had a few narrow escapes," she said, "haven't you?" "What do you mean?" he asked. "Nearly got killed." "That's right." "You had protection," said Mary.

"It's a shadow, look." Our host got up and demonstrated by jiggling the lamp stand. His wife pulled him back to his seat. "See the light from his hands," Mary was saying, "he could be a healer." Murmurs of " ... Yes ... look ... there it is ..." mixed with an obstinate "It's a shadow" from our host. The engineer's wife took his place, but she drew

a non-committal reading from Mary. Her vibrations were vague. I felt the two women were antagonistic, and the engineer's wife put a screen up that Mary read as weak energy.

Then it was my turn. Standing there, with the purple glow suffusing my face and beyond it, nothing but darkness, I felt cut off from the rest of the room. The voices of the people were characterless, disembodied. As usual, Mary did most of the talking, but I felt isolated there, suspended in timelessness. She talked of a previous incarnation. She saw me wearing a uniform, a foreign uniform, in a campaign against Indians. She spoke of a blow being struck in anger, with great force, coming from behind and taking the left side of my neck. It was clear in the aura ... Then she shifted ground and referred to a "rap on the knuckles by the Masters" which I had received recently. She meant a stroke of bad luck. I thought of Boccaccio and said nothing.

I had forgotten about the 'previous incarnation', until the morning when I woke up with the pain in the left side of my neck. It was the same morning as I looked back over my notes of that session in the split level in Bridgeport and read about the blow struck in anger, that came from behind ...

It doesn't matter whether or not Mary, or anyone in the group, actually saw what they claimed to see. I wasn't there to conduct a scientific analysis of the claims made by the group. What was taking place, from my point of view, was a piece of self-created drama, semi-improvised but with sections of pure ritual. One of the most interesting things to watch was the subtle shifting of moods, impossible to express in the condensed form of this newsletter. But all the time the atmosphere was changing - at one moment charged with expectancy and tension, then seemingly banal and conversational, then switching to intense devotion, and before long, as if nothing could be allowed to become too solemn, lightened with a joke, or a satiric exchange between some of the people. There was even a touch of farce as the black screen on which people's healing capacities were to be projected kept rumbling off the curtain rods on which it was precariously balanced just as at the moment when somebody was about to be diagnosed. It didn't matter, though. Belief was sustained. The screen was replaced. It was all part of the show, rich and absorbing raw material; and watching these people, who spent the rest of their lives in the most mundane occupations modern society can devise, make black light into helpers and reincarnations of long dead invaders, I felt I was close to some of the roots of theatre.

Sincerely


Kenneth Cavander

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