

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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"Likening spiritual to corporeal forms"

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Richard H. Nolte  
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535 Fifth Avenue  
New York  
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

This has been a month of intense activity, which in turn has generated the need for even more intense work to follow.

In my spare time I was working on a play that allows me to concentrate into a fairly conventional dramatic form some of the more unconventional things that have begun to manifest themselves in the past few years; it also allows me to embody in one fictional character a number of traits and biographical highlights that are typical of what I see as one emerging contemporary 'hero'. The play is nearing completion in first draft form; I shall have more to say about it when the draft is in typescript and the umbilical cord severed.

Meanwhile, I sketched out a scenario for what I expect will be one of several theatrical pieces in which some of the theories I have been testing (in the workshops I mentioned in previous

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newsletters) would be put to the test in a more connected way. Then, I had to find the actors, interview them, schedule meetings and make sure everyone knew exactly when and where to arrive, as well as arrange for space to be available at the times we needed it. From past experience I knew that none of it would happen as smoothly as I hoped, and I could never have done it without the help of an assistant, an eager and bright Bennington student who is on his spring semester "Work Project". When he is not assisting me he is observing Zero Mostel rehearse for the upcoming New York production of Ulysses in Nighttown. If that doesn't produce mental fragmentation, nothing will.

The main business of the month was to begin work with actors. I invited some that I knew and trusted from previous work together, plus two others I had met during last fall's auditions. We began on an ad hoc basis, meeting whenever we could and covering as much ground as possible in a short time, so that both I and they could find out all we needed to know before setting out on a longer journey together. It was a reconnoitering process, and is still going on. We shall work into February, but enough has happened already to fill several newsletters. All I can do, I think, is to summarise a few of the more specific things that took place, and leave others for later.

The purpose, as I said, was to make a series of brief forays

into the unknown territory and see what parts of it suited us best. I had eight people, most of whom I had directed in other work, but never work of this nature; nor did they all know each other. So while I was watching the action on stage I was also trying to keep up with the various harmonies and discords that were set up between the actors themselves.

Since we didn't go about it in a linear way, it will be easier to describe what went on according to the types of problem we tackled. The first was space. The definition of a piece of floor, ground, earth, room, where something special could happen. In a conventional theatre the audience accepts the stage area as special, inviolate, not subject to the normal laws of logic. But I need to find a way to heighten this effect, and to extend the penumbra of the stage to include the audience. One technique we tried to was to create a silence in the smallest possible area - a small circle marked off by the actors standing as close to each other as possible. Then the task was to expand that circle of attention and concentration till it included an area large enough to perform in; and then, still keeping the silence intact, to expand it even further to include the audience. The actors had nothing except their own wills to help them. In any room, except for Proust's cork-lined study, there is a constant invasion of extraneous noises - from the street, from the building,

from the other people present. What we were creating, it turned out, was the kind of 'silence' which someone experiences when he is concentrating on solving a difficult problem, writing a letter to a loved one, or composing a piece of music or a design - when other noises are heard-but-not-heard, the person is encased in a cocoon of attention; it is equivalent to the silence achieved by the yogin, when the outer voice of the world is still and the inner voice can make itself heard. Of our various attempts to bring this about the one I thought showed most promise was when some of the actors, becoming an audience, tried to bring about complete stillness in the rest of the performers, who were concentrating on responding like ultra-sensitive antennae to any sound from within a given space. The resulting tension, in which each side had to be at a pitch of alertness, created a sensation I didn't find pleasant, but it was certainly strong, like the distilled essence of suspense. One felt riveted into place. Another version of this was a game in which the 'audience' was given license to play with the actors, creating random sounds just to see what the effect would be - as a real audience might feel tempted to do. As actors and audience engaged in a silent battle for ascendancy, some actors even managed to turn the tables and control the audience.

