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Program Notes: The Newsletter of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America, volume 2, number 3

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PROGRAM NOTES

VOL II, NO 3

SUMMER ISSUE

AUGUST 1987

Published by LITERARY MANAGERS AND DRAMATURGS OF AMERICA, Inc.

CONVENTION ISSUE

REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT

As LMDA approaches both its second birthday and its second convention--our most ambitious project to date--it is becoming a national organization in truth as well as intention. Our association has increased from the original handful of New York-area incorporating members to 217 colleagues representing 29 states, the District of Columbia and one Canadian province. Our newsletter routinely features voices from all over the country. We have also begun to decentralize some of our activities and broaden our programming.

To that end, our 1987 winter symposium brought together academics and professionals and professionals to address trends in editorial, historical and critical processes by which traditional material may find fresh life on stage. Similarly, this year's convention, *Dramaturgy and the Development of the New American Play*, is an act of national arts criticism through which LMDA hopes to initiate a dialogue about the structures and assumptions, the ways and means of play development in the United States in recent decades. That this convention takes place in Minneapolis italicizes, we hope, our national agenda and organizational demographics.

This conference will be not only the first event LMDA has attempted beyond its Manhattan headquarters, but the first initiated and coordinated locally. For this we thank LMDA members Mark Bly and Michael Lupu of the Guthrie Theater who invited us to Minneapolis, convinced the University of Minnesota and Midwest Play Labs to produce this event with us, and in support of whom the Dayton-Hudson Foundation has granted us financial assistance.

I look forward to reporting on this event and other matters in the next issue of PROGRAM NOTES.

Respectfully,
C. Lee Jenner

They Showed Us In Missouri

A Personal View
By Beverly Shatto

In 1985, Missouri Repertory Theatre was fortunate enough to have George Keathley chosen as our new artistic director. He immediately stated publicly that one of his highest priorities was new plays. To his surprise, a detailed proposal for a new-play program landed on his desk the next morning. I was fully prepared--just in case. "Yes," he said. "Yes," said Jim Costin, our executive director.

(continued on page 11)

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

The Winter 1986 issue of Canadian Theatre Review published new member Per Bræk's "Dran Turgia," a discussion of Canadian dramaturgy. The Spring 1987 issue of The Southern Quarterly carried Gayle Austin's "Alice Childress: Black Woman Playwright as Feminist." Also appearing, in TCG's American Theatre, were Jack Savage's "Joyce's 4-Play Lineup Eyes Social Issues," Alice Solomon's "Redressing Imbalances" and Arthur Ballet's "And Now a Word from the Director."

LMDA 2nd Vice President Rick Kramer has been named Co-Editor, with American Directors Institute Artistic Director Geoffrey Shlaes, of ADI's forthcoming The Book: An American Directors Source-book.

In academia, Felicja Londré has been awarded a University of Kansas City Trustees Fellowship and a Curators Professorship at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Londré's winning project for ATL's National Contest for Dramaturgs, "Classics in Context," will be mounted in October.

PROGRAM NOTES

Editor: Richard E. Kramer
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Red Harriott has just returned from the People's Republic of China where he directed a touring production of The Fantasticks in Mandarin with an all-Chinese cast, one of the first two American musicals ever to play China. On June 29, Mark Michaels, Special Assistant to the Treasurer, heard the first presentation of his one-act trilogy, Square Meals, in a reading at New York's Roundabout Theatre as part of a series supervised by LMDA Treasurer Eileen Cowel.

Betty Osborn has been working as director-dramaturg with New York radio storyteller Mike Feder as director-dramaturg on his live performances.



ADVERTISEMENTS

Fourth Friday Playwrights invites all Literary Managers and Dramaturgs to attend our meetings held twice each month on the 3rd and 4th Fridays at 8:00 p.m. to hear cold readings of works-in-progress and to participate afterwards in the script critiques. 249 E. 48th Street, #4D, New York, NY; (212) 421-0013.

NOTICE OF POSITION IMMEDIATELY AVAILABLE AT THE PHILADELPHIA FESTIVAL THEATRE FOR NEW PLAYS. Position Title: Literary Manager. A challenging artistic leadership position is available at the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays, an independent, non-profit, professional theater producing a six-play mainstage season of world premieres in the Harold Prince Theatre, Annenberg Center. Starting date: immediately. Please send letter and resume to Hilary Missan, Administrative Director, Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays, 3900 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104; (215) 222-5000.

REGIONAL NEWS AND VIEWS

CELTIC WRITERS, NEW PLAYS DOWN SOUTH

By Catherine Burroughs
Southeast Correspondent

In March and April, Atlanta's Theatre Gael, an internationally acclaimed theater devoted to the works of Celtic writers, produced Brian Friel's The Freedom of the City, directed by John Stephens. Upcoming projects include Stephens's adaptation of Dylan Thomas's A Child's Christmas in Wales and Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock.

