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Institute of Current World
Affairs

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535 Fifth Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte

In 1638 the son of a London scrivener, John Milton, known as a scholar-poet who had published some promising verse (Comus, L'Allegro) was traveling in Italy on an extended vacation. From there he heard the news of the uprising of the Puritans against Charles I and cut his vacation short to join the cause of the rebels. He was 30 years old.

For the next 18 years he wrote almost no poetry. He published articles, served as a bureaucrat in Cromwell's administration, and went blind. Finally, on the Restoration of the monarchy, Milton, now 50 years old and a ruined man because of his part in the rebellion, took up his poetry again.

Years before, he had planned a cosmic drama. Many subjects had crossed his mind (his notebooks show over 90 themes) but now, he settled on a story from the myth of creation as contained in the Old Testament and wrote it, not as a drama, but as an epic poem. Paradise Lost took 5 years to complete.

It seemed almost an act of sacrilege - not to say impudence - when I suggested an adaptation of Paradise Lost for the Williamstown Theatre Festival's Second Company this year. The enormous scale of the work, the overpowering language, the vast sweep of action, and its reputation as a classic seemed to dwarf any possible hope of a successful translation to the stage. On the other hand, there was its origins, in Milton's mind, as a play, and the fact that it contained a story (aside from the well-known temptation of Eve and the expulsion from paradise) which interests me a great deal.

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

It is an intensely political story, as you might expect from a man who spent the whole of his mature life involved in the day-to-day workings of the only period of republicanism in England's history, and it concerns the rebellion of Satan against God's decree, announced suddenly and arbitrarily, that all were to bow down to God's newly begotten Son, the Messiah. Thus Milton found in the mythological sources a representation of his own life experience as a rebel against another form of divine authority - the power of the King with his "Divine Right" to impose his will.

Second of all, although the language is dense and difficult to read (sample: "Then who created thee lamenting learn when who can uncreate thee thou shalt know"), it becomes miraculously clear when spoken out loud (Milton was blind, he wrote for the ear).

Finally, the visual, almost cinematic nature of the writing makes it surprisingly easy to adapt for the stage. It falls into scenes and dramatic speeches very naturally. (In fact, in one of his essays, Eisenstein takes a passage from Paradise Lost and without changing a word breaks it down into a shooting script for a movie; it works perfectly.)

I had 10 actors, two and half weeks, and the text.

The story I had chosen to dramatise is told, in the original, by the angel Raphael, who is describing to Adam the fall of Satan. Raphael begins with words I have quoted before (in KC 5) but I'll repeat them here because they express so succinctly the art of theatre in its broadest sense:

How shall I relate to human sense the invisible
exploits of warring spirits, the secrets of another
world - perhaps not lawful to reveal? Yet, what
surmounts the reach of human sense I shall delineate
so, by likening spiritual to corporal forms as may
express them best ... Though what if earth be but
the shadow of heaven and things therein each to other
like, more than on earth is thought?

The tale of Satan's fall and rise is first of all a violent political melodrama, secondly a study in the psychology of groups, and thirdly a superb portrait of the revolutionary will and individual ambition. Here, very briefly, is how it goes.

God the Almighty announces to his assembled Angels the beginning of a new order. He introduces his Son, the Messiah, and declares: "Him who disobeys, Me disobeys, and that day falls into utter darkness." Raphael continues - "So spake the Omnipotent, and with his words all seemed well pleased - all seemed, but were not all." The lone standout is Satan, "he of the first, if not the first Archangel, great in power, in favor and pre-eminence."

During the celebration in honor of the new Messiah Satan conceives the idea of rebellion and Sin (in the form of a woman) is born out of his head. Later that night he gathers his followers and summons them to his own palace in the north of Heaven, on pretext of arranging "fit entertainment" to receive the Messiah.

With his followers around him he reveals his true feelings:

SATAN:

What if better counsels might erect our minds and
teach us to cast off this yoke? Will ye submit your
necks and choose to bend the supple knee? Ye will
not, if I trust I know ye right ...

One angel, Abdiel, aghast at this arrogance, protests, and is expelled from the rebel company.

In due course Satan attacks the throne of God. The battle rages for three days, during which time Satan first knows pain, invents gunpowder, but is finally crushed by the overwhelming power of God's Son and cast into hell along with his followers.