There was a limit to the amount of work we could do on the space problem. Since we were always moving rehearsal rooms, it was impossible to form an attachment to a particular working area, and without that attachment the kind of effect I was looking for can never be achieved. But in ideal circumstances, in a room that could be devoted to a single purpose over an extended period of time, I'm sure the space could be filled with emotional energy, which would be stored there, bottled as it were, to be uncorked at certain times when an audience is present. Everyone has had the experience of walking into a strange house and saying to oneself, "Something has happened here." What you use, you change, and not just physically.

Another group of experiments concerned the use of energy to affect the actions or behavior of others. I mentioned, in Newsletter #2, the 'Power Game'. In variations of this I had the actors try to exert, one to one, their capacities for changing the action of another without using any of the obvious means - persuasion, for instance, or physical force. Some of them found rather easy solutions to this - such as devising some surprise that momentarily distracted the person who was performing the action. But that was not what I was looking for. At one point an actor succeeded in simply staring another person into immobility. In this case I think it was a case of a particularly concentrated

actor and a particularly suggestible actress, but it was still fascinating to watch. The actress had chosen to mime scrubbing a floor, and she went about her business methodically and realistically. The other actor sat down, and stared at her. Then he leant forward, hands on knees, and stared at her more intently. She backed away. After a while she began to scrub more slowly, and to cast nervous glances at him. He came a little closer; she continued to scrub, backing away. She looked as if she was backing up against a wall, although there was plenty of room between her and the nearest physical object. (She was getting close to the edge of the acting area, however.) After a few more minutes of this she burst out into an exasperated laugh, threw down her (imaginary) cloth, and said, "I can't go on!" I asked the actor what he had been doing. "I just told myself she had to stop," he said.

In another exercise, the actress devised a very complicated action for herself and became engrossed in it. The actor trying to stop her was totally nonplussed by what her action meant; all he could think of doing was imitate it. Gradually he discovered what it was. He tried to enter into her imaginary world and then to put up obstacles to her imaginary task. It didn't succeed, but along the way an interesting thing happened. The two sets of actions became so interconnected that they began to form a little drama of their own; they became full of comedy; soon it began to

look as if the actor was going to succeed by making the actress so helpless with laughter that she had to stop; the laughter of the audience began to get in her way. But she was serious in her attempts to keep going. The tension between the laughter and the will not to be diverted from her task was somehow very unnerving. In the end she managed to keep her concentration just enough to force a draw. There is some interesting exploration to be done in this area of semi-autonomous and infectious actions like laughter, yawning, stuttering, sobbing ...

Now for a group of experiments that involved some alteration of the actors' perception of reality. We tried a simple way of doing this - one person sitting in the center on a metal chair while the others took up positions on the circumference of an imaginary circle. The actress who was sitting in the chair said she wanted to fly. So each of the others in turn talked to her - some trying to give the impression that she was actually rising from the ground by means of movement and sound relative to her; others trying to lead her into it by suggestion; one appealed to her rational mind and asked her to reflect on the known physical properties of matter and so get her to draw the conclusion logically that she was afloat; another gave her a poetic image, which he expanded, to create the illusion of being carried away by the wind. The exercise was a great

success, though not the way I'd hoped. She fell asleep. On being awakened, she was told, still sitting in the chair and with her eyes closed, to put one foot on the ground. She obeyed gingerly, as if afraid of finding nothing there. Then she was asked, still keeping her eyes shut, to put both feet on the floor and to feel its solidity under her. Then she was to open her eyes and look down. She did, and said she felt the floor rushing up to meet her, " ... as if it was coming at me to hit me ..."

We had succeeded in putting her into what the doctors would call a 'fugue' state, I think, but I didn't feel it proved much either way.

Another version of this was much more evocative. It involved action, a song, a guide with a script, and a Traveler. While one of the actors sang a simple folk song the Traveler set out and was given the length of the song to complete a journey; at the end of the journey he would meet a figure or creature who would have some significance for him/her. Meanwhile the guide would accompany the Traveler, helping him out of his current reality into another, without suggesting any specific images or events, and the others provided a constantly shifting movement around the periphery of his vision. All this - words, song, movement, journey - took the form of a miniature drama, lasting perhaps five minutes.



