

## A Theatre Week in New York City

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I arrive on Tuesday afternoon for the joint conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and the American Alliance for Theatre and Education with a \$75.00 ticket for *Rent* in my pocket. I take a \$25.00 cab to the convention hotel, the Marriot Marquis, and check into my \$170.00 a day room for five nights. The room is large and lush. I draw the curtains and take in the view from the forty-second floor: Broadway comes straight to my window. I follow its path until its diagonal gets lost in the tall buildings and billboards. To my left, I see the Hudson River, its ships sliding along at their steady snail's pace. To my right, I watch the line inch forward at the TKTS booth in Duffy Square.

After a quick bite, I head for the Nederlander Theatre, the uptown home of *Rent*. Ushered to my seat, I'm disappointed. When I made the reservations several months ago, I'm sure I was told I'd have a fourth-row seat but I'm in the last row of orchestra, the balcony overhang blocking part of the set. The seats are narrow and difficult on my 6'3" frame. My knees push against the seat in front of me. I'm beginning to resent what I've rented for my \$75.00. But I'm still excited, ready to see the show, ready to take in this Tony Award winner, ready to experience what *Newsweek* called, "the breakthrough musical of the 90's."

The show starts and the cast appears—they are young, energetic, and diverse. This isn't the usual Broadway cast. The pleasure in seeing such diversity fades, however, as I recognize how the politics of the show have gone awry. For *Rent* is nothing more than a fraudulent display of poverty for capitalist gain. I don't trust what I'm being told. I don't trust the logic put before me. I don't trust the drama of their economic dilemmas. I grow impatient with the naiveté of the kids, their immaturity, their adolescent passions. I feel old. Some of the musical numbers engage, despite being sung by untrained voices. Some of the characters are moving, despite being portrayed by untrained actors. Yet, when the audience claps its way to a standing ovation, I feel cheated, betrayed, embarrassed. I feel cheated because the show doesn't match its hype. I feel betrayed because the promise of seeing genuine difference is reduced to cliché. I feel embarrassed because as I stand there clapping I am reminded of how my

liberalism can be a failure, a lie, an excuse to continue a class system that exploits. I return to my \$170.00 room depressed.

The next morning I take part in a convention program designed to demonstrate how performative writing might be called upon to evoke a theatrical experience. I present a paper that places my liberalism in dialogue with bell hooks and the DEF Comedy Jam. Craig Gingrich-Philbook speaks of the mouth, the gay mouth that dares to kiss on stage. Kay Ellen Capo reveals her struggle to understand and perform Lithuanian dissent during the days of Soviet control. She quotes a Lithuanian woman who said: "We lost our afraid." Her line holds me and I cannot stop wondering how far one must be pushed before fear has no hold, before one is free to act, before one doesn't care about the rent.

After my program I attend another. Three feminist playwrights, Lee Jenkins, Cherylene Lee, and Linda Park-Fuller, present scenes from their work centering on, respectively, lesbianism in the military, Asian American ethnicity, and breast cancer and the medical establishment. These are women's plays for everyone, attended by an audience primarily of women. At the end of the session I ask a question and wonder as I'm doing so, if I have any right to be shaping the discussion with my interests. I am treated kindly.

That night I sit in the Ontological Theater at St. Mark's Church questioning the kindness of Robert Cucuzza's adaptation of Clare Booth Luce's *The Women*. His show, entitled *Mean Rich White Ladies*, is a hilarious romp, fast paced, energetic fun, filled with physical humor. It parodies the vacuous and vicious bitchery of upper-class women whose lives revolve around securing a man to protect their own lifestyle. But as that bitchery is put on stage, I am left unsure where to stand, where to enter this production. Should I just accept the piece as good natured fun and put aside any desire for a feminist reading? Should I understand the critique as a playful reminder of earlier times, a time before women's enlightenment? Should I see the parody as a serious critique of women's behavior, behavior I suspect is not reflective of women's lives?

