

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 26 - THE BARBIE DOLL PLOT

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

3 Mayfair Lane
Westport
Connecticut

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Dear Mr. Nolte

You couldn't easily put a label on the experience. If it was theatre it was a kind of theatre that doesn't yet generally exist, a theatre in which creators, performers and audience are all one and the same. It certainly wasn't what they used to call a "Happening". It had form, a story, identifiable characters. I would like to think it wasn't solely the outcome of a chance meeting between eight or nine talented and sensitive people; that's to say, I'd like to believe that any group of reasonably committed individuals could arrive at the same results. But I don't **know**. **Wh**atever it was, I found it a moving and engrossing experience, and this newsletter, odd in shape as it may be, is in part an acknowledgement of the unique contribution of the people who made it happen.

They were a group that had come to Wainwright House, in Rye, where I had arranged to run a workshop in theatre. Wainwright House is known as a "Center for the Development of Human Resources" and offers courses and workshops in a number of disciplines, traditions, and teachings - lectures in philosophy, Eastern and Western, speakers on psychoanalysis, biofeedback, healing, religion, social and family problems. My recent work had been brought to their attention and they suggested that I try some of my ideas out as a workshop, to be run with a group of people, some of them with acting experience, but none of them currently fulltime professional actors. For me, it was a chance to explore an idea I'd been wanting to try out for some time. Along the way the idea took on a life of its own, the group imagination took over, and by the end ... I'm not sure what happened, but it grew progressively more mysterious and autonomous, and in the end became a waking dream in the form of story which the dreamer could both change and learn from at the same time.

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

The material revealed itself in its own way, at its own pace. Sometimes we were bystanders at the creative process, sometimes, conscious architects.

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Among the losses that must be offset against the gains of 20th century civilization is the reduction of objects to mere 'things'. Objectivity, killing gods and spirits. Or so I believe. And yet even in this ungodly age it often happens to a person that the world comes alive again - at a time of crisis, at a turning point in life. The picture on the wall, hanging askew, becomes an image for... whatever it wishes. The world comes alive again, nothing happens by chance any more; everything has a meaning.

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It was my idea to take a simple situation, something that could be expressed in a sentence, a phrase, a quickly comprehended image, and by treating it as a mystery to get it to yield its secrets. By "mystery" I mean - a source of wisdom, or of revelation. To do this theatrically would mean a different process from most theatre work, which proceeds from complexity to simplicity; you rehearse to find the essence, the exact right word or gesture. But to fulfil this idea of mine we would have to go the other way around - delve deeper and deeper into the apparently simple, till it surrendered, and became a labyrinth.

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Some such simple situations as:-

A fisherman, fishing in a lake

A magician making somebody vanish.

A guide among the ruins.

A visitor knocks on the door.

Walking a tightrope.

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There were eight people. We had to pool our imaginations. We were going to pick a simple image, and express it theatrically. We would be our own audience. Maybe a story would emerge. Or maybe some characters. But we didn't know how. All we had when we began was the commitment to work together, and to use actions, words, sounds, to go as deeply as we could into one simple image.

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It was hard at first. We didn't even have a starting point, our "image-situation". That had to come out of a common agreement and we didn't have the grounds for it. So we began with the most basic things - objects that held a personal meaning, possessions - and shared them. We made a sculpture out of a bunch of ordinary things - someone contributed a notebook, another person a ring, there were a couple of bracelets, a set of car keys, a pink plastic spoon, and two belts - whatever people happened to have there with them at the time. We put them together as a combined work of found sculpture, following very simple rules: everyone was free to change any part of the arrangement to make a more pleasing pattern, and the whole would be finished when no one wished to make any more changes. It was satisfying to work on this quietly, watching the different arrangements take shape, dissolve into new patterns, and emerge in more interesting forms as people adjusted, corrected, and adapted. What was going on, really? At the time, it seemed a good idea to make concrete what was really an abstract idea - collective creation. But later on, the resulting sculpture turned out to be a prophetic version of the work as a whole, and kept recurring in a **variety of ways.**

We ended up with something that might have been a heart. Or was it an apple? The outlines were formed by the two belts. Inside, in the right chamber (if you saw it as a heart) a spiral notebook, half open, stood on end, with a ring and a set of keys balanced on it. In the left chamber a ring, and the pink spoon, lay. The top was open, but a bracelet, standing on end, guarded this open entrance. Further down, towards the tip, a bird on a chain and a medallion with a sun wheel effect lay side by side, the chain of the medallion forming a figure eight, or an infinity sign, depending on how you looked at it.

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I asked everyone to commit the design to memory. Then to use it as an image with which to stimulate dreams.

