

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Mr Nolte

First, a brief report from the west. Brief, because I was out there for only eight days, in October, on a trip for which the immediate pretext was a revival of BOCCACCIO in Seattle (it went very well - the run was extended), and so I found out something about theatre in Seattle, and then a little more in Los Angeles, but that was all.

Seattle has a number of theatre groups working on the fringes of the cultural life of the city, which supports at least two year-round professional companies, a symphony, as well as opera and dance programs. I learnt that there were three groups of special interest - La Pensee Discovery Theatre, the Intiman Theatre Company, and an organisation called The Empty Space.

It turned out that the Empty Space company was not performing while I was there - but two of its members were in BOCCACCIO, so I had a chance to talk to them about their work. (It ought to be more possible for actors in local experimental self-perpetuating groups to cross over into commercial theatre; amongst other advantages, in a town like Seattle the actors of the Empty Space have their own following, which they bring with them when they appear at A.C.T. - so both sides benefit).

The Empty Space is a loose association of fifteen to twenty actors, who work collectively on the selection, preparation and production of plays. They have supported themselves on receipts from the box office, eked out by small grants. But I got the impression that financial pressures were hurting the quality of their work, which relied on continuity, and the loyal attendance of all members all the time. The very fact that two members of the group were appearing in a L.O.R.T. theatre at a time when their new season was being prepared

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is an indication of the way loyalties get divided.

La Pensee Discovery Theatre was presenting an interesting program, at least on paper - an up-dated version of the Oedipus story, and an adaptation from a Japanese folk tale. Unfortunately I couldn't sit through more than about half an hour of the first of these, which turned out to be an overwhelmingly serious talkathon, with heavy-handed acting and thesis-type dialogue. So I left.

The Intiman Theatre occupies a beautiful space in downtown Seattle, site of the old Seattle Repertory Theatre. The building is large, rectangular, and infinitely flexible. The night I was there it had been arranged in an extended thrust. Upstairs are capacious rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms, and areas for the audience to loiter and wander. Perfect. The show was based on myths, poetry and history from the northwest (it was called "The Northwest Show"), and its author had written a number of other plays, as well as working in television. So I went with high hopes, especially as the theatre had been^m existence for four years, and had a long and distinguished record of successful revivals of classics. Once again, though, I was disappointed. The actors recited the stories as unbroken narrative; they stood absolutely still most of the time, and did nothing to theatricalize the images or the incidents. The poetry was delivered - well ... poetically - and the songs were not very interesting. The only drama came in snatches of period dialogue sandwiched between the recitations. I felt remote from the intention of what was being done there, and the rest of the audience did too.

Theatre in Los Angeles is a popular hobby among the movie and TV community. Twenty or thirty small theatres are active right now, though my guess is that most of them have been created only for the purpose of the show they are presenting at the moment. Nevertheless, there are a few ongoing companies, scattered all over the city, from the opulent Mark Taper in the Music Center, to storefront operations on straggling boulevards like La Cienega and Airdrome.

Many of these smaller groups confine themselves to revivals of commercial plays - A Little Night Music, Johnny Belinda, You Can't Take It With You - providing opportunities for actors starved of performing before live audiences to practise their craft.

Of the remainder, new works seemed to lean heavily towards satirical and socially relevant material - nothing much that

experimented with new forms or pushed the boundaries of theatre very far out - though I did see a flier in Venice, advertising the formation of a new company which was going to call itself The Theatre of Conscious Death. I like that. It has hints of Sufism and mystery, and I was sorry I wouldn't be at the first meeting.

A few years ago a company calling itself the James Joyce Memorial Liquid Theatre came from Los Angeles to New York (largely as a result of a favorable Clive Barnes review) and ran for a while in the auditorium of the Guggenheim Museum. It was an intelligent exploitation of some recent trends in public consciousness, combining theatre games, psycho-drama, soft rock, mime and a smattering of mind control to create an atmosphere of possibility, openness, and charm.