Also in April, Theater Emory and Seven Stages coproduced The Alchemist, directed by Geoffrey Reeves and assisted by LMDA member **Jim Carnody**. LMDA member **Larry Maelon** wrote the rhymed couplets for the epilogue. In November, Theater Emory will present Pericles in its new theater on the campus of Emory University.

The Atlanta New Play Project held its annual play-reading festival at Georgia State University June 7-14. Regional and local playwrights participated in the readings, and ANPP featured workshops on writing for children's theater, critiquing new plays, directing the new script and the role of literary managers in evaluating new work.

We thank Catherine Burroughs for her efforts as Southeast Correspondent. Catherine has left her theater and PROGRAM NOTES to complete her dissertation. As her successor, we welcome Gayle Austin, who can be reached at 3779 F Westchase Village Lane, Norcross, GA 30092-4701.

* * * *

BAY AREA NEW-PLAY DEVELOPMENT

By Richard Hellesen
Berkeley Repertory Theatre
West Coast Correspondent

A brief lull at the end of the theater season and some perfect weather by the bay provided the opportunity recently for a long-delayed gathering of Bay Area literary managers and dramaturgs in San Francisco. Joining me in the informal lunch meeting, primarily intended as an

introductory get-together, were LMDA members **Larry Ellenberg** of the One Act Theatre, **Dennie Powers** of the American Conservatory Theatre and **Oskar Huotie** of the Eureka Theatre. Also attending were literary managers Cathy Clark of the Eureka and Christine Krolik of the Magic Theatre.

Though much of the conversation focussed on comparative job descriptions, the fact that we all read and evaluate new plays led to a general discussion of new-play development in the Bay Area, and our roles in it.

The institutional theaters, naturally, vary in their commitment to new work. One theater revived a dormant staged-reading series at the same time that another cancelled one; others regularly program premieres as part of their main seasons; some are more inclined to develop writers rather than specific plays. All have grappled with the question of reading unsolicited scripts.

At the same time, playwriting activity outside the resident theaters is increasing. This summer, the area will host two significant festivals. The Playwrights Foundation of Mill Valley (formerly Playwrights Unltd.) will again present the Bay Area Playwrights Festival. Meanwhile, a number of former BAPF people have created the West Coast Playwrights Workshop with courses by Robert Woodruff and Sal Trapani and workshop productions.

The high visibility of new work in these settings, and the increased advocacy by groups like the Playwrights Foundation on behalf of local writers seeking professional productions will mean greater demands on our theaters to raise their commitment to new work. It is clearly up to literary managers and dramaturgs, in addition to artistic directors, to deal creatively with those challenges.

One problem, however, is our image among playwrights. The meeting took place the same week that spring issue of the Dramatists Guild Quarterly hit the mailboxes and, along with the generally positive articles on literary management, a letter from one playwright asserted:

(continued on page 8)

LMDA Responds to McNally

In "From Page to Stage: How a Playwright Guards His Vision" (New York Times, 7 December 1996), Terrence McNally related his experiences as a playwright during the development of Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune. Many of his remarks disparaged the dramaturge with whom he had worked, accusing us of wresting his play away from him. LMDA asked several members around the country to respond to Mr. McNally's comments. PROGRAM NOTES published three of those responses in the Spring Issue, and here publishes the final two.

MARK HOPPLUND

Old Globe Theatre, San Diego

The recent New York Times article by Terrence McNally made reasonable points and provided helpful criticism, and was humorous to boot.

Now I learn that Milan Stitt has--with more seriousness--penned his own article in the May issue of Horizon--an attack not on dramaturgs, but directors. In both cases, playwrights have chosen to disparage members of the theatrical community on the basis of functions rather than talent. Messrs. McNally and Stitt seem to be relieving their frustrations at the expense of directors and dramaturgs. While they acknowledge that there are a few good ones, they focus on a faceless horde as representative of the professional community. What a shame. And--I'm sorry to add--what a load of sour grapes.

By its collaborative nature, the theater includes varied components, and the diversity of the people who operate these components compounds that variety. The adjunct profession of criticism flourishes on this variety: it attempts to sort it all out and assign praise and blame. What a sad state of affairs, however, when playwrights forsake their work and become critics themselves--departing from creativity to pick over the shortcomings of sympathetic colleagues.

