

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Mr. Richard Nolte

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535 Fifth Avenue

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

At the end of my last newsletter I was describing the general problem that faces every young actor who is making his life, and hopefully his work, in New York. To give you a better idea of what this means in practice, and how it affects a project such as mine, let me tell you something about the people who gave their time and energies to me this spring, who they were, and how they survived.

There was Andie, aged thirty, though he looks younger, a graduate of Berkeley, where he was a mathematician who switched to history, and a highly intelligent man. He has traveled in Europe and North Africa, and has decided to stay away from the usual devices by which an actor tries to make his career spring into life in New York - auditioning for commercials, looking for parts in TV soap operas, following up leads that may take him to a regional theatre for a season. Instead, Andie has pared his necessities down to the minimum, and to create a separate patch of ground on which to stand, independent of theatre as a profession, he is now hiring out the skills he acquired when he remodeled and redecorated his apartment. So, for half the week, he paints - studios, lofts, apartments, restaurants, as a freelance contractor, and the rest of the time he acts. During the period we were working together he was simultaneously rehearsing for a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music by a group that specialised in intensely disciplined, almost balletic movement. Andie would paint during the day, then from six to midnight he would rehearse with this other group, then at one o'clock the next day he would appear for rehearsal with me, wearing his paint-stained clothes and looking very pale. At the end of the afternoon he would be ravenously hungry, and although he would never admit it, I guessed he was eating only from time to time and at the most irregular hours.

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

Michael was for several years the leading actor in a very active Off-off-Broadway group called the CSC Repertory, which presented only classical plays in repertory. In spite of a well developed armory of acting skills, he had never joined Equity, or made the jump into regional theatre. Eventually, feeling constricted by his position at CSC, he had decided to accept a summer contract with the Williamstown Theatre Second Company, where I met him last year. Since that summer, though, he has not been able to find work as an actor. He is talented. He sings, a powerful bright baritone, draws, and writes. He has a dark, prickly personality, and in rehearsal is an inspired and very funny improviser. He became the mocking adversary in the group, being very quick-witted and skeptical by nature. Three evenings out of every week, Michael worked at a collection agency, calling people up on the phone and urging payment on overdue bills by implying legal action. Meanwhile, he had so little money that he was unable to pay any of his own bills, and in the course of the year he became progressively more depressed about his future as an actor. He felt cut off from the exercise of his true talents. He could see no way out of the trap of being unknown and non-Equity, however gifted. He was doubly frustrated because the Public Theatre would summon him for auditions, where directors would enthuse about his work, and then he would hear no more, only to learn some time later that another actor, entirely different in style from him, had been cast in the part.

Molly was a rangy blonde girl from Arizona, a guitar player and a member of the original company formed by Paul Sills to present Story Theatre on Broadway. She understood mime and transformation, which she applied to the work with a cheerful lavishness, scattering a dozen original and creative ideas about every hour. As she couldn't afford a telephone, only an answering service, I would usually have telephone conversations with her to the accompaniment of the roar of 7th Avenue traffic, over which she would yell frantically thinking that I, in my quiet study at home, couldn't hear her. During the days she worked in a restaurant, and in the evenings, like Andie, she would often be called for rehearsals of a play that was being developed at La Mama, one of the longer established Off-off-Broadway theatres.

Mike (to distinguish him from Michael) was a withdrawn and shrouded person, hard to know, and one of the two actors I had not worked with before. He seemed to have no apartment of his own, but moved from one to another as they were vacated by friends who were taking extended trips out of the city. The one he occupied for most of this spring, on a street in the 70s just off Central Park West, was quite comfortable, but he always seemed to be short of money. Quiet, reflective, with a modest manner and a conventionally structured face like a leading man for a thirties drawing room comedy, he was an intense person who, in spite of his lack of funds, managed to finance for himself a crash seminar at one of those mind-training

programs that offer heightened self-awareness and increased powers of concentration after ten easy (but pricey) lessons. He had experience of stock company and repertory theatre work and was notably honest and painstaking, correcting himself as he went along with agonised admissions that he wasn't sure of what he was doing, had nothing more to contribute, and then, a few moments later, coming up with something quite startling and original. He came down with infectious hepatitis and was hospitalised in April. When I last spoke to him he was out of hospital and planning a trip to Los Angeles to see if he could pick up some movie work.

Judy and Margot were relatively inexperienced, compared with the first four. I took them in because one of them had dance training and I thought she was bright enough to be able to compensate for her lack of vocal and performing technique. The other was a graduate of an Off-off-Broadway group run by Richard Foreman, the Ontological-Hysterical Theatre, and I hoped she would be able to work into my approach from his. Judy was teaching a course at the New School for Social Research and doing some freelance writing; Margot was looking for acting work, studying with Uta Hagen, and readingscripts for an independent TV movie producer. Though each of them was intelligent and enthusiastic, they weren't able to bring as much to the work as the others. Like the gravitational pull from an invisible planet the vision of a fuller, more successful life on New York's own very special terms drained the energy and mental focus of both of them.

