

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 32 - BURROWING THROUGH THE
MOUNTAIN
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Dear Mr. Nolte

Although my Fellowship officially ended on January 31st of this year, my work on the questions that have interested me for so long did not. In fact, in some ways it has intensified.

I spent the last few months of 1976 writing. In January of 1977 I visited Europe (for family reasons) but I took some time out to visit a theatre in Paris that had been acquiring a European reputation for interesting work, and in the latter half of the month I held a reading in New York of one of the plays I had been working on in the fall.

Looking back on the hundreds of hours of rehearsal, the scores of games, exercises, and stories I tried out, the dozens of actors, from seasoned professionals to students and people who had never set foot on a stage, with whom I had collaborated on these projects, I realized what an enormous undertaking it had all been. And if reflection hadn't given me this realization, the piles of notes and drafts of new material accumulated over the past three years would have. Any one of the exercises I created, used, and put aside to go on to something new could have occupied me for several weeks; any one of the stories or ideas for stories could bear investigation for a full production period; and there are all the notes made from reading and suggested by things I saw in rehearsal. It is this body of material which I still burrow into, and use in my subsequent work as far as possible.

For example, since the end of January I have spent eight weeks with a group of acting students at Sarah Lawrence College in New York City. The subject was dreams, and for eight hours every Friday we

Kenneth Cavander was an Institute Fellow investigating our past and present mythologies and our capacities for self transformation. This is his last newsletter.

told dreams, past and present, played out the images, tried to find techniques for representing their peculiar moods and colors, tracked their connection to private myths - all in an attempt to make contact with the source of dreaming. As you know, I had been attempting for some time to find a satisfactory theatrical form for this kind of material, and I think that in the course of this workshop I moved a step closer to it. The ostensible reason for my presence at Sarah Lawrence was to offer a course in advanced acting, but the dream workshop became the vehicle for everything that I wished to say to the students about the subject, and when we came to our final meeting we used the occasion to enact, without rehearsal, a grand festival of dramatized dreams - using whatever we had been able to learn in the previous sessions. I thought it made for terrific theatre; the actors were energized - and moved; and the next time I do it I want to do it in front of an audience. Aside from its innate theatricality and entertainment value, the dream material has another, equally important value - not just for actors but for any artist. It is the most available and most orderly way to gain access to one's own creative powers, and to watch them at work. Over and over again I was struck by the way the dream master (whoever he is) inside each person is able to take banal everyday events and transform them into a work of art.

Another interesting development since my Fellowship ended is that as I started to find out about what some of my colleagues in the profession had been doing, I discovered that they had been on a similar quest to my own. For instance, when I took up my Fellowship, Andre Gregory, with whom I had collaborated on ALICE IN WONDERLAND, had been building up his company, The Manhattan Project, into an intensely committed group of actors, presenting a series of works by classic and modern authors. Then we lost touch - until I happened to meet him again a few weeks ago. I asked him what he had been doing for the past year. His description of the changes he had felt impelled to bring about in his professional life sounded like a synopsis of my newsletters. The same thing happened the other day when I met Paul Sills, whom I had last seen as the director of the Broadway version of Story Theatre, recently emerging from his work with the Second City and Compass Theatres in Chicago. Now he was talking of mystery religions, the Kabbalah, and Martin Buber.

Paradoxically, at the same time as this development has been taking place in the careers of a few individuals, the avante garde theatre as a whole, at least in New York City, has been squeezed financially and institutionally. The major producing organizations for new works, the Off-off-Broadway theatres, have become cautious and unwilling (though it's fairer to say, unable) to commit themselves to the kind of work which people like myself want to do. That is, the rehearsal time, the space, the effort of promoting these

works (if they reach a point where they can be presented to an audience) all add up to an investment which the theatres cannot make. "Cannot" - for a number of complex reasons to do with their relationship to their sources of funding, public and private, and to Actors' Equity. Actors themselves, in one of those shifts which takes place in the consciousness of groups within a profession, are not so eager to set aside their careers for the time it takes to develop new works, especially risky or 'experimental' new works, as they were five, or even three years ago. I say this without judgment or blame, merely as a statement of fact.

The real source of interest in these matters (I mean the questions I have been investigating during my Fellowship) lies among members of the general public, theatre- and non-theatre-going, who see the potential for self-development and evolution in action, symbolic and ceremonial, quasi-theatrical in form, but perhaps not presented as a commercial product for marketing along with other forms of entertainment. I realise this may seem a vague formulation, but the movement itself is vague. There are no centers where this kind of work can be done securely or confidently. There is no recognized institution that supports it, and no acknowledged leaders who can show the way or help newcomers over the inevitable barriers that are thrown in path of anyone who tries to explore this territory. It's like burrowing through a mountain, hoping you will meet the people burrowing through from the other side, and going ahead with only the faint sounds of the other party's picks and shovels to guide you.

I suppose, if there was a single theme to which I kept returning, and which I will continue to return in the future - it's the need for such a center - physical and spiritual. To do this kind of work under the aegis of theatre entails too many disguises and stratagems, periphrases and redefinitions, to be truly comfortable; and to try to make it respectable as a form of psychological training, academic study, or self-discipline, is another kind of masquerade. So a third ground is needed, a space free of pre-judgments, where the play, in all senses of the word, can go on in an atmosphere of creative support and artistic mutual respect.