All we need now is for actors, directors, dramaturgs, designers, technicians and everyone else (shall we hear from marketing and development as well?) to form grievance committees. Can you imagine directors suddenly focussing not on current productions, but on keeping score of all the failed attempts of such-and-so playwright? Can you imagine

literary managers and dramaturgs publishing their thoughts on some of Messrs. Stitt's and McNally's unproduced efforts? The family could completely disintegrate; and the art would obviously suffer.

How much more productive it would be for Mr. Stitt to examine the collaborative success of playwright-director teams like Lanford Wilson and Marshall Mason or David Mamet and Gregory Mosher as models to which other theater professionals can aspire. Or he could explore the double talents of a John Bishop, who succeeds as a director of his own work, rather than to assume that Bishop's success means categorically that no one else could have done it, or even enhanced and supported it.

Come on, gentlemen, may we please shake hands and move on, with the ideals and the art ever before us?



BEN CAMERON

Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University

Terrence McNally's hostility to dramaturgs is the result of our failure to separate the role of the dramaturg from that of the critic. Well versed in the theatrical literary tradition, good critics are combative and aggressive, argumentative and opinionated; they are invaluable in play analysis and interpretation, yet they do not necessarily make good dramaturgs.

A dramaturg--especially a new dramaturg--is flexible and articulate, sensitive and pragmatic; he is grounded in the production process, rather than in the theoretical realm. Those of us

Profiles in Dramaturgy

trained in criticism programs would not wish to renounce our training, I think, but most of us have come to realize that our critical vocabulary is often useless, occasionally destructive in the rehearsal hall; our critical theories, in addition to engendering suspicion among our fellow artists, can render us incapable of hearing the uniqueness of new voices that do not conform to our theoretical expectations.

Both McNally and Elizabeth LeCompte in her appearance at the LMDA symposium in February emphasized the role of audience as collaborator. Both, I think, are arguing for a contribution that a dramaturg can make: both long for impassioned spectators who enter the theater in a state of perpetual naivete, who respond in an immediate and powerful way to the artist's work. Good audiences respond to what the play says, without insisting on what they might wish to hear instead. Our most important mission is to do the same--to bring to the rehearsal the naivete and excitement of the uninitiated, along with both the grasp of the playwright's objectives (objectives that the writer has defined) and the production vocabulary that lets us collaborate with playwright and director.

In confusing the function of the dramaturg with that of the critic, McNally merely accepts a pattern that our training programs have encouraged and that we have accepted. We must now define ourselves independently of the critical community; we must define our roles as reflectors, questioners, participants, and reject a vocabulary that has emphasized correction and detachment. Perhaps then McNally will see his experience with the dramaturg (or, in his case, the "critic on the playwright's side") as akin to that involving the miscast actor--a frustrating experience that should be avoided but one that in no way negates the value of an entire profession.

(In an effort to introduce our members and our profession in a more personal basis, PROGRAM NOTES initiates a new feature: profiles of members doing interesting work around the country. Additional profiles will appear in future issues.)

RICHARD PETTENGILL

Reported by Janet Allen
Indiana Repertory Theatre
Midwest Correspondent



A Chicago freelancer and teacher, Pettengill was dramaturg at the Court Theatre, the classical Equity theater at the University of Chicago, from 1982 to 1986, when the termination of the state Humanities grant ended the job.

With a B. A. in English from Bates College, Richard is working on his Ph. D. dissertation, "Production Analysis as Critical Interpretation: Studies in Jonson, Sheridan, Ibsen and Shaw" at the University of Chicago, where he got his M. A. He has taught dramatic literature, dramaturgy and film at Chicago and Columbia College, and has written articles on theater, humanities and film. This June and July, Richard worked as a freelance dramaturg for the Body Politic and Victory Garden Theaters' Play Expo festival.

QUESTION: What do you consider the most important aspect of the dramaturg's job? In what areas do you consider you have had the greatest positive impact?

At the opening weekend of Play Expo, I heard that some of the playwrights had been calling in to ask things like, "What is a dramaturg, and will it get in the way?" and "What is a dramaturg, and how do you lance it?" The challenge prompted an impromptu presentation by director Susan Osborne-Mott and myself on our previous collaborations and, thus, "what a dramaturg can and might do for you." By all accounts, our talk

ARE YOU IN THE LMDA
JOB REFERRAL SERVICE?

American Developmental Theater

By Susan Gregg

Until the mid-1970's, script development as we know it, didn't exist. Playwrights wrote scripts, producers optioned them, worked out the flaws on the road, then took them into commercial houses in New York. After a play had a modest run and a national tour, the rights were sold to a publishing house, then leased to individual theater companies.

Subsequent to, and probably as a consequence of, the rise of university theater arts departments in the '60's, and coincidental to significant funding in the early '70's, professional, non-profit theater activity surged across the country. The theater arts graduates of the '60's became theater managers as interested in originating work as they were in interpreting it.

