

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

The Williamstown Theatre
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KC-8 - Logistics

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

While relocating my household and the hospitalisation of one of my actors put the month of May into a state of limbo, and forced the temporary suspension of my New York workshop, I thought this would be an opportunity to go back over the past few months and fill in some of the gaps which my more abstract letters may have left. So, with apologies to those of my readers for whom some of the material in what follows is familiar from their own experience, I'd like to give you as much of a panoramic view as I can of that side of New York theatre activity with which I've had some experience in the course of doing this kind of work.

When you undertake a project such as mine, and decide that, for some of the time, at least, you need to work with actors as the indispensable tools of your trade, where do you begin? Who do you approach? How do you organize it?

Everyone who has worked in the theatre for even a short period has acquired a circle of acquaintances, and a notebook full of names and addresses and, in addition, a cache of hearsay information about actors they may wish to work with at some time or other. But there are always the ones you don't know. Are they better for what you have in mind? Is there, somewhere out in that wilderness of New York theatre, the ideal company of performers waiting to be found and assembled? And anyway, shouldn't you try to broaden your circle of acquaintances in the acting profession? Feeling that the answer to these questions must be 'yes' you put an advertisement in 'The Trades'.

Most people have heard of 'Variety', the weekly publication that feels like a telephone directory and covers every aspect of films, TV, theatre, radio, and related performing and entertainment crafts. 'Variety' has its own language, its authoritative inside stories, and in spite of its relentlessly hardnosed commercial attitude to the performing arts, a perceptive stable of critics.

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Less well known, but covering some of the same ground, are two smaller publications, 'Show Business' and 'Back Stage', modestly slim tabloids that also appear weekly, and stand in relation to 'Variety' as a rumor picked up in a bar does to a story in the New York Times. These papers, known as 'The Trades', carry all kinds of information about productions planned, plays optioned, shows being cast, as well as news about the prevailing trends in the day-to-day marketplace of show business. They are a kind of whispering gallery, for even as insubstantial an item as the optioning of an obscure script by an unknown producer rates a mention in their pages, presumably in order to alert actors to the possibility, however remote, of a job. Auditions for commercial Broadway and Off Broadway productions are announced in the The Trades, and anyone, for a nominal fee, can advertise for actors for any kind of production. As a result, alongside the listing of open calls for the latest musical starring Prima Donna or Top Billing, you can find a string of entries, four or five lines long, calling for dancers for dinner theatre revues, ingenues for a stock company season of Broadway hits of the fifties, 'types' of all shapes and sizes for tours of childrens' theatre repertory, and invitations for actors to apply for roles in showcase productions around New York.

Many actors read the trades regularly for news of these showcase productions. Professionals pick them up, often with a depreciating aside like, "I just wanted to see what was going on", when they are out of work, or feel that they may be missing something that their agent hasn't told them about. Non-professionals and inexperienced actors use them as a way to find productions in which they can be seen and noticed.

Before I go on to say more about showcases and how they work, I ought to clarify some things, as I see them, about acting and who 'actors' are.

Acting is an art form, a way of life, a kind of physical poetry. It is also a craft, but one for which there is no recognized apprenticeship, no examination or degree, no diplomas which you can flourish and say, "Look, I'm qualified." Anyone can become an actor by merely presenting himself at an audition and declaring his availability and getting cast in a play. As a matter of fact, this almost never happens, or if it does, it scarcely signals the start of a career. In the first place, Actors Equity Association, the union, limits the chances of this happening in the normal commercial situation by requiring actors appearing at auditions to show their Equity cards. And, roughly speaking, the only way to acquire one of these cards is to be hired at a theatre working under an Equity contract - which usually means that you have to have demonstrated sufficient competence or talent to

have attracted the attention of some professional director or producer somewhere. However, there are sneaky ways to acquire an Equity card. For instance, SAG (Screen Actors Guild) and AFTRA (Association of Film, TV & Radio Actors) are sister unions to AEA, and I have heard of actors who have crossed from one union to the other - not too difficult provided you are willing to pay the dues.

Thus the mere possession of an Equity card doesn't guarantee work, or even minimum courtesy from a producer. Meanwhile, drama schools around the country send streams of young actors to New York yearly. In the city itself there are studios, such as those run by Uta Hagen, or Warren Robertson (two of the most popular ones right now), where anyone who can raise the money for the fees can receive training and on the strength of that training present themselves at an audition to be hired. Almost none of them ever are.