Later, some members of the group drew it from memory, and in imagination the images transformed.

Later still, the 'altar' became the subject matter of several haiku-like short poems, in which the symbols took on an even deeper meaning.

When we had found our 'image-situation', much later, and a story began to develop, many of the ideas in the story turned out to have been anticipated in concrete form by the elements of this found-object sculpture.

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We had made a sculpture. We had done some basic theatrical exercises to get people working together, and to establish trust. But we hadn't agreed on an image to explore. When I asked for some suggestions ... "Diving into water from a diving board" said one person. "Going into a labyrinth holding hands" ... "Pulling back a curtain ..." These were interesting choices. Any one of them would have served our purpose, but I felt they all referred too explicitly to the situation we found ourselves in as a group. So I exercised directorial prerogative, and made my own choice. "Choosing a doll for a child." No one objected violently. It was as good as any other. It seemed pretty neutral. So we began.

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I didn't want acting, I mean "acting". I didn't want to see how well people could create dolls, or children, or situations in which dolls are chosen, skits, scenes, or reality fabricated. For the work to have any meaning it couldn't depend on performance skills. What was at stake, what I was after, hunting, tracking down, was the singular voice of the imagination. Could it be prompted into speech? How? We started - and we got ... people enacting dolls, rag dolls, puppet dolls, dancing dolls, mechanical dolls, dress-up dolls. They were very good. And eloquent. But not what we wanted.

One exercise, though, proved very helpful at this stage. It was a version of the 'reincarnation game', first developed last year, and described in KC19 and 23. The person going back in time arrived at a place where she was alone, where people came to her, and where she was surrounded by wooden figures which, to her at least, were magical. People came to her, as if she could help them. But they were afraid of her. She was thought of as a witch. Others associated images of fire with her (in real life, now, though they didn't know this at the time, she is a sculptress, and works in welded metal).

That exercise closed a stage of the work, and for a while its results were left behind us. In fact, they never returned consciously into play again. It's only now, after the whole thing is over, that I can see how this person's previous existence/hidden personality became a force in the drama that finally unfolded.

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We went back to the original situation. Choosing a doll for a child. Still no story, though, no connections established. We evolved a complex exercise that began as a way of visualizing a child. I asked the group to imagine a specific child, using as clues the kinds of doll such a child might select. But first, we had to

have an environment, so before we tried to make this leap of the imagination we built a setting, a castle-like edifice, with towers, battlements, walls, chambers, secret entrances and exits, within which people found their own favorite and most comfortable positions, the whole thing constructed out of chairs.

One person took up a sentinel-like position in the center. Another found a comfortable area on the periphery. A third positioned herself in a place where she could see everyone else. Another found a protective dungeon-like place that formed a walled off screen against the outside world. For each of these people there was an imagined child, created in response to a series of alternate dolls. Characters were evolving. One of the children wanted a sphinx to guard her room; another wanted a magician that would lead her out of her cell into freedom, but couldn't follow, however hard she tried; another was a thoughtful boy whose task was that of watcher and protector; another was a child who needed action, always more action, until he destroyed the companion that provided the excitement - or rather got the companion to destroy himself.

Characters. Attitudes. The beginnings of relationships. Some of the participants were struck by the material that was swimming to the surface. I was a spectator, as often as not, of the dramas that were starting to unfold. I had no idea where they were leading, or whether they would all amalgamate to form a composite picture.

To answer my own questions, in part, I set the group a new task.

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They were to go back over the previous sessions in their minds, and in particular try to recreate the visual image of the 'altar', without trying to put it together again in a literal way. They were to find in each part of it, as well as in the relationships of the parts, a meaning, make notes, and try to write them down in an informal way somewhat in the style of a haiku.

I was hoping to find some words out of this, the beginnings of a script, the raw material of dialogue, images that could be spoken. I felt we had actions, situations, but no script. Here was a way, I thought, to nudge the unconscious into wakefulness and get it to blab.

The words that came out were saying something, but what?

" ... temptation ... subterfuge ... No exit but infinity ... axes, vertical and horizontal, able to transform if the will is there

into infinity ... repeating and decaying - bound - riches and power ... A path spiralling towards infinite sound ... woman the head, refuting the guilt of Eve ... " These were a few of them. Oracular statements. Neither prose nor poetry. Not exactly dialogue either. Dream slogans?

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"Let me tell you about this strange thing that happened to me yesterday - I think it was yesterday ... I was walking along a street, in the middle of the day - I hadn't had any breakfast - and I came to this little store. There used to be a different store there, that used to say something like "re-weaving done", but it had vanished, and in its place there was a different one, and in the window there was a big Barbie Doll. It was looking at me strangely ..."