Paul was a Jesuit nearing the end of his training, and this fall he will be in charge of a drama program at Fordham University. He had worked at Williamstown Theatre for two summers, and I had always thought him an expressive person, funny and sensitive, with a fine Irish talent for words, but not an especially interesting actor on stage. He was always cast in small parts in conventional plays where his rather austere exterior was used to add dignity or presence to some ordinary supporting role. The normal acting exercises in improvisation and physicalisation, which he had of course gone through in his training, seemed to have left no mark. On an impulse I asked him to join us, mainly because I liked him and thought he would see and be able to express things the others couldn't. As it turned out, I had been quite wrong about his gifts. Through the series of episodes, or dramatic actions in free form, that I was presenting to the group as raw material, he seemed to find a new freedom for his imagination and the results were delightful. He produced a style of playful, somewhat grotesque, but always humane clowning that was often brilliant. And because he was a complicated and thoughtful person his work always had a strain of sadness in it. Paul is 31, and is supported by the source of funds for his Jesuit training. This made him calmer, and stronger, than the others.

These were the seven people with whom I worked. But I had started with eight. The one I lost was Faith, an actress I had met through

one of the Backstage ads. a year ago, and worked with on a play for about a month. She is a talented, fiercely dedicated actress, with considerable experience. She let herself be immersed in whatever the task in hand demanded, although some of the time I felt she was uncertain about the other actors, didn't really trust them, and only agreed to stay because we had our own understanding about the conditions under which she could work. About six weeks after we started, and just before we entered a more intense period of meetings, Faith was offered and accepted the lead in a long running Off-Broadway play, THE HOT L BALTIMORE. Since it meant a regular salary and considerable prestige, she wanted to give all her energies to that. So she dropped out of the group.

What happened with Faith highlights one of the main problems all such work faces. Workshops and showcases live on a precarious grace at the best of times. Actors may say yes to a part, rehearse for three or four weeks and then, three days before the show is due to open, be offered a job that pays some money and conflicts with the performance schedule off the play. When they say they want to leave under such circumstances, few directors can find it in their hearts to say no; and if they did, they have no contract they can enforce. Actors on the whole don't leave for frivolous reasons and they are loyal to fellow actors, so that even if they are unhappy with the working conditions they will usually see a showcase through to the end, however bitter. But few have the self-denial to turn down a job rather than abandon a nearly completed production.

The tension that comes from the actors feeling committed to a production that pays nothing while they are asked to give freely of talents and energies which they consider to have a market value brings about a greater sense of strain in the rehearsals for a showcase, in my experience, than in a regular commercial production. However much the actors like the project, the director, or their fellow actors, nothing can make them forget that they are doing gratis what they should be doing for a living. Frequently, even if the show is a success - that is, is picked up by a commercial producer and starts to pay everyone a salary - they know that they have no protection against being dropped. The Showcase Code provides only that an actor who has initiated a role in a showcase and is dropped for the commercial production receive the equivalent of two weeks salary - small consolation for having made an investment of time and energy, only to see someone else reap the rewards. Naturally many actors are now leery of appearing in showcases if they think there is any ulterior commercial motive involved - a fact that worked in my favor, in this case.

As you can see from the sketches of the people involved with my work this spring - and they are fairly typical - the day-to-day existence of a young actor in New York is so wearing, its satisfactions so exiguous, that it creates a certain pattern of behavior,

a syndrome that might be worth a sociological study some time. As I hinted at the end of my last newsletter, time becomes relative. The days are split into segments that reflect the demands of two entirely conflicting worlds - the schedule by which most people live and earn their bread, and the schedule by which the theatre, both professional and non-profit, operates. These two schedules are simply not compatible - but most actors are forced to live in both at once. Consequently, large patches of the day are spent in waiting - waiting to audition, waiting to get to a job which doesn't start till 6:00 pm or 12 noon - trying to fill two or three hours during which nothing useful (to the actor) can be accomplished - he has no lines to learn because he is not in a play, he can't afford a movie or a shopping expedition, he doesn't have the kind of trade which can be practised in odd moments at home.

Given this state of affairs, I had to be specially careful what I asked of my group. The initial aims of the project were tenuous enough; but when they were juxtaposed with this volatile existence I have just described, and the individual needs of seven different people, the mixture could have dissipated into thin air overnight. In the end, after much discussion and some desperate guessing, we arrived at the following arrangement:

We agreed to work together through January and February of this year, on a schedule that would be arranged ad hoc, according to everyone's availability. For this stage of the work we would go from one aspect of the material to another, trying a wide variety of different techniques, approaches, fragments of scenes or stories, to see which worked best for us, which seemed like dead ends, and which offered good prospects for further exploration. So in any one session we might go from a scene from a classic play whose theme interested us, to an experiment in trance-induction techniques, to an improvisation based on dream logic, to an attempt to find the mythical persona behind a simple habitual action. During this initial exploratory period we also agreed to keep discussion to a minimum and then, towards the end of February, to meet in someone's apartment and review the ground we had covered in order to decide whether or not we should go on and if so, in what direction.