And so you have, in New York, thousands of unemployed actors, a vast range of experience and talent, from utter beginners to performers with several awards on their shelves, seeking a way to practise their craft. I don't know what the current membership of Actors Equity is, but in combination with the pool of non-members, there must be between 20,000 and 30,000 men and women in New York trying to make a living out of the stage and the related professions. A glance at the pages of the New York Times will show how many shows are currently running--- and how many actors they can keep employed? A few dozen? A couple of hundred actors at most? And the pay scales in many of those productions are scarcely such as to provide a comfortable living in the city. Off Broadway minimum is currently about \$135 a week.

So, most actors are not working at all, and cannot expect to. Even those that are working are bored or idle for a good part of the day. They are sent by their agents to audition for films or TV specials; they try out for parts in commercials; they go to studios for scene work, or voice work, or movement. And they read the trades, and think about appearing in a showcase.

The showcase is an interesting phenomenon, with a lore and tradition all of its own. Its correct title is Equity Showcase, and technically it is a production presented under a special agreement (the Showcase Code) with Actors Equity, by which professional actors are allowed to perform without pay for limited number of appearances (12) under certain conditions - that there be no paid advertising, no charges made to the public, no backers in the audience, etc. But this doesn't begin to cover the range and quality of the productions which are offered as 'showcases', and in order to understand the background against which I was collecting my actors and asking them to work, I must say a little more about the different shadings which the word 'showcase' may have.

At one end of the spectrum are those productions which, in every respect except budget, are shadow versions of fullscale commercial shows. They are presented and performed in with the highest hopes, hopes that through the kindly attention of critics and producers they will transform themselves into successful Broadway or Off Broadway productions. This happens often enough to encourage even calculating producers to become involved in showcases. Examples of shows that have made the transition are GODSPELL, THE HOT L BALTIMORE, BAD HABITS, THE SEA HORSE. In the case of this last show, the script was under option for a long time by at least two producers, before the author gave up trying to find a commercial production, and offered it to a small Off-offBroadway theatre that specializes in Equity Showcases. It performed there for twelve nights, was enthusiastically reviewed and is now set for a long Off Broadway run. Off-offBroadway, which used to be a place that only the most enterprising or bored commercial producers would ever visit, is now becoming a substitute for the old out-of-town tryout, with the added attraction of economy. The budgets for most showcases are in the hundreds of dollars; five thousand would be lavish. Compare this with the \$50,000 minimum which a straight play costs to mount Off Broadway (it can rise to about \$100,000 in no time for a musical), and you can see the attraction for producers.

Probably most actors, authors and directors become involved in showcases with the vision of GODSPELL or THE SEA HORSE before them. But most showcases never make it beyond the twelve performances. Many, of course, are presented by those coffee-house organisations, lofts, itinerant companies and groups that make up Off-off Broadway and constitute the most fertile ground for new creative work in the theatre. These organisations exist to perform labors of love. They live on the devotion of their actors, technicians, and audiences - often interchangeable. Sometimes one of their productions will achieve a longer run on its own account; or one of the companies will acquire its own underground following. But for the most part these theatres and their productions (often not strictly speaking Showcases since many of their actors are not Equity members) have a brief mayfly existence.

Beyond, or below (depending on how you look at it) these islands of actual production is a vast ocean of amorphous energy, coagulating now and then into the assorted workshops, groups, laboratories who make up the true underground of the theatre. These groups range from the relatively well-known (The Manhattan Project, The Performance Group) to the esoteric (Drifting Traffic, The Ontological Hysterical Theatre). They may work for a year and show for a week. They may work for two years and never show at all.

Obviously an actor willing to commit himself for one kind of production in all this activity will not be able or anxious to give up time for another. A known or established actor will appear in a Showcase that rehearses for three weeks and performs for three weekends for a number of reasons - he hopes it will go on to 'greater' things, he is a friend of the author, he is doing nothing better, he likes the script and wants to do it regardless of the financial reward - but that same actor will not be interested in giving up six or nine months of his life to work in a dingy loft on the lower West Side with a group of actors who believe in improvising every line.

The reverse is also true. A performer who is used to working in a leisurely, exploratory rhythm can be inhibited and even destroyed by the pressures - no different, really, than the pressures of a conventional commercial play, with its dress rehearsals, previews, and opening night - of putting on a showcase production in less than a month and under less than ideal conditions.