All this takes place in Books 5 and 6 of the poem. The story continues where Milton's work begins, the great debate in Hell at the beginning of Book 1, where Satan and his fallen angels discuss their next move. After some debate it is resolved not to try a second attack on heaven but to disturb God's peace by indirect means - namely an attack on earth, newly created. Satan volunteers to make the long and difficult journey to earth, through the gates of Hell and across the Kingdom of Chaos, and eventually, after many adventures, he stands at the borders of Nature, surveying his as yet innocent prey, Adam and Eve, mankind.

With that image, Satan poised on the verge of the planet earth, I ended the story I wished to tell. The rest is history.

This brief synopsis doesn't begin to suggest the subtlety of Milton's conception. For example, at the end of the debate at which it is decided to explore Earth, Satan emphasizes the difficulty of the project ... "Long is the way and hard, that out of hell leads up to the light ... " and he goes on to describe at some length the dangers ahead, concluding ... "Who shall tempt with wand'ring feet the dark unbottom'd infinite abyss." And then, before the other angels can consider their reaction, he goes on: "I should ill become this throne, O peers, if aught propos'd of difficulty or danger could deter me. Wherefore do I accept as great a share of hazard as of honor ... This enterprise none shall partake with me."

The consummate political leader, Satan builds up the problem before volunteering to solve it. Thus, if he succeeds, he is bound to appear a hero; and if he fails, no one can blame him. As a final touch, he cuts off debate, allowing no further arguments, and Milton points to the significance of this tactic: "Prudent, lest others might offer now (certain to be refus'd) what erst they fear'd, and so refus'd might in opinion stand his rivals, winning cheap the high reput which he through hazard huge must earn." Satan knows that the appearance of heroism is not enough; you must not give your potential opponents an opportunity to contest your image with a counter-image of their own.

In addition to the moments of realistic drama, Milton creates scenes which present more intriguing problems. How do you represent "ten thousand banners, with orient colors waving, a forest huge of spears" or "millions of fierce encount'ring angels"? I decided to take as my text, and my permission to be eclectic, the words of Raphael, "likening spiritual to corporal forms as may express them best". For me, the spiritual forms were the images in Milton's text, the corporal forms were the actors, the setting, our props and costumes, and the concrete scenes we could build out of all these.

There was one other element, music. This time I was working without a composer. The purpose of music in the piece was not to decorate, or even to heighten, so much as to change an audience's perception and turn them inwards. I wanted percussion and rhythm, not melody, because I needed something to take the actors and the spectators on the journey into Milton's blind world of angels and demons. Mircea Eliade, in his book on shamanism, writes: "The drumming at the beginning of the seance, intended to summon the spirits and "shut them up" in the shaman's drum, con-

stitutes the preliminaries for the ecstatic journey. This is why the drum is called the "shaman's horse". The actors had to do this for themselves, and a great part of our rehearsal time was spent in improvised chanting and drumming, noise-making on a variety of instruments, exercises in distortion of the voice, exploration of the rhythms of Milton's pentameter line both chorally and individually. We ended up with an orchestra of tambourines, snare and kettle drums, bells, kazoos, whistles, woodblocks, chimes, psaltery and sticks. The set, conceived in the image of a vast web, or cosmic cat's cradle, didn't quite come out that way (no budget) but served well enough - long strips of netting ascending and descending in a variety of angles into and out of shadows; the costumes were less successful, as you can see from the picture, but they were intended as abstractions with echoes of the netting motif.



Each scene had to be reconceived in the form of some collective action. When, for instance, Satan is left outside the celebration for the Son of God, and is first struck with the notion of rebellion, what is happening? Satan (who speaks Raphael's words in my version) says: "That day, as other solemn days, they spent in song and dance about the sacred hill, mystical dance ..."

Mystical dance. One of the first improvisations I had the actors do was an extended session, in which they used drums to put themselves into a state of trance, using whatever rhythms seemed to them the most hypnotic. The task was then to recreate the same effect for an audience, without forcing them to sit through the hours of drumming that would be necessary to induce trance. Having once had the experience the actors were able to portray it without actually being in it. One part of it looked like this:-



Later, we needed a different kind of dance/celebration. When Satan summons his followers to his palace, called the "Mountain of Congregation", he does so under pretence of entertaining the Messiah. This entertainment had to be more extrovert, and it came out, interpreted through the actors' 20th century imagination, as a kind of Pentecostal, ecstatic rite. There was a thread of satire in it - until Satan brought his angels to their senses with a sharply worded speech, some of which I quoted earlier. In that speech Satan's lines reach right into Milton's own age, and our own: " ... if not equal all yet free, equally free. Who can in reason, then, assume monarchy over such as live

by right his equals, if in power and splendor less, in freedom,
equal?"