While this new, non-profit theater was figuring out how to maintain its artistic integrity and sell subscription seasons at the same time, commercial theater was beginning an insidious, almost imperceptible slide to the current fare of slight comedies, British imports and mindless musicals. Not surprisingly, the old-fashioned producer--the man who believed passionately in what playwrights had to say and was willing to stick with them through thick and thin--has, for the most part, become extinct.

Along with the brain children of the '60's came an understanding of the power of advertising and marketing. Marketing directors discovered that by packaging seasons, they could generate advance income to launch a repertoire which typically included a classic, an American standard, a recent commercial hit and a new play, often "To Be Announced." The marketing device of selling six plays for the price of five, ". . . and you get the new play free," hasn't worked so well for new scripts. Audiences have focussed on the part of the advertising which promises that five

plays are proven hits, while the last is untried. To complicate the situation, inexperienced audiences tend to judge the first production of the new script by the same standards as the rest of the tried-and-true season.

The theater community was in a dilemma. It still is. The odds of a multi-million dollar Broadway show running long enough to recoup its investment are terrifyingly small and no one can afford to run a show for months out of town while the playwright, director and dramaturg tinker with it. Regional theaters are gun-shy because they haven't figured out how to market new scripts effectively. According to the business managers, they aren't cost-effective.

Witness the emergence in the '70's of "script development." Today, many regional theaters, unable to afford to produce new plays, offer instead a reading series for playwrights. What started as a tool for playwrights has become a thing called "developmental theater."

Nobody benefits much. Since most of these readings are either unrehearsed or minimally rehearsed, playwrights are using them not as tools for rewrites, but as auditions for productions. Since the under-prepared scripts are often dismissed by the audience as bad work, the writer goes on to another theater for another reading. Meanwhile, the first theater gets another script out of the pile and does another reading of another unfinished play. This "developmental theater" is antithetical to what we say we want on our stages: original and adventurous new voices. What it best promotes is television sit-com writing: easy writing, easy theater.

There is a way out. Around the country, a few programs, such as New Dramatists and the National Playwrights Conference, have been established not to mount productions, but to allow playwrights to work on their scripts. Several producing theaters are following suit. If the budget for an entire read-

(continued on page 8)

On the Western Front

By Jan Lewis



Someone complained to me just the other day that an organization like LMDA might never really be effective because "all of our concerns are so different. I mean, here we are, in Hollywood ..."

While I know that literary managers and dramaturgs do the same things everywhere, I understand what she meant. Working in theater in Los Angeles is unique because of the influence the motion picture and television industries have on just about everything here.

Many people still believe the old cliches about how amateur our theater is "behind the celluloid curtain." It's taken as fact that film and television steal all our playwrights because that's where the money is. Or that playwrights get confused by writing screenplays, and then give the theater scripts that are really screenplays in drag. (That's true. And it is a problem.) Certainly it's thought that the public here is so infatuated with film that it is unreceptive to theater.

While these notions probably used to be true, play development and the whole process of creating theater have changed dramatically here in the last ten years. A huge talent pool--actors, directors, designers, writers, producers--collects in Los Angeles because of television and film work. Many of these professionals also work in theater. More and more, the moguls of film and television recognize that some of the best talent supplying their industries has been forged in our theater.

Hollywood money attracts playwrights to the studios, but those who write plays because they have something to say continue to do so. The Los Angeles playwrighting community--with immigrants from everywhere in the United States alongside native artists, and including many ethnic minorities--is the most

energetic and diverse group you could want.

Playwrights who work successfully in both theater and film or television say they actually enjoy the differences and, especially, the freedom of moving from one arena to another. Some say that when they return to writing stage plays after a big or little screen stint, they bring with them a new sense of the limits and possibilities of live theater.

Aside from money, I see one big difference: the stage play always belongs to the writer while the screenplay, once sold, belongs to someone else.

It is true that some writers working in Los Angeles want to write plays and don't know how, thinking playwriting is the same as screenwriting. They don't understand theater's concerns and the ways they differ from those of other media. However, frustrating as it is for a literary manager to get submissions that aren't plays yet, it's still very exciting to see how much interest there now is in playwriting here, where all the prestige and money are supposed to be in film work.

Literary managers and dramaturgs working here have their own relationships with film and television. Many of us have worked or do work as screenwriters, story editors, producers or actors. Above all, the proximity to film and television production constantly forces us to identify what it is we do that is different.

Many of our artistic directors have made their mark precisely by developing theater that exploits the differences between the screen, and live theater. At my theater, we tell writers that we want plays "with either an innovative form or extremely provocative subject matter--theatrical pieces that explore the possibilities of the live theater experience and the enduring questions of human existence."