The actors who tried it reported a noticeable shift in their center of consciousness. What seemed to happen was that we were able to create a disassociation - listening to both song and words was impossible, so the Traveler became absorbed in one or the other. Usually it was the words - which were aimed at recreating a specific feeling of detachment. Meanwhile, the sounds, the movement, the passage from one place to the next, however short, encouraged the release of images. One of these was seen by the actor as a grey cowled figure with outstretched wings. Nothing remarkable in this ~~except~~ that, as we found out afterwards, at the same time as he saw this image one of the actresses who was providing the movement at the periphery had seen in her mind's eye a Blake drawing, one of those hovering angels, misty grey forms with outstretched wings that fringe his poems. If, in place of the Traveler, you were to put an audience, could you create the circumstances in which there could be a collective ESP experience? With the right kind of guide, I think so. Mythologically speaking the guide recreates the part of Hermes, or Thoth, in his capacity of psychopomp, He Who Escorts the Soul. In our case the words the guide spoke were based on a common experience that can be either pleasant or alarming, according to your mood at the time. While still perfectly able to function and perform normal physical tasks, you feel

that you have been plunged into the situation you are currently experiencing from another place, somewhere quite different, and that you will return to this other place in a few moments. The trouble is, and this is what can make it alarming, you can't remember where that other place is. So for the moment you're stuck with the present reality - to which, however, you feel you have only the most tenuous connection. You don't belong to it; it doesn't belong to you. This sensation can persist for a few minutes, or even much longer. It may be possible to induce it chemically, though I've never heard of such a thing. But re-created vividly enough, it can be a powerful vehicle for taking the mind off terra firma.

While we are on this subject, we discovered that the actors could also retrieve some buried capacities in another area - diagnostic powers. One of them stood quite still and did all he could to concentrate whatever he understood by the word "energy" or, if he preferred, to create a field of force around himself as if he were a magnet. (These are catchall terms, by the way. One uses the most convenient label to describe things and events that don't really have names as yet). The other actors then took a spiral path around him that led them through this field of 'energy', and tried to discover any weaknesses in it. They were not to think of these weakness visually, but to let

them affect their bodies and the way they moved. The result was remarkable agreement on a certain place in the actor's body which everyone felt was weaker than the others, and one of them even began to walk differently, holding his hand to the small of his back on one side - just about where the actor had recently suffered a bruise. Afterwards, the one who had put his hand behind his back claimed he had no idea he had made the gesture.

All this was fascinating, but it left untouched most of the hard questions about communication with an audience, though I think some of things we started to do contain the germs of a performance script. The goal is to make these things happen for the actors in such a way that they happen for an audience too - not in a carbon copy way, but collaboratively, and this is the direction we are now going to investigate.

Meanwhile, in the month ahead I shall be approaching the problem from another angle. With a different group I plan to spend a short time translating into theatrical terms the scenario of an Evocation Ritual I found in some 19th century sources. I am also starting to work on some material based on heroes of the American outback - not cowboys or gangsters - but figures with a wilder fantasy life.

It's strange how, once you begin to work on something in a con-

centrated way, every chance event seems to fall into a pattern consistent with that work. I discovered this passage in my reading not long ago, and thought it a perfect description of a certain kind of theatrical undertaking. Yet it wasn't written as such. Slightly adapted, but ever so slightly, it runs as follows. Can you guess where it comes from?

"Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate to human sense the invisible exploits of warring spirits, how unfold 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 corporeal forms, as may express them best - though what if earth be but a shadow of heaven and things there each to other like, more than on earth is thought?" \*

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander

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\* Milton: "Paradise Lost" V, 564 ff. Raphael talking to Adam.

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