

The Discreet Alarm of the Off Off Broadway Playwright: The Off Off Broadway Playwright

By TOM EYEN,

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 23, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 129

The Discreet Alarm of the Off Off Broadway Playwright

By TOM EYEN, borrowing a bit from Luis Buñuel's "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie"

THERE was a determined knock at my door. It had an early Elia Kazan-Tennessee Williams feel to it. It was almost but not quite like the one in the last act of "Streetcar" where they take Blanche away for a rest on Fire Island.

It was Lanford Wilson coming to my dinner party for the Playwrights' Strategy, a new group formed by 23 Off Off Broadway playwrights to produce their own work. Lanford looked hassled and pensive in the great tradition of playwrights. "Some strange man just tried to mug me but I escaped as he didn't see too well." I offered him a Mil-town from the large candy dish in which they sit calmly posing as after-dinner mirths. "But then," Lanford continued, as playwrights are apt. to, "I have always de-

Tom EYEN is the author of "The Dirtiest Show in Town" and "The White Whore and the Bit Player."

ended upon the blindness of strangers."

Another knock asserted itself into the room and Rosalyn Drexler, Maria Irene Fornes and Rochelle Owens stood behind the door, looking like the three Andrews Sisters about to sell World War II bonds to a Japanese family.

"Hello, Tom," Miss Fornes offers in a simplistic Gertrude Stein style so obvious as to be art. "You know Rosalyn 'Home Movies' Drexler and Rochelle 'Futz' Owens, don't you?" (All playwrights seem to have strange middle names when they're introduced socially.) Maria "Promenade" Fornes then began reading "The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook" as Rochelle and Rosalyn began singing the 264 songs Al Carmines cut out of "The Faggot."

The door again. More playwrights. Megan "Viet Rock" Terry arrives in a leather coat from Cardin's of 14th Street, looking like Carroll Baker in the classic Italian film, "Paranoia." She then takes off the coat, changing her image as quick-

ly as she does the images in her plays: in her blue chiffon cover-alls, she becomes Sandra Dee before 1963.

Julie "Gloria and Esperanza" Bovasso jumps through my front window wearing a French bra, screaming, "I am Jean Genet!" Maria Fornes then slugs her with a volume of the complete works of Samuel Beckett (all 22 pages) protesting, "Silly woman! I am Jean Genet!"

At this point, a long distance call comes in collect from Israel Horowitz, sending his apologies for not being here, which is strange since he wasn't invited. Then Sam "Tooth of Crime" Shepard swaggers in with Murray "The Hawk" Mednick, both looking like extras in John Wayne's "Cowboys." They both go into stream-of-consciousness monologues about stream-of-consciousness monologues.

The phone rings again. It's Robert Patrick from Staten Island. He's writing a new opera for Eileen Farrell based on the life of Kate Smith. He'll try to make it for dessert if he can borrow

a nickel for the ferry.

David Starkweather, Ken Bernard, Robert Heide and William Hoffman appear outside on 10th Street, singing a medley of Christmas carols made famous by



Jack Mitchell
Terrence McNally
Listen, Walter Kerr

Johnny Mathis, as though the December songs would cool the humid September air.

Leonard Melfi and Terrence McNally each bring a bottle of Dewar's Scotch given to them free for posing for Dewar ads in New York Magazine. (Word has it that Alcoholics Anonymous has offered them a whole case to pose for its new ad campaign.)

Paul "Tom Paine" Foster arrives late with Charles "Bluebeard" Ludlam and John Ford "Older People" Noonan; they were attending a retrospective of all the films of Nanette Fabray made after 1967.

Dinner is about to begin. Madeleine le Roux is serving. Candy Darling is taking coats and Sylvia Miles is taking blood tests. We're just about to eat when suddenly there is a loud knock at the door (obviously not belonging to a soft-handed playwright). "The English are coming! The English are coming!" warns the voice outside, which sounds like that of Sal Mineo in "Exodus." "The Angry Young

Men of the 50's, led by John Osborne, have threatened to bomb the place!"

We evacuate, taking the tender Kentucky Fried Chicken and drippy cole slaw which has seen better days (like the one it was made on three weeks before). We move on to La MaMa where many of us have worked and resume our party on the set of a new play by Arrabal about the cruelty to homosexuals in our state prisons entitled "And They Hand-cuff the Fruits."

We are in luck—the entire set is a queen-sized bed which we sit around and use as a table. Lanford Wilson goes into an Ingmar Bergman-style monologue, "...and I lived in the woods of Missouri and the city said 'Come' and I came but then the voice of promise turned into the voice of rejection and for years I lived in the shadow of an almost was."

Megan Terry then begins a four-minute Om chant used by the Open Theater to convey that dinner is served. As we are about to eat, six nuns rehearsing a new play by

Daniel Berrigan attack us with bean shooters filled with genuine olive pit rosary beads. We flee, with the cold chicken and cole slaw (which seems to run ahead of us), to the Judson Memorial Church where the Reverend Al Carmines is rehearsing his third new musical of the day, concerning a band of liberated women who take over the I.R.T. Subway with the title of "The Bull Dykes."

Ed Bullins appears mysteriously in a black priest's robe, followed by Ronald Tavel, wearing an altar-boy outfit and holding a large candelabra ablaze with baby pink candles. The 20-odd playwrights then kneel as Ellen Stewart appears with a bell in the original mirrored robe from "Hair" to say grace: "Welcome to this food which is dedicated to the playwright and all aspects of the theater." Flying down from the choir loft in an old space costume from "Via Galactica" is Adrienne "Funny House of a Negro" Kennedy, singing "Before the Parade Passes By." We are about to eat.