Obviously, developing new plays depends on the audience's willingness to share in the practice of the craft. Not only does Los Angeles now have a community of talented writers, but we're starting to have an audience which regularly attends theater and often applauds

DEVELOPMENT

(continued from page 6)

ing series were focussed on two or three scripts in production, however minimal, more playwrights would benefit and a few scripts will surface that merit main-stage exposure. True "developmental theater" ought to develop, not just hit and run.

Susan Gregg, a director and dramaturg who specializes in new plays, is former Literary Director of New Dramatists. She recently directed the premiere of Lynn Alvarez's Hidden Parts at New York's Primary Stages.



WEST

(continued from page 7)

what is dangerous and difficult.

With the growth of an audience and a playwriting community, artistic directors are willing to take bigger risks

with new work. Many theaters sponsor playwriting units and new-play festivals. Most try to develop working relationships with playwrights and to increase the number of new plays produced every year. We are all becoming more confident in this process.

The stakes have gone up for everyone in Los Angeles theater. Our work is better than it was--better developed, better produced, better attended. The Hollywood influence is unavoidable, but it is often more beneficial than not, and this relationship will inevitably grow.

Here, now, the process is exciting, and I am proud to be part of it.

Jan Lewis has been Literary Manager of the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble since 1988. She has also taught, reviewed and directed theater and done script development and production for two film and television companies. She has just landed her first acting role in a feature film.

REGIONAL NEWS AND VIEWS

(continued from page 3)

Unfortunately, far too many literary managers and dramaturgs are simply second cousins to the consultants, middle-managers and efficiency experts that are sucking the energy out of modern society in all walks of life. Their goal is not the discovery of new plays. Their goal is to keep their jobs. They want their theaters to continue sending them on junkets to New York

Accuracy and mythical junkets to New York aside, this writer's characterization of dramaturgs--true or not--is abroad among dramatists. That perception cannot be ignored.

In response, we hope to begin exploring opportunities for direct contact with playwrights in a public setting. Possibilities include a session with writers at one of the summer festivals, and fall forums on season selection and the search for new plays. We cannot make the subjective work of literary management less subjective, but we might

begin to demystify the process somewhat.

Finally, we noted the need that exists for experienced dramaturgs able to work with the area's alternative and minority theaters--often the most eager to develop new plays. In our future meetings, we hope to involve artistic people from a number of such theaters in the area in an exploration of ways to publicize and meet their needs.

* * * *

NEW-PLAY VENUES IN NEW YORK CITY

By Timothy Sanford

Playwrights Horizons

New York City Correspondent

New York City remains one of the most attractive, yet hostile venues for presenting original plays. Tension between Actors' Equity and the Dramatists Guild may have eased since the latest LORT contract established the subsidiary rights compensation trust fund but, since Off-Broadway and Broadway producers do not contribute to this fund, commercial transfers of showcase productions remain rare.

The compensatory obligation for Equity actors still seems most to prohibit using showcases to develop new work in

New York City. These obligations deter not only playwrights with overly optimistic commercial aspirations for their work from granting rights to showcase producers, they also deter possible producers who, because of enforced limits in ticket revenue, required complimentary admission, increasingly rapacious real-estate moguls and escalating publicity costs, face certain financial loss without a commercial transfer. How, then, are New York producers encouraging the development of new writers for the theater?

A poll of several literary managers of New York City theaters confirms that, indeed, a backlash against "The Reading" has set in. The number of readings presented in New York City has not abated, but they have been relegated to their original dramaturgical function of testing the discerning ears of the author and potential producer and helping them develop ideas about casting, pace, action and style. A host of overly rewritten, wan, homogeneous plays has made apparent the limitations of the reading as a developmental tool.

LMDA Vice President **Casey Childs**, after working for many years at the readings-oriented New Dramatists, founded Primary Stages upon the premise that playwrights need to grow through productions. Notwithstanding this priority, Childs still presents about 100 readings a year. This season, Primary Stages produced two new plays, by Laura Harrington and Lynn Alvarez, and plans to expand to four next season. Childs also plans to workshop six plays next season and is optimistic about the future.

INTAR is one of the few companies attempting to nurture young talent through the lengthy, hands-on process possible only through workshops and classes, headed by Maria Irene Fornes. INTAR relies heavily on private and public funding, but it is beginning to enjoy the fruits of its labors. It recently produced Roosters by Milcha Sanchez-Scott, who went through each stage of its developmental process.

The Manhattan Class Company has developed one of the more innovative systems for developing new commercial works.