Sitting in an outside cafe discussing Cucuzza's production with a friend, a woman calls out to the crowd: "You want a show? You want a show? I'll give you a show." She lifts her short skirt around her waist, revealing her bare bottom. She pulls her tank top down to meet her skirt, exposing her breasts. She parades in front of the cafe challenging her audience: "Do you like what you see?" No one applauds. Her friend takes her by the arm and they walk down the sidewalk together, a ring of clothes around her waist, with dignity. On the way back to the hotel, I see another woman. Pulling her two small children to her side, she asks for change. I've been told that this is a common ploy and I move on. In my room, I find little comfort in feeling city-wise. Their faces will not leave me. Even if she is using her children to make a few extra dollars, even

if this is her only daily work, and even if she doesn't recognize the politics of it all, she is staying alive, doing with as much dignity as she can muster, not what she dreamed in her adolescent years she might be doing, but what she knows how to do, what she hopes will allow them to survive.

The next day at the conference I'm confronted with issues of survival again. I attend a program with a panel of distinguished playwrights, producers, and artistic directors whose charge is to discuss how beginning playwrights might get their work produced. Their advice is sound—learn your craft, join a theatre collective, start with regional theatre groups, and so on. But the audience grows impatient. They are hearing the familiar clichés of those who hold positions of power. They want to know about the politics of it all: How can you get a fair reading of your play when so many plays are entered into each contest? Would an agent take on a playwright that hadn't been produced in New York? Isn't it true that it's really about who you know? They are holding their failures against their clocks, pushing their dreams against walls, insisting that they have a place.

Another program pulls together working performance artists with the academics who write about them. The artists acknowledge the benefits of academic attention but speak of their frustration with academics who cannot talk without jargon, who fail to watch their performances with any understanding or compassion, and who write about shows they haven't seen. The greatest anger, however, is directed at those academics who neglect or conveniently forget the work of artists. Deb Margolin of *Split Britches* cries out: "I've been rendered invisible because I did not conveniently fit some academic thesis. I've been reduced to a footnote!" She names names as she speaks with passion and pain.

Tom Ziegler's play, *Grace & Glorie*, presented at the Criterion Center Laura Pels Theatre, is also about survival, survival at a time of death. Directed by Gloria Muzio and starring Estelle Parsons and Lucie Arnaz, this play yokes together two unlikely people, a ninety-year-old Virginian mountain woman who is dying from cancer and a M.B.A. from Harvard who finds herself doing hospice work after the tragedy of losing her only child in a car accident. The play is filled with the good humor that emerges when the different worlds of people of good will collide. The play is also filled with pain, the pain of losing those you love, the pain of trying to make meaning of it all, the pain of surviving in a world that bulldozes what you most cherish. And the theater is filled with empty seats. The ushers invite those who are seated in the back to come down front for a closer look.

I decide to skip the morning sessions of the conference in order to see the Toulouse-Lautrec exhibit at the Metropolitan. It includes many of his drawings, some of his poster art, and a few of his paintings. But the exhibit disappoints. The Toulouse-Lautrec that can appall, that can uncover what you

don't wish to see, that can capture what the can-can obscures is not enough present. The exhibit even seems to go out of its way to hide the critical Toulouse-Lautrec. It presents on video two modern film versions of the can-can, film clips that depict the dancers as leading a delightful life of merriment, kicking their legs up in the spirit of good-hearted fun. One wants more of Toulouse-Lautrec's penetrating eye, the eye of "Rue des Moulins" that can show the wear and weariness of the two prostitutes who, with dresses hiked up to their waists, line up for their obligatory medical examination. I return to the convention in time to paint "Stop Censorship" on a support the arts banner for an upcoming march in Washington. I remember that the entire funding for the National Endowment for the Arts is less than 1/100th of one percent of our national budget.

The next morning I attend a general session program entitled, "Visions, Insights, & Perspectives: Theatre Studies and Theory." The program description quotes Margaret B. Wilkerson's seductive words:

Theatre is the last frontier. . . . Here in the theatre we can critique, reflect, debate and question. Here we can feed our spirits, both mind and soul. . . . Here in this fundamentally sacred space, this place of wonder, this place of extraordinary freedom and responsibility, we who create theatre are granted a special public trust and are called to say the unsayable, to do the undoable. Not for petty gain, but to engage our collective imagination in the revisioning of ourselves and our world.