That is what we did, and in the meeting in late February everyone (with the exception of Faith, who was about to go into HOT L ...) said that they wanted to continue and committed themselves for a further two months. It wasn't, of course, a full time commitment. Several of them, as I have indicated, had roles in other projects. All had to find time to earn money. I myself was simultaneously doing other things - writing, running shorter sub-projects, doing research, digesting the results of the work we did on the main project. So we would meet two or three times a week, on the understanding that if the occasion arose we could agree to intensify our activities and prepare a production - or at least something that could be shown.

The next problem was to find a place in which to do all this work. In fact, the question of where antecedes all the others, artistic and practical alike. Everyone wants room in which to work in New York. From the seasoned Broadway producer and from the rawest, most inchoate improvisatory group you will hear the same story - real estate. Astronauts and theatre people share the same magic catchword - 'space'. Without space, there is no work, no theatre, nowhere for the actors to work or the audience to come. The public takes the space for granted; but for the creators of theatre it is a constant agonising struggle. Comparitively little theatre is done in theatres, that is, in spaces designed for a specific performer-audience relationship. Usually, a theatre 'space' in New York means a loft - or a garage - or a shell of a building punched out of the block to create a long narrow shoe-box of an auditorium - an abandoned movie house - an old store - a basement - someone's living room - the vestry or even the main body of a church.

Even if you can find a space, there is still the financial problem. Few rehearsal spaces rent for less than \$5.00 per hour, which seems almost reasonable till you add it up. A normal rehearsal day is 7½-8 hours; you work six days a week for, say, three weeks on a production. Total - for rehearsal alone - about \$750.00 - prohibitive for most showcases, whose total budget, including lights, costumes, publicity, and other expenses, may be less than \$500.00.

I was lucky. I started with an 'arrangement'. In return for various literary and advisory services, reading occasional scripts, making suggestions on programming, I had space available at the Manhattan Theatre Club. This is an interesting institution, one of several Off-off-Broadway equivalents of the Public Theatre (The Clark Center for the Performing Arts and Cafe La Mama are others), non-profit organisations that house, encourage and (when they can) support theatre in all its stages, from play-readings to full blown productions. The Manhattan Theatre Club is housed in what used to be the Bohemian Benevolent Society of East 73rd Street, and its rambling structure is a honeycomb of rehearsal rooms, studios, miniature theatres and musty stairwells. It was here that I held auditions and conducted the original, non-regularly scheduled workshops. But as time went on, and the Manhattan Theatre Club began to expand its activities, I found it more and more difficult to make my schedule dovetail with theirs. I went in search of my own space.

After many letters and phone calls I found two. One, just off Fifth Avenue, was a rarity - a miniature theatre, used only at lunchtimes which I could use at other times during the day for no fee; and the other, in a Church on Central Park West, was also available in the afternoons at a nominal rate. Both spaces were used in the evenings for other activities - encounter groups, concerts, other theatre productions, singles evenings. For reasons of size and accessibility (actors seem to live on the West side) I chose the space on Central Park West, and it was there that we

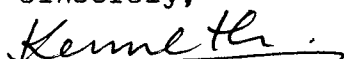
met for the months of March and April until, as I told you in my last newsletter, a combination of circumstances brought that phase of the work to an end.

In retrospect, I think the arrangement we arrived at was the best for the people involved and the pace I wanted to work at. But it would have been wrong to continue much longer in this particular way, and the rhythm imposed by the schedule we chose had some great drawbacks. For one thing, the lack of a deadline, however artificial, by which the work, or some work, would have to be completed was not necessarily a good thing. The actors told me that they enjoyed the lack of pressure, that it freed them and enabled them to explore sides of their craft or their personalities they had never touched before. I believed them, but I still think that for the future some more definite goal, in terms of a performance before an audience, would be healthy. Secondly, by accommodating as much as I did to their other commitments and need to go after other employment, I think I reduced the pressure too far, and in consequence lost something which they might have been able to give if they had been more ... well, desperate. Also, the meetings were spaced too far apart. As we got into our stride, they began to ask for more frequent meetings, but by that time their respective schedules wouldn't permit it.

It's always difficult to balance the people and the times they are available against the needs of the work and the impersonal demands of the creative process, which has its own relentless laws. There are no general rules, either, and each situation is new. So long as you are asking people to work for nothing, except the intrinsic satisfaction of the group and its objectives, their personal needs and idiosyncrasies tend to govern the way the whole project is organised. But once it moves beyond that stage, into something that may be shown and attract attention, then a different set of influences has to be taken into account. The people become less important; the space, the timing, the work itself - more so.

As I said, all through the period I have just described I was working on other projects and different stages of development. One of those was the script of Boccaccio's DECAMERON, which I had begun last year and which I was trying to put into final form. I had also been doing research into legends from the middle ages, associated with the Grail and tales surrounding King Arthur. There seemed to be something very pertinent for today in that material, and I used some of it in the spring workshops. While I was doing this I was asked to do a production for the Williamstown Theatre Second Company, the experimental arm of the Williamstown Theatre Festival. I decided to try out some of these Arthurian legends and the techniques we had been experimenting with in March and April, and see what they would do to an audience. In May I prepared a scenario. And in June I went up there to direct the show. In my next newsletter I'll try to recreate that experience for you.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Cavander

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