Under the supervision of Kent Adams, a core of six to eight directors reviews the plays submitted. They make recommendations for a first round of readings, the best of which are presented again for a "steering committee" series for MCC's executive directors Robert Lupone and Bernie Telsey. The best of these are given a "PIP" staged reading, after which the board decides whether or not to sign the piece. Signed plays are rehearsed for three weeks under a Letter of Agreement and given four free performances in Bethpage, Long Island. These performances generate dramaturgical feedback for the authors who are encouraged to rework their scripts before returning to New York City for a final presentation not unlike a backers' audition. Nine scripts have gone through the process, and four more are in the final stages.

Of the more established Off-Broadway theaters, both Manhattan Theatre Club and Playwrights Horizons have begun second stage series to develop new work. According to LMDA member **Jonathan Alper**, MTC's Artistic Associate, its Stage Two series is really only a reinstitution of the old Upstage/Downstage plan of MTC's East 73rd Street days. Critics will only be invited to Stage Two plays, which will be given limited productions, on a show-to-show basis, and audiences will pay only about \$10. One of MTC's Stage Two plays, Terrence McNally's Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune, has proven one of its season's most popular shows and is being revived as a mainstage production next season.

Artistic Director Andre Bishop proposed Playwrights Horizons' second stage plan, the New Theatre Wing, to answer a perceived need for young writers to have plays produced with high-caliber actors, but without the high expectations and pressures that a major Off-Broadway production brings. Under an Off-Broadway contract, the New Theatre Wing will give four to ten plays minimal productions in its Studio Theatre. Critics will probably be invited only to specific shows. Bishop hopes that the \$5 ticket price will draw a new, younger, more open-minded audience to New Theatre Wing productions, which will not be

offered to regular subscribers. Four new plays, however, will be part of the Main Stage subscription series.

Despite the many legal and financial obstacles to developing new writers for the American theater in New York City, the imagination and energy of a number of creative, enterprising individuals and institutions are helping to rekindle optimism for the future of the emerging playwright.

* * * *

POSES AND POSTURES IN THE SOUTHEAST

By Robert Strane
The Alley Theatre
Southwest Correspondent

Kenneth Tynan, in a little vacation valedictory in The Observer, said he was going to take some time off and maybe "write a play, if I can forget how insuperably difficult it is to do." Years of acting, directing, producing and teaching have cost me my innocence in this matter, I suppose, for I, too, think it's insuperably difficult.

For 21 years I was artistic director of a resident theater before becoming a literary manager, so I'm no newcomer to theater. In between, however, I spent four years in opera, dealing with a much more limited repertoire. Perhaps that's one reason I'm constantly amazed how many plays are being written out there, and how few of those I see are downright awful.

Do I contradict myself: "insuperably difficult," "few scripts," "downright awful"? Not really. For competence, at least of a technical kind, abounds. But as my automobile-wizard step-father says: "There are a hell of a lot of mechanics, very few engineers."

I can marvel at the tenacity required to "undergo" a play, but few of the plays I read are really about anything. More than anything else, the plays I return lack a truly compelling premise.

Lots of action is good, to an extent, but too much can muddle the play's point. What people do is best employed to show us why they do it. Motivation--the hidden, largely unspoken and, perhaps, unspeakable wellspring--is crucial. Characters are put under stress so that we can discover who they are and

what moves them. So many scripts are like the evening news: a lot of recording, but little understanding.

I attribute these problems, not to general witlessness among playwrights, but to their separation from the theater and, hence, from audiences. Thus removed, how are they supposed to know what theaters and their audiences care for?

Since our "electronic global village" is too vast, fragmented and fast-changing for a cogent "world picture," artists tune in to themselves and broadcast the uniqueness of their own voices. Character gives way to quirkiness, thought to redundancy, language to vocal riffs. Instead of sharing a common understanding, I guess we're just supposed to rally around them.

The fault, however, isn't entirely the playwrights': producers are partly to blame, too. For many, nothing measures up to Shaw and Shakespeare but Shaw and Shakespeare. After all, there are all these masterpieces around that we revive over and over, often because they're safe--and they protect those risky new plays in the season. Brecht, however, warned that we keep redoing the plays of the Golden Ages because we have yet to find the theater for our own times.

A commitment to new plays, like a Samurai sword, has to be painstakingly hammered out. Thank heaven our resident theaters are increasingly doing this.

We literary managers and our artistic directors--and our theaters and their audiences--must adopt aggressive postures. Lukewarm, try-it-you-might-like-it advocacy won't cut it. Above all, we need to take steadfast positions without waiting for consensus.

Whatever our standards for separating the wheat from the chaff, when they're brought down hard and some wheat really turns up, it ought to be worth getting feisty about.