This company no longer exists - or rather, it has split in two. One half has become the ProVisional Theatre, which, at the time I was there, was offering a piece called "Voice of the People". They are an itinerant group, going from colleges, to community centers, to schools - and they described their show as "the history you don't get in the textbooks." It was not in performance any of the days I was in Los Angeles. The other segment of the old James Joyce ... Theatre had become the Company Theatre, one of the storefront operations I mentioned earlier. I saw one of their current offerings, a musical version of a medieval novel, AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE, which was simultaneously a romantic love fable and a spoof on romantic love fables. The audience was enthusiastic. The style of the show was broad, simple, earnest, conspiratorial with the spectators. The music was hearty folk rock. The whole thing felt a little old fashioned. but - as I said, audiences were coming.

I don't seem to have liked anything very much - but then I didn't see very much. What conclusions would I draw? That theatre is still basically a conservative art form; that nothing seems to suppress the urge to perform; that audiences exist for practically anything so long as it does not bore them; that real adventure and risk-taking in the theatre are as hard to find as ever.

The trip out west was a short episode in the course of the month's work. Having completed the draft of one script (KC 27), I started work on another. I spent the rest of October and half of November bringing it to a point where it could form the basis for a workshop I was to run in Philadelphia towards the end of November.

The work is based on historical fact. Most people have heard of the Shakers, either as the makers of simple, elegant, durable furniture that anticipated modern designs by a century; or as the source of fine quality seeds, recipes, and herbal medicines; or perhaps the origin of the song "The Gift to Be Simple", which Aaron Copland incorporated into "Appalachian Spring". But there is a side to the Shakers that is less well known, and much more interesting, though these popular manifestations of their influence on American life have a place in the overall picture.

In 1772 Ann Lee, married to a blacksmith in Manchester, England, began to have visions and receive revelations. She believed that she was the Bride of Christ; she said the second coming was at hand; she went out and preached the abandonment of all worldly goods and the forsaking of all carnal desires. She was imprisoned for disturbing the Sabbath.

Two years later, after considerable persecution for her religious beliefs, Ann Lee came to the U.S. with a few followers, and after some early setbacks, finally persuaded enough people to join her and was able to buy land in Niskeyuna, New York State. This was the first Shaker community.

Over the next fifty years the Shakers grew in numbers till there were about 6000 of them in various communities, or collectives, throughout the country. Most, however, were clustered in New England; in Hancock, Mass., New Lebanon, Vermont, Watervliet, New York. They codified their beliefs into a series of laws, called the "Millenial Laws". These laws covered every aspect of behavior, from the way you should sit at table to the question of private property, marriage, and education. There was in fact nothing of the last three in a Shaker community. A true believer gave up all his goods to the "family"; all sexual relations were strictly forbidden - even touching and talking were taboo; and the children brought into Shaker villages received the minimum of education, for they believed "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

Obviously, there is a great deal more to the Shaker way of life than these rather grim details would suggest. Late this summer, when I was just beginning to think about a theatre piece based on their adventures, I visited the Shaker village at Hancock, near Pittsfield, in Massachusetts. It is now a museum (there are only about five or six Shakers left in the country today), partly restored and reconstructed from other Shaker villages, but it retains an eerie sense of vitality that I hadn't expected.

It was not like Williamsburg, or even Nantucket; those two seem to have lived out their histories, and what is preserved is complete, finished, however beautiful or nostalgic. But in Hancock there was a sense of waiting. Ann Lee prophesied that when there were less Shakers in the world than could be counted on the fingers of a child's two hands, their time would come again ... Or was it my imagination? Hancock impressed by its scale. The size of the buildings is alien to eyes grown accustomed to New England colonial proportions. Men and women lived together in large dormitories, or family dwellings, separated by sex, but together under one roof, four or five to a room. They ate together, they worshipped and worked together. The buildings reflect this collectivity. They arc outwards with light. All the famous Shaker products can be seen there - but it's not the perfectly crafted chests and cabinets, the ingenious applications of common sense to working objects, the spotless kitchens, the unadorned gleaming wood floors that you remember. It's the brooding of an intense unified spiritual life, never finished.