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A brief report on my visit to Paris. The company to which I had been introduced by a friend is called Le Grand Magic Circus. Appropriately, it performs in a tent, set up not far from the metro station in a drab north east section of Paris, where all the streets seem filled with grey tenements and people hurry home from their factory jobs as fast^{as} they can. The show is performed as a spoof on the traditional circus spectacle. As soon as you enter the tent you are surrounded with an atmosphere of aggressive craziness. Members of

the company dressed in battered tuxedos clamber directly over the backs of the folding chairs to lead you somehow to your seat. You are showered from time to time with sparks from fireworks held directly over the audience and waved frantically around to the rhythm of a jazz combo that plays obsessively upstage right. Other company members in clown makeup wander among the audience scattering confetti and distributing huge quantities of Kleenex, pour vos larmes. The show, it appears, is not only magic but tragic - although when the time comes to use the Kleenex, it's not to wipe away tears. The show begins when a processioned by the Master of Ceremonies, who is also the author and the director of the Magic Circus, as well as playing leading actor in some of its episodes, pulls back the curtain that is strung across the stage on a sagging wire.

The background is a cheaply painted flat representing an Italian town. The company, representing a broken down circus troop, shambles on stage. The MC, Jerome Savary, announces the kind of evening we may expect - sentiment, slapstick, morality, tragedy. It is all done in an outrageous parody of the excessive style of pulp fiction and vaudeville.

The story is simple. A small time circus is down on its luck. At first the circus animals think that they will rebel, and form their own circus - but this uprising is quickly subdued and the animals shot. Then the two owners of the circus set about creating another, more commercial circus - one that cannot fail. This gives the author a chance to satirize society's corruption, cynicism, immorality, careerism, and sexual exploitation. He uses transvestism, nudity, and Grand Guignol (in one elaborate scene Queen Victoria, played by a man, appears as a very aged hospital case, supported by an elaborate life-line of rubber tubes stretching into the audience; she sips tea, very slowly, very daintily, from a beautiful china cup. When she has drained the last drop of tea, the tubes are pulled away and Queen Victoria topples over, blood gushing from her mouth. End of scene.) In one particularly frantic scene, an actor, dressed half as a man and half as a woman, enacts large chunks of ROMEO AND JULIET in English, playing all the roles and using a tattered wig to represent Juliet when he/she is playing Romeo. This turns into a paranoid celebration of the joy of being an actor, in which the performer becomes so manic that spittle flies from his mouth over the first few rows of the audience ... Hence the need for the Kleenex. In its final degradation the circus goes to hell, and plays to the devil in stage smoke and red spotlights.

The audience, mostly students and a sprinkling of solid citizens, seemed to enjoy itself, though not as much as the actors and director seemed to expect. I thought I felt a lack of compassion and a contempt

for the audience in the whole production; the jokes were bitter, and there was something self-conscious about the combination of Brecht and Theatre of the Ridiculous. For all the brilliance of some of the segments, the piece as a whole left me with a bad taste in my mouth. The company performs all over Europe, returning to Paris periodically as its base. In each country it plays in the language of the people. Last year, it was in America - very briefly. There was some talk of a New York presentation, but I think it managed to get no closer than Stony Brook, Long Island. Over a quarter of a million people have seen it in Europe, and the show's creator, Savary, is an interesting mixture of energetic performer/musician, spoiled child, and hard headed entrepreneur. There's nothing quite like it here - with the possible exception of a strange and seldom noticed quirky genius called Jeff Weiss.

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Theatre as a profession does not really support its members. Pretty well everyone finances the 'habit' through other work - in TV, movies, teaching, commercials. Except for a few who find permanent berths in the hierarchy of institutions such as the regional theatres, theatre doesn't offer people a way to earn a living, support a family, or even to develop as an artist. This is almost equally true whether your ambition is to prepare a production for ten months in a Canal Street loft for viewing by forty people at a time, or to write Hello Dolly. Most people subsidize theatre with their own money, their own time, their own sweat, or their taxes. Often it's hard to think of theatre as a profession at all. When I began my Institute Fellowship I had reached a point where I was questioning many of the assumptions by which theatre, and theatres, were run. Who is the audience, really? What do they want? What kinds of things can you do to make them feel that this is a unique experience, being in an enclosed space with other human beings, strangers, some of them dressed in strange ways, illuminated, singing, perhaps, or dancing? Trying to answer these questions has led me into some strange places, and sharpened the razor edge on which everyone walks in this so-called 'business' - wondering at one moment whether anything you do makes sense, needs to be done, or will speak to another living soul, and the next, thinking that nothing else is worth doing.

I would like to have a brief and communicable summary of my conclusions to put at the end of this newsletter. But I don't. The fact is, there are no conclusions - only more twists and turns on the path, more doors opened, more offshoots, labyrinths, boxes within boxes. So the best way to end seems to be to say, to all the newsletter readers, the Institute, the Institute staff, and to you especially, thank you.

Sincerely


Kenneth Cavander

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