Please keep your regional correspondent up to date on your news and concerns. Additional correspondents are Greg Leaming (Northeast), Hartford Stage Company, and Janet Allen (Midwest), Indiana Repertory Theatre.

MISSOURI

(continued from page 1)

We carefully planned and budgeted both the original proposal and several smaller versions. As we had no special grants or angels, the money would have to be carved from other projects.

Having listened to the national debates, to playwrights' complaints and druthers, our program was geared to bring as many plays to full production as possible. Any play could conceivably go from Reading to Staged Reading to Full Studio Production to Main Season (or any combination or repeats of those steps), depending on the needs of the play and playwright and our continued interest in the play.

We are under the jurisdiction of the Chicago office of the Actors' Equity and contacted them early on, explaining our complicated plans and variables, and asking for their help and advice. Now, I have been a member of Equity since 1972, and have worked under nine or ten different contracts from Production to Small Professional Theatre. I had recently helped negotiate the conversion of a small theater here to and Equity SPT contract. I knew about concessions and "seeding" and instances of special contracts for special purposes or projects. Our company had a good relationship with the Chicago office. We had no reason to expect anything but help in whatever contractual necessities would be required.

Response to our recent request for advice on how to handle our project was slow. We finally submitted our own proposal and were assured that it "looked good" and we would be able "to work it all out."

Missouri Repertory Theatre is in residence at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. We have a complicated relationship with the University's professional training program. Some of us work for one or the other, some of us for both, but even if you officially work for only one, you cannot avoid actually working for both. For 24 years there has been an interaction between the professional company and the professional training program. M. F. A. students work side by side with pros in all areas and must be considered for casting when there are appropriate roles.

The new-plays program could have been started under the auspices of the theater department using only student actors, but we wanted the best professional talent we could get for the project, so we fought right from the start to use Equity actors. When plans for the program were first being drawn up, we were still doing rotating repertory; it would have been simple to attach riders to the contracts of actors interested in the reading and staged-reading phases of the program and schedule rehearsals within their work weeks. Mostly for financial reasons, our company no longer does rotating rep, and that changed our options.

Our letter to playwrights inviting submissions went out in August 1985. By March 1986, we still had no concrete answers from Equity.

We had chosen the first seven plays for readings in July and August 1986, scheduled three staged readings for the Fall of 1986 and two full studio productions for May-June 1987. Directors for the readings had been selected, most of the casting completed, marketing prepared. Ready, set, go.

"Hello, Equity?"

"Do the reading under a casual employment rider. That's the only thing you can use as a LORT company. We'll keep working on it."

We launched our first seven readings on successive Monday nights. 300 people showed up for the 99 free seats. We were overwhelmed and unprepared for their popularity. As the series went on, people came an hour early to claim a seat. We were described in the press as the "hottest ticket" in town. We were getting the kind of press and attention that could have led to independent financial support for the program. We scheduled another set of four readings for February-March 1987 to keep things rolling.

"Hello again, Equity. What are we going to do about our full studio productions in May-June? We've picked the first two plays for full productions. What's going on?"

We hit the wall on the Catch-22: We are a LORT company and only LORT options are available to us. (Oh, what happened to "looks good, we'll work it out"?)

(continued on page 12)

MISSOURI

(continued from page 11)

The LORT category for a 99-seat-or-under space is "Experimental." Only Equity actors may be used under that category. That limitation would be a direct violation of our relationship with the professional training program. The Chicago office knew this from the beginning.

We continued with the work as the negotiators negotiated. The New York office of Equity took over. We're a LORT company; LORT is a nationally negotiated contract. I got confused, but at some point we arrived at The Final Appeal. Our local Equity liaison, the Chicago office and the Midwest Advisory Board were all set up on a conference call to plead our case. They were denied a voice on a point of order. Stephen Grey, the Equity business manager, made a rare personal plea and convinced the Equity Council to deny our appeal. Whoops! We seemed to have strayed into the area of test case . . . or precedent setting . . . or something.

We felt we had no choice but to close down the program. Yes, we could have continued to read plays in the basement under the casual employment rider (which, by the way, allows a pro/non-pro ratio), but that was the antithesis of our goals.

We wrote a six-page letter to our local Equity members trying to explain it all and we sent copies to all LORT theaters and organizations interested in new work. All hell broke loose here, but you would never know it from Equity News. I don't know how the Chicago office got any work done while dealing with the letters and phone calls from our local Equity members and from members around the country who were acquainted with our problems.

