



Portfolio: A Dream

In 1966, with *I DO, I DO* and *FANTASTICKS* both running in New York at the same time, Harvey and I set out to find a theatre of our own. It had been our dream since 1950 when we had started working together in college. Now was the time. We knew that. If we didn't do our "own thing" now, we would get too established. Too "fat." Too scared.

And so we found an old building which had once been a chapel for immigrant weddings and we converted it with the expert help of our business manager, Bob Gold, into a working theatre space. Harvey designed a stage. We begged and borrowed costumes and props from wherever we could get them. We invited a few actor friends to join us and then we began professional classes in circus techniques and belly dancing as well as exercises and experiments having to do with masks, mirrors and mockery.

It has been five years now since the Portfolio experiment actually got underway. It has produced three pieces so far: *CELEBRATION*, which was later done on Broadway and which is included in **this** volume; *PHILEMON*, a musical play about the crucifixion of a clown in Roman times; and *RATFINK*, which is the story of a middle-aged man who glues bones in the Museum of Natural History. All **three are** originals. All three have been written for the same stage (our **unit set** at Portfolio). The last two have as yet only been seen by small **groups** of invited guests, but it is our hope to complete one or two **more** original pieces and then open the entire body of work to the **public**.

We have learned a great deal during these five years. We have made so many mistakes. My God, it is easy to be pompous. Easy to be dull. We have searched for the meaning of ritual theatre. We have tried to combine Peter Brooks "holy" theatre with "popular" theatre. We have worked with masks, with crude musical instruments from around the world. We have tried a rough form of "communion," both among the actors and then later among the invited audiences. (I would hate to guess how many gallons of Almaden burgundy have been guzzled down during that noble experiment.)

At the end of it all, I have some very definite and strong feelings about "ritual" theatre. About its possibilities, and about its dangers and its limitations too. A few years ago, wildly excited and impressed by photographs of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, I finally saw them in action. I was fascinated. But disturbed too. Depressed. Something was missing. Something important. What was it? I sat down and made the following notes to myself. [Some of them are in verse form because that is the way I usually write when I get excited.] The notes ramble a bit, but I think they pretty well sum up what I feel now about this whole experiment with ritual.

SOME THOUGHTS AFTER SEEING
THE BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE

We instinctively reject the "prose" theatre.
The theatre of "doors" and "chairs."
Of telephones ringing.
Of cigarettes.
Of slyly interjected "exposition."
Further
We reject "unimportant" theatre.
Fascile theatre.
What we have come to think of
As "commercial" theatre.
Theatre which is motivated primarily by a desire
For success rather than by a desire of self-expression
For