Fit
entertain-
ment ...



The battles presented one of our greatest problems. Here is some of Milton's description, which somehow we had to dramatise:

The loud ethereal trumpet from on high 'gan
blow, at which command the powers militant that
stood for heaven in mighty quadrate joined
of union irresistible moved on in silence
their bright legions to the sound of in-
strumental harmony ... At last, far in the
horizon to the north appeared from skirt to
skirt a fiery region, stretcht in battailous
aspect .. the banded powers of Satan hasting
on ...

With a handful of actors on each side there was no chance of
faking a mighty quadrate or bright legions, much less a
fiery region stretcht in battailous aspect.

There are three days of battle between Satan's Angels and the
Angels of God. The action alternates between 'long shots' of the
armies maneuvering, mass engagements between the two sides, and
'close-ups' of confrontations between individual angels. On the

second day, Satan invents gunpowder, to the consternation of God's Angels, who are forced to uproot whole mountains and dump them on the artillery. On the third day the Messiah, God's Son, takes on Satan's hosts single-handed, and dispatches them to Hell. Each day has a special feel to it, and we approached the problem of staging the battles by investigating different forms of conflict, trying to find emotional associations appropriate to each phase. In the passage just quoted, for example, we found a contrast of vocal and musical styles. God's Angels were orchestrated into a complex structure of overlapping sounds (the last syllable of "heaven" drawn out to become, at a different pitch, the word "in") and syncopated rhythms ("the powers militant" was spoken in a strict iambic beat syncopated with a beat that followed Milton's pentameter from start to finish of the speech), while their bodies stayed almost motionless. By contrast, the "banded powers of Satan" were free to move around and spoke their lines in a jazzy scat inflexion to the accompaniment of a cymbal.

In previous newsletters I've referred to my experiments with children's games. A children's game gave us the key to one long sequence in the first day of battle. The game was Blind Combat, in which the players, blindfolded, try to knock each other out with lengths of rolled-up newspaper. Into this action we wove loud machine-gun-like bursts of noise made by sticks on the floor, alternating with the words of the narrative, spoken sharp and clear. For blindfolds the players wore white hoods, which gave them an eerie menacing look. Along with the rattatat of the sticks the grim language gave an effect that was not at all childish and made the game look like some sinister ritual played out by a group of poverty-stricken fanatics.

The second day, the invention of gunpowder, required a different approach. For one thing, it is the only section of Paradise Lost that I know of where Milton jokes. Ponderous puns, actually, such as this one, in which Satan is giving orders to his Angels to be ready to touch off the cannon: "Ye who appointed stand, do as you have in charge and briefly touch what we propound, and loud that all may hear." And then there is something incongruous about a battle scene turning into a free-for-all with both sides hurling mountains at each other. So I decided to take the whole thing to its extreme and stage the second day as a vaudeville show. Instead of building artillery, Satan's Angels sketched a gun on a vast sheet of newsprint. The ammunition was the Angels themselves, who burst through the paper to form a Three Stooges/Marx Brothers lineup and spoke the lines (more heavy puns "Leader, the terms we urged were terms of weight ... Of hard content ... And full of

force urg'd home ...") accompanied by music hall sounds and action. God's Angels responded with custard pies in lieu of mountains and the day ended in blackout sketch fashion - "Amaze and terror seized the rebel host."

For the Son's solo performance we switched styles completely. In the text, the Messiah tells the other Angels to stand back and let him handle these rebels by himself. He mounts his chariot, "the Chariot of Paternal Deity , itself instinct with Spirit, convoy'd by four cherubic shapes ..." and says to his Father, "whom thou hat'st I hate, and can put on thy terrors, as I put thy mildness on." It is a concentration of pure, irresistible force.