Those members thought our requests were perfectly reasonable. Some of them are the products of the professional-academic training interaction and they make special efforts to help the students they work with. Many had expressed their willingness to do the readings for no salary, even though we never even considered that as a possibility. They liked the program and saw the potential for growth and a lot of future employment, and they were con-

cerned by what they viewed as "regional discrimination."

Another concern has been the unequal treatment of theaters being cause by the new "seeding" contracts. The logic seems twisted when a "start-up" project of a stable LORT company is forced to close while both new and promising, and ill-run, \$1.98 operations are being granted wild concessions under the SPT and Guest Artist contracts in our community.

Stephen Grey was forced to fly out here to face the ire of our local membership in March. Oh, wasn't that a meeting! The feelings expressed had no more influence than the letters and phone calls that had preceded it. Despite the fact that Mr. Grey told us that he "would be in touch," there has been nothing but silence since then.

What are we going to do? Who knows. It's quite a shock for a program that started off more successfully in every way than we ever expected, to be forced to close because of the shortsightedness of Equity. Ironically, in the 12 readings and staged readings we did, we employed far more Equity actors than the casual employment rider demanded. Also ironically, there were at most two roles for which students might have been considered in our first two studio productions.

In the short history of our Second Stage we had begun to build relationships with several playwrights whose work interested us. We optioned one of the plays for a future main-season production. We commissioned one of the playwrights to write a scenario for a special project that we hope will lead to a full-length play. We were able to read a hot-off-the-typewriter first draft by a playwright we had just produced on our main stage.

There seems to be an expectation that a way will be found and that any day we will announce the resumption of our Second Stage activities. But how do we do that? Equity denied our final appeal, ignored the membership's protest, and offered us only one other option: a LORT D contract that has a non-pro ratio. We cannot afford a LORTD contract for a 99-seat basement room.

We will continue to produce a new play every season or so on our main stage, but our Second Stage is in limbo. Even if Equity reconsidered, we would virtually have to start over. Serious momentum was lost.

Regardless of what your individual philosophies about the right way to approach new work may be, arguments may become academic if Equity does not approach these problems with more flexibility and less paperwork.

Perhaps less time should be spent debating how it should be done and more spent making sure it can be done. There should be plenty of room for a variety of approaches. Every method will have its pros and cons, including full production for a play that may not be ready. But a good play or playwright will probably survive even the most inept of approaches. If not, well . . . in life there are risks.

The question is: Is Actors' Equity going to protect us all--playwrights, directors, actors--not to mention literary managers and dramaturgs--from taking any risks at all?

Beverly Shatto, an actress and "one-time fledgling playwright," is Second Stage Director at the Missouri Repertory Theatre.

PROFILES

(continued from page 3)

managed to allay the fears of those who had read Terrence McNally's excoriation last fall in the "Arts and Leisure" section [of the New York Times], and even to enlighten a few.

Q: How do you improve your skills as a dramaturg? How should the profession in general strive to position itself?

AP: What I found soon after I started [working as a dramaturg], and this is underscored by my recent new-play work, is that interaction skills are key. The establishment of trust and a working report goes so much further than any library ability. In most cases a certain barrier needs to be crossed before anything good can take place. I agree strongly with what Mark Bly and others said as last summer's LMDA conference: that the cultivation of self-important

phrases like "conscience of the theater" have gotten dramaturgs into a fix, and it's our task now to reverse the image into one of an engaged, skilled and, as Linda Jenkins has said, "altruistic" person.

Q: What specific aspects of your theater community might make your work in the profession different from that of your colleagues in other cities?

AP: Some have expressed surprise that, given the vibrancy and size of Chicago's theater community, there are not more working dramaturgs. It surprises me, too. Some might attribute this to a certain Heartland anti-intellectualism or unpretentiousness, but that would be hard for me to say since I've done most of my work in Hyde Park, Chicago's intellectual capital. In fact, I've found artists and audiences here to be, on the whole, extraordinarily open to and appreciative of my work. The problem is and continues to be making [the dramaturg] into a budget line-item, which leads me to conclude that if I am to continue in this line, the primary employment will probably be academic. With a sustaining salary, one might job-out with glee at times. In spite of it all, I'm actually more optimistic about the profession's future than I was fifteen months ago [when resident dramaturg at the Court]. No longer an institutional figure constantly asserting his usefulness, justifying his presence, I am now called in because [I'm] needed, used because [I'm] useful.

LMDA RECEIVES GRANTS

LMDA has received several important grants in recent months. First, we are pleased to acknowledge a grant of \$2,500 from the Arthur Foundation to hire an administrative aide. Subsequently, we received \$6000 from the Dayton Hudson Foundation and \$5000 from an anonymous, private donor toward the mounting of the 1987 Annual Conference in Minneapolis. We thank all of these generous organizations and people.



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