I have made such arguments, never as eloquently, but with equal passion. I have lived believing in the truth of such claims. So, I take a seat down front in the large ballroom to listen to the panel, including not only Margaret B. Wilkerson, but also Jill Dolan, Marvin Carlson, Barbara Wills, and Lin Wright. They speak, with Wilkerson's remarks as a backdrop, of the need to find a place, a place where the value of theatre is secure, where its power is deeply felt and understood. Their words return to me in another session, "Lesbian Criticism and Performance: 'Teaching' New Practices," as the speakers lay claim to a place where they might be heard.

That night, still remembering their words, I go with five colleagues to see the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's Everett Quinton in his one-person show of *Phaedra* at the Theater for the New City. We are ready for a satirical dart that will pierce the heart of this old classic. We are ready for Quinton's wit. We are ready for gay political theatre. And for the first ten minutes of the show, he gives us what we expect. He has us in his hands. Dressed as a waitress, he starts by playing off the audience, asking an audience member how to pronounce the names

in *Phaedra*, pulling another audience member on stage to perform a role, and teaching everyone how to moan as the chorus when cued. But soon the delightful waitress leaves the stage and he returns, dressed in a golden robe, to present the play straight, a one-person show where he takes on all the characters. Despite his massive effort, the character that the audience longs to see again is the waitress, a longing that is never satisfied. Over coffee after the show, we are stunned, stupefied. The six of us struggle to understand what we just saw. What was this show trying to say? At best we imagine Quinton saying, "Don't you get it? The Queen is a queen." And that, for us, is not enough. In our collective imagination, we cannot see the place where gay lives are revisioned.

I spend part of my time on the last convention day looking at the books displayed in the exhibition hall, looking for books that offer new visions. So many titles intrigue: Elinor Fuchs' *The Death of Character*, Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Patrick Campbell's *Analyzing Performance: Issues in Interpretation*, Jon Erickson's *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry*, Alice Rayner's *To Act, To Do, To Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action*, Elin Diamond's *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman's *The Performance of Healing*, and Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. I buy more than I can comfortably carry back home, more than I'll find time to read. I pick up order forms for still more. Later that day, I'll browse the Drama Book Shop for more titles.

Still later, I'll sit in the Reading Room of the New York Public Library, not reading, but looking at those who are. A man, thin as his out-of-style tie, sits, legs crossed at the ankle, perfectly still as he reads old Germanic tales. When he stands, he cannot straighten. A woman, perhaps fifty and wearing a bright tee-shirt with Nigeria printed across the front, reads, looks up to smile, and then reads again. She repeats this pattern over and over. I stop watching, afraid I'll be caught. Another woman, writing in Japanese with her gold fountain pen, takes notes from *Working Women in Russia*. As I begin to leave, I see a yellow slip of paper on the floor. It says, "ADDITIONAL INFORMATION IS NEEDED TO LOCATE YOUR BOOK." I read it, not as the librarian's plea for better information from a patron's call slip, but as a personal challenge, perhaps as a calling.

That night, I'll listen to Floyd Barton (played by Keith David) intone his calling in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*. His song plays against the music of the other six characters in the play, a harmony of voices singing of a cacophonous life. I applaud at the end, thinking of August Wilson's intent stated in program: "I have tried to extract some measure of truth from their lives as they struggle to remain whole in the face of so many things that threaten to pull them asunder."

I leave the theatre and stand in front of the Marriot Marquis, hanging on to New York for just a little longer before I'll have to leave in the morning. I watch the street sellers hawking their watches, sunglasses, and tee-shirts. They are not licensed to sell. When they see the police, they vanish, sweeping up their goods and disappearing into the crowds. When the police pass, they return, ready in an instant to sell. They have few buyers. They are not licensed.

Checking out, I cringe at the bottom line of the hotel bill before taking a taxi to LaGuardia. On the plane home, a young woman is seated next to me. We do not speak. She holds a scrapbook on her lap throughout the entire flight. On its cover is written, "Leah and Michael's Memories." For a moment, I long for a world that would seem that simple, that would be contained in pages, that would let me alone. I fall asleep listening to the hum of the engine, feeling its vibration.