Why had I been drawn to the Shakers at this time? As I read more about them I kept being overtaken by similarities between the experiences they accumulated during the years of their greatest strength, and my own investigations over the past two and half years. Consider their 'gifts', for example.

A 'gift', to a Shaker, was any form of divine intervention, or inspiration. Often it came in the form of words, speaking in tongues, or a message 'sent' from Mother Ann Lee, or from an Angel to one of the brethren or sisters. There were other gifts - they came in the form of songs and dances. And then there were the literal gifts - breastplates of truth, censers of Mother Ann's love, crowns of purity, beautiful gowns and jewelry, trumpets, drums, guns and fur hats, which came as real and as tangible as any man-made objects. It turned out that these 'gifts', manifested to the Shakers often during their Sabbath day services, but liable to come at any time, even in the midst of a days work, were treated as palpable entities, though invisible to the world. They were pantomimed, in absolute child-like seriousness.

Then there were the states of possession, in which believers would spin for up to an hour, till they fell to the floor of the meeting house exhausted; or one part of the anatomy, a hand, perhaps, would become possessed of a will of its own, and drag its owner across fields and through workshops, till he stopped exhausted before some preordained destination.

These by themselves would have intrigued me, but there was more. For a brief period of about ten years, from 1839 onwards, the Shaker communities were swept by a heightened form of these visionary experiences (or 'altered states', or 'peak experiences', if you will). Elaborate rituals came to simple brethren and sisters as if by magic. Often they took such an extreme form that the meetings, normally open to the public, were closed. In due course these ceremonies were transferred to the open air, and the hills above Hancock witnessed dancing Shakers possessed by the spirits of Indian tribes, becoming drunk on Mother Ann's spiritual wine, washing each other down with pure 'water' that had sprung miraculously from the earth by virtue of the power of love and simplicity.

All this, combined with the Shakers' utter down-to-earth nature at other times, their contempt for all things frivolous and decorative, their scientific approach to the problems of everyday living, seemed to beckon imperiously as a subject for more research.

I had promised to run a workshop at Temple University's Department of Theatre - a situation which enabled me to choose my topic, and rehearse a group of ten actors uninterruptedly for two and half weeks. I'd always meant to use this time as a way to explore some aspect of my Institute research. Now I had my material. I started to read more about the Shakers, to draft a script (time was running out and there were only about three weeks in which to prepare something), make notes of improvisations and exercises. I went to the primary sources.

" ... When a tune is struck up, they turn, the brethren to the left and sisters to the right, and perform a sort of trotting step, each company around its own division of the room until the set of the tune, when all turn facing the singers and shuffle. This continues for about three minutes. Then there is a respite for a half of a minute, or a minute. And another tune is struck. At the intervals of the tunes, there is sometimes speaking. Some brother, or sister, expresses their thankfulness for their privilege in the Gospel, and express their determination to be obedient to their beloved Elders. Sometimes the Elders exhort the brethren and sisters to be zealous, and labor for the 'gifts and power of God'.

As these exercises continue, the zeal increases, the whole

company frequently clap their hands in concert. Some begin to turn around with great rapidity, some leap and shout, throw up their hands and perform all manner of gesticulations, talk in new, unknown tongues, sing in unknown tongues. Sometimes, as today, for instance, two or three times, all join in one concert of yelling, screaming, shouting, shaking, with all their might, thumping their feet upon the floor with great rapidity, altogether presenting a scene and making a noise which cannot be described ..."

"Two Years Experience Among the Shakers"
by David Lamson, 1848

Very well, if it cannot be described, I thought, I'll try it myself, and see what it looks like. And what it feels like. And how it strikes others.

Next month I'll tell you what I found out.

Greetings for a very happy Season.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth". The signature is written in dark ink and has a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Kenneth Cavander