Suddenly the lights go out.



Alix Jeffrey
Rosalyn Drexler
She can sing, too

We sit in silence. No one moves. We cannot find the food. Years pass. An era is over. An entire generation of Off Off Broadway playwrights emerged silently in the 60's and there were so few to realize the importance of the movement. Not that there haven't been moments of recognition — "America Hurrah," "Futz," "The Dirtiest Show in Town," "Next," etc.—and there are moments today with "The Faggot,"

Continued on Page 15

The Off Off Broadway Playwright

Continued from Page 3

"The Hot L Baltimore," etc.

Impressive, but almost all these moments came when Off Off Broadway plays moved Off Broadway. There are certainly not enough productions (out of the over 2,000) that made money (the establishment measure of success and the one thing Off Off Broadway playwrights were never taught to worry about, which is at once their unique virtue and their basic problem).

The Broadway writer seems governed by the producer who just produced the hit musical versions of old properties: "All About Eve," "Two for the Seesaw," "Some Like It Hot," "Smiles of a Summer Night." And no one can tell that producer that his new project to make "Wuthering Heights" into a musical, with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon in their original roles, isn't going to work. (It certainly worked before.)

There is a calculated sound to a Broadway play. The whole feeling of a Broadway evening is something out of 1955—and Walter Kerr wonders why anyone under 30 doesn't go near the theater. You know why, Walter? It's boring! The 6 o'clock news is more exciting than the formulas Broadway has been insisting upon for the last 20 years.

The trouble with the 20-odd playwrights sitting in the dark of the experimental stages in New York is that they lack the calculation. They are not going to write that inexpensive five-character, one-set comedy about the generation gap entitled, "The Moonshine Boys of Third Avenue." They are not going to write that charming little musical for Robert Goulet and Carol Lawrence to try out in summer stock for the next ten years called, "I Do, You Don't." They are not going to adapt the film version of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" into "Two Boys From

Chelsea" or "Uncle Vanya" into "Uncle Had a Late Show."

The O.O.B. writers are not capable of the calculation it takes to adapt someone else's past for they have spent their talent exploring their own imaginations and their own needs.

Films employ more current minds than those of the theater but even they have their "Lost Horizons," "Great Gatsbys" and numerous remakes. And TV? The words "obvious formula" were created especially for it.

Why is originality so frowned upon in America? Is it too hot to handle?

No one seems to be eating. There are too few venture-some producers and the 20-odd playwrights have gone into a literary suspension. True, with "The Hot L Baltimore" Lanford Wilson has been rediscovered after ten years of writing in the cafes, and the Reverend Al has had his first complete success in months with "The Faggot." This has been the pattern of the last ten years: someone being found to be lost as quickly.

*

So the 20-odd gathered one day last year to organize The Playwrights' Strategy to function as their own producing organization. Although grants have begun to appear and the first play festival held by the Strategy at the Manhattan Theatre Club last spring was a success with over 20 plays presented in four weeks to good audiences, playwrights need more than financial support. They need public and critical affirmation before they get their first smash hit and their in-depth interview on the front page of the Sunday Times's Section 2, to be followed up in the Only Human column in The Daily News.

There are many new exciting playwrights and composers. Yet so many theaters stand empty on Broadway,

(Off Broadway died in 1970 and no one even sent flowers.)

Theater must shift into the new consciousness soon or accept its role as a museum.

I wish I could call film director Luis Buñuel person to person in Paris now and invite him for dessert. He would understand. Most of the playwrights at this dinner have been influenced more by the fast images of film than by the slow sounds of the theater.

Buñuel would understand the originality of the work. There is not the big funny first-act curtain line, the big star entrance or the grand finale which tries to make you forget the rotten second act. Broadway has a definite formula and yet our times are not so simple or so pat. We need to encourage original minds, but the awards go to plays the older critics understand—plays marinated in 1950's realism and faking their way in a world which

abandoned such indulgences years ago.

The majority of critics reviewing today were reviewing in the 1940's and we wonder why our theater is so imbedded in antiquity? How can a mind that grew up in and understood the emotional era of Williams or Inge totally understand the today world of Sam Shepard or Megan Terry? Williams cannot write for this time, why are they allowed to review for it? New playwrights are being produced and reviewed by their fathers, who live in a world they have lost touch with.

*

Suddenly the walls of my dining room open into the 1,675-seat Palace Theater. We're all on stage! The playwrights around my dining-room table (with five extra leaves borrowed from Bette Midler down the block) are shocked but try to maintain their cool. Madeleine, Candy and Sylvia quickly go into "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" as rumor has it the producer of the first new 40's musical starring the DeMarco Sisters is out in the darkness.

There is no one there except a cleaning lady who looks like Patsy Kelly. Echoes of the greats who have played the Palace haunt the balconies: Sarah Bernhardt, Judy Garland, Lauren Bacall, Eddie Fisher. Everything in the gilded theater reeks of the past. Not that it isn't lovely. The past had a beauty we'll never find again, no matter how many old musicals they revive. The old theater is painted in the past but on the stage are the 20-odd playwrights and they are alive and they have an energy and originality demanding to be watched.

But they cannot eat. They must wait. Like Beckett characters in the ancient dumps of Manhattan, they wait for 1966 and up to hit the theater and then they can feast.



"THE RIVER NIGER"
—Arthur French acts the father in the Joseph A. Walker play which has passed the 300-mark at the Brooks Atkinson.