The narrator tries to convey what the Doll looked like, but at the same time the Doll is actually present, behind her, and the Doll is imitating her movements so that it appears as if the Doll is manipulating the Narrator, unconsciously.

"It seemed to move when I moved."

But to us, the audience, it is the other way around - the Narrator is the moved, not the mover.

"I wanted to touch it."

In the moment of trying to reach out and touch the Doll the Narrator discovers that she has crossed an invisible boundary, the Doll has vanished, and she is now confronted instead by a concerned and gracious storekeeper, who lures her deeper into the store, down a passage, backwards, through a spiral path ...

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So began the drama that composed itself out of the assorted material of six weeks. I say 'composed itself', but the first draft was an outline I wrote in the days before the meeting at which we first started to tell the story. As writer, I was an extension of the role I had played as director - and in both cases it was a matter of providing a scaffolding around which people's imaginations could grow, the way a gardener plants a pole for a climbing plant.

I used the characters, ideas, and some of the images from the previous weeks. But I hadn't got too far into my first draft of the story before I was stuck. I knew that it would have to do

with a person going into a store and choosing a doll. I had also decided to have some mysterious prohibition about touching the dolls, have the principle character violate that prohibition and discover that the dolls then came alive, and then ... and then I didn't know what happened next. So, when we went into the next meeting, I was as much in the dark about the outcome of the story as any reader or member of the audience would be, and I wanted to know what would happen next.

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The Narrator found herself, after a twisting, spiralling journey in which she lost her sense of direction and was taken through narrower and steeper passages, in a room full of life-size dolls.

"You must choose - but you may not touch" said the Storekeeper.

The Narrator was only half paying attention, she was fascinated by the variety of dolls, and by the offers they were making. For each one of them had a gift, a bribe, which was being dangled in front of the Narrator. Temptation surrounded her.

"I will tell your future," said one of the dolls, "just cross my palm with silver."

"Come on a flight on my magic carpet," said another with an eastern accent, "just rub my head."

"I am strong and brave, take my hand," said a third.

The Narrator wanted them all, but the price of accepting any of their offers was that she would have to touch them. And the storekeeper had said "Don't touch."

The dolls all wanted something from the Narrator, as much as she wanted what they had to offer. What did they want? How long could she resist?

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All this had been created through improvisation, following an outline which I had devised. Many of the images were developments of hints that had been thrown out weeks earlier; or they were extensions in dramatic forms of a idea expressed in another form - the infinity symbol in the 'altar' kept recurring, for instance, to reappear finally in an offer of eternal life; the short poems

had mentioned 'riches and power', guilt and temptation - all these themes came back in the offers of the dolls. The important point was that none of this was consciously planned. What was to happen next, though? In my outline I had come to a stop soon after this moment. All I had in mind was for the Narrator to touch one of the dolls, find herself imprisoned in its place, while the others went free, and then ...

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There was a knock on the door ... Another customer. The Storekeeper left, and the Narrator was on her own. The offers from the imprisoned dolls resounded in her ears. She couldn't hold out any longer. She touched one. As one of the performers said, "it was a one for one exchange of souls." When the Storekeeper return with her visitor, the Narrator was now a doll, replacing one that was missing, released.

The new visitor turned out to be ... the original Doll the Narrator had noticed in the window, a smiling, assured, mysteriously powerful Barbie Doll. The arrival of this new, ambiguous figure set in motion a train of events that upset the orderly world of the Storekeeper. A duel of wits and power started between her and the Barbie Doll. One by one the other dolls managed to escape; there were flights and chases, until finally the escapees allied themselves with the Barbie Doll and overpowered the Storekeeper. The Narrator was toppled over, died, smashed, revived, and became 'herself' again. The store vanished, and all the characters scattered to strongholds on the periphery. Doors slammed open and shut as if of their own accord. A piano key was struck insistently and loudly. Only one doll was left, a lonely figure, a sentry doll, who offered to take one of the others on a journey "back and forward in time". They agreed to go together, and set off, only to find themselves facing the others, who had regrouped meanwhile, and were ready for a story to be told ... "Let me tell you about this strange thing that happened to me yesterday - I think it was yesterday ... "

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Confinement and release - the enactment of the **discovery of self** - the offer of real freedom seen as a challenge, and a threat. The need to change, the temptation of security and a limited life ... All these, and others, more personal to the individual performers, were raised in discussion later as ideas, themes, metaphors. In short, we seem to have hit on a way to consult the psyche as if it were an oracle; create a dream with which we have a dialogue even as we dream it. And more. It's an experience hard to assimilate, and I'm still working on it.

Kenneth

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