But Milton adds something interesting, when he describes the meeting between this force and the Angels of Satan. His countenance was "too severe to be beheld". Satan's Angels "astonisht, all resistance lost." The Son advances on them holding ten thousand thunders "such as in their souls infix'd plagues." Down their "idle weapons dropp'd ... ", and the wheels of his chariot shot forth fire "that withered all their strength and of their wonted vigor left them drain'd ..." This sounds much more like a psychic than a physical battle, and I was reminded of a documentary movie I had seen last year, made in Bali and Java, showing folk plays based on a myth in which the wicked witch comes to a village and forces all the menfolk to draw their knives and attack each other. She achieves this feat by putting a spell on them, so that first they fall down in a catatonic trance, then leap to their feet again, possessed, and rush against each other with drawn knives. The performance given by the villagers in the movie is as realistic as they can make it. The actors do appear to go into trance, and the knives they turn on each other are real knives; you can see them press into the flesh, and the muscles of the warriors straining, but no one is hurt - according to the villagers, because they are protected by their state of possession.

Whatever the explanation, I followed this idea in the third day of the battle, giving the Messiah a mask which completely erased all trace of human features and transformed his face in a sun-burst of spiky golden rays. He began by drumming, invoking the power of his Father, the Almighty "... this I my glory account, my exaltation and my whole delight, that thou in me well pleas'd declarst thy will fulfill'd, which to fulfil is all my bliss ...". When the Son was sufficiently imbued with the ecstatic power of his Divine Father Satan and his Angels, already affected by the invocation, were drawnⁱⁿ and, while the drumming continued and built in intensity, the Son began to dance, and through the dance induced a series of nightmare visions in them. They saw the cherubic shapes

"four faces each have - wondrous ... with stars their bodies all and wings are set with eyes ... with eyes the wheels of beryl ... wheels burning ... his arrows! ... distinct with eyes ... and from the living wheels a multitude of eyes ...!" Deprived of all power to resist they fell into a hell of tormenting apparitions that contorted their bodies. Some of the preparatory work we did on this scene involved rehearsals in which the actors playing Satan's Angels tried to recall nightmares that had particularly affected them, while the actor who was Satan was charged with the obligation of bringing them out of the worst of these dreams and finding the exact right images that would restore calm to them, and reorient them in the 'real' world.

From my work with dreams earlier this year I knew that the re-enactment of dream images was a potent source for actors who were searching for a certain kind of physical reality to correspond to mental states. In this case, the rehearsal with the nightmares provided the foundation for working between two levels of consciousness. For the purposes of the production, Satan had to be the first one to 'wake up' to the reality of Hell, to deal with the nightmare, and to transform it into the basis for positive action.

I've talked about the great debate that ensues once Satan and his Angels have woken up to their new condition. After the violent physical and musical effects of the preceding action, this scene (in spite of its subtle shadings and the way Milton rounds out his portrait of the political leader in action, combining manipulation of others with cunning self-aggrandisement) seemed tame to me, and I wished I'd had more time to spend on it. But our rehearsal time was so short (something like 60 hours all told) that I felt I had to push the actors on to the next piece of story as quickly as possible. Coming up was Satan's journey to the furthest bounds of Hell where the most melodramatic confrontation of the piece takes place.

As Satan, solitary and desperate, approaches the gates of Hell two strange figures come forward to meet him ... "The one seem'd woman to the waist and fair, but ended foul in many a scaly fold voluminous, a serpent arm'd with mortal sting. About her middle round a cry of hell-hounds never ceasing bark'd ... The other shape, if shape it might be called that shape had none, black it stood as night ... and shook a dreadful dart. What seem'd his head, the likeness of a kingly crown had on ..."

Satan finds his way barred by the second figure, and an argument follows, which is about to end in blows, when the woman stops them. "What fury, O Son," she says, "the shapeless shape, possesses thee to bend that mortal dart against thy father's head ...?"

It turns out that the half-woman, half-serpent is Satan's own daughter, Sin, conceived the night of the celebration for the Messiah, and the Shape is Satan's son, Death. (The actor who played the Son of God also played the Son of Satan in our production - it was a choice made from necessity, but I liked the irony of it and thought it had a certain aesthetic logic, too.) The hell-hounds are the result of the incestuous union between Death and his own mother. "Hourly conceived and hourly born," Sin tells Satan, "when they list, in to the womb that bred them they return and howl, and gnaw my bowels. Grim Death, my son, sets them on ..."