My problem was that I was looking for a group of people who were prepared to work within none of these recognisable categories. These was nothing especially unusual in starting without a script - as I did - but the situation was especially tenuous and hard to explain because I wasn't able to say, "We'll work for X number of weeks, at such and such times of day, in this or that space, and at the end of that time we will either show it or we won't, but at least we will have accomplished something." I couldn't say that, because I was asking for something different. All I could say was, to paraphrase, "There is this area of interest of mine, there are these techniques and source materials (describing some of the things on which I am basing my work), but I don't know at this very early stage whether any of it can be turned into a production, or in what form, or when." I was asking them to be, in effect, partners with me in the laboratory of the rehearsal room; to be doing it for few, if any ulterior motives; and to share my own interest in the outcome of the work for its own sake, no matter what it was. And this was difficult because, for all the reasons I've suggested above, actors are not in a position, or just don't wish, to be involved in a project in this way for the most part. They want, naturally, to be able to see the results on the horizon, even if it's a distant one; and preferably to be able to start with a concrete and recognisable text or goal.

So I placed my ad. in the trades, wording it in the vaguest way possible, so as not to attract too many people who were

just looking for a short-term commitment. For a showcase I directed about a year ago I received over 200 responses to such an ad. I hoped not as many would reply this time, but as it was I picked up over a hundred photos and resumes from the theater I was using as an audition space. These photo-resumes are an art form in themselves, sometimes more fiction than fact. They are 5 x 8 glossy photographs of the performer, with a synopsis of his or her career, professional standing (AEA, SAG, or AFTRA), agent (if any), and special skills (can be anything from skiing to languages and yoga), printed or pasted onto the back. Actors go to a great deal of trouble to make these photo-resumes attractive; often the resume is the closest the actor will ever get to a director or producer. They are sent out wholesale, and as a result of this scatter-shot technique actors will forget which part they have put in for. More than once I have answered an application for a part by calling up the actor and being asked, in a dazed sort of way, what part it was he had applied for. The sad thing about these resumes is that they are as likely to be filled with the names of teachers the actor has studied with as with the titles of parts he has played, and the person who walks through the door at an audition may be a totally different being (in appearance) from the one whose photograph you hold in your hand.

Trying to see even a hundred people individually would have presented exhausting logistical problems, so I met everyone I could get in touch with by holding group workshops which doubled as a preliminary testing of the material (See Newsletter #2). The paradoxical thing, in view of the shortage of work, about these group auditions was that for every dozen or so actors I would invite to attend, about three or four would not make it to the session; either they would call up and say they had another appointment; or - they would simply not show. It's another measure, of course, of the disintegrating and debilitating effect which his life in New York has on an actor - about which I'll have more to say later. Many actors, for instance, work into the small hours of the morning, and so tend to oversleep for a morning audition; some simply hear of what sounds like a better opportunity and go to that one instead; a surprising number of actors are afraid of auditions, or are too proud to subject themselves to an experience they feel is humiliating.

Most of the people I saw were young. A few were making some kind of a living as models or doing bit parts in commercials and TV specials. They had usually had some acting experience in summer stock, but the vast majority were currently 'between jobs' in the euphemism of the profession. A good number of these were talented and attractive. I ended up with a list of about twenty I could have worked with, but in the end, after all the auditioning, the sifting, the interviewing, I only picked two of those people who had come to me through the ad. Why? Was the quality so low, the level of talent so disappointing? Not really.

What made it unlikely that I would use any of these people - and this I knew even before I began - was that every director, and especially someone working on a project such as mine, feels more at ease working with people he knows, with whom he already has some unspoken affinity through the shared experience of going through the production together, and whose relationship to other members of the group he has some chance of predicting. So, the worn out and paranoid adage that 'it's not how good you are but who you know' is, I'm afraid, borne out in practice - not just my own, either. Nevertheless, holding the auditions was worthwhile if I met only one new actor I would want to work with. Moreover - and this is a purely personal feeling - it was a matter of conscience to be as open to new possibilities as I could.

The life of an actor, especially a young or inexperienced actor, is one of almost medieval servitude. He is at the mercy of directors, producers, agents, casting offices, authors, and his landlord. But the most demanding and most difficult to please of all the masters he serves is the phantom of The Part That May Be. The Part That May Be is always just around the next audition, in a possible play not yet written (or not yet announced), offered as a result of a chance meeting in a bar, or at the behest of some god-like agent, as yet unacquainted with this particular actor. For obvious reasons, most actors do not make a living out of their profession, craft, art, whatever you wish to call it. So they make some kind of week-to-week or month-to-month existence possible for themselves by a variety of stratagems - all the while secretly serving that other slavedriver who may, by a stroke of fate, become a smiling fairy godmother. It is this that makes them late for appointments, tense in rehearsal, temperamental in auditions, and raw and restless in everyday life. In my next newsletter I shall give you some thumbnail sketches of the group of actors I worked with this spring and in so doing I'll try to give you an insight into the various expediences by which some members of the profession manage to survive.

Sincerely,

Kenneth.

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