This is Satan's family, and the problem was to match the grotesque extremes of Milton's conception without making the images ridiculous and diminishing their power. For, unlike the scene with the cannon, I felt that this part of the story was meant to have a macabre and genuine chill, however fantastic the imagery. The problem was to find something non-literal and sufficiently gripping; we kept coming back to one or two basic ideas - the attraction of Sin, although to herself she was repulsive, and perhaps to Satan too; the shapelessness of Death, or, to put it the other way around, Death's polymorphous perversity, an infant, infinitely various. We got some way towards working out these ideas, but never hit on the right combination of them. But somewhere in that thicket of images lies the solution to the problem, I'm sure.

Satan wins both Death and Sin over to his side, as soon as he describes to them, salesman fashion, the huge benefits accruing to them if they let him pass and help him get to earth, "where thou and Death shall dwell at ease. There ye shall be fed and filled immeasurably. All things shall be your prey ..."



Only one more obstacle stands in the way of Satan, the Kingdom of Chaos. Once again Satan, though entangled in the overwhelming octopoid-like clutches of the warring elements, talks his way out of his predicament by offering a piece of the action to Chaos - "No mean recompense it brings if I that region reduce to her original darkness and your sway. Yours be the advantage, mine the revenge ...". King Chaos agrees to co-operate and directs Satan out of his realm - in staging terms this meant freeing Satan from the weight of the bodies representing the elements of Chaos, and no sooner had this been done than ...

" ... strange alteration - Sin and Death, following in my track, pave after me a broad and beaten way over the dark abyss, whose boiling gulf tamely endures a bridge of wondrous length from Hell."

The actors who had formed chaos now became the bridge linking Hell and Earth. Along this bridge the souls of the damned would pass, and the devils would make their ^{way} back and forth with ease.

Satan is close to earth. "Nature first begins her farther verge." Dawn appears, and far off, Satan glimpses heaven, "with opal towers and battlements adorn'd of living sapphire, once my native seat ...". The sight brings back memories, and here I gave Satan a speech that actually comes from later in the poem, but fits perfectly here. It is a remarkable piece of introspection and a moving expression of warring emotions. I'll quote some of it, so that you can see the remarkably modern angst Milton gives Satan.

SATAN:

... O had His powerful destiny me ordain'd some inferior angel, I had stood then happy ... Yet, some other power as great might have aspir'd and me drawn to his part. But other powers as great fell not, to all temptation arm'd. Hadst thou the same free will and power to stand? Thou hadst. Whom hast thou then or what to accuse, but heav'n's free love dealt equally to all? Be then His love accurst, since against his thy will chose freely what it now so justly rues ... Which way shall I fly? Which way I fly is hell. Myself am hell ...!

Satan eventually makes his decision. He will proceed to earth and the corruption of mankind. The last image of the play was of earth, as if seen from an astronaut's rocket ... "this world, hanging in a golden chain, this pendent world, in bigness as a star of smallest magnitude close by the moon."

As the last words of the play were spoken the house lights begin to come on so that the audience is brought into the same space as the actors, and find themselves in the company of Satan in a more immediate way, no longer comfortably shut out by the darkness of the theatre. Satan speaks his last lines directly to audience members ... "Thither (i.e. to earth) ... in a cursed hour I hie, as man erelong, and this new world shall know. Evil - be thou my good!"



A bridge of wondrous length.

In a sense, there was no way, in the circumstances, for the production to succeed. The time, the youth and inexperience of the actors, the budgetary limitations, made any pretense that all the possibilities of Milton's text could be thoroughly explored farcical. But that very fact was liberating, and gave us all a feeling that Raphael's language "likening spiritual to corporal forms as may express them best" was more than a licence for eclecticism, but was an encouragement to explore many different creative sources. I found the work of the past 18 months, which I'd been doing largely in studio circumstances, under wraps, as it were, had validity for the actors even in these very rushed and pressured conditions ... So this production, though certainly not the last word on the subject of Paradise Lost for

me, was an important testing ground for a number of ideas which, up till now, I'd been able to see working only in the limited circumstances of my laboratory. As I had to leave soon after the production opened, I wasn't able to follow its fortunes throughout the course of the summer, as it has toured around Massachusetts and New York State. The first night we played in 90° weather, without air-conditioning, to an overfull house, of which at least 70% were members of the Jamaica, Queens, Hadassah, on a cultural tour of the Berkshires. These good ladies were all in their 60s and 70s, and - to say the least - stunned by what they saw that night. But I hope to revisit Williamstown in a week or two, and to hear more about the summer when I get there.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Kenneth Cavander", written in dark ink. The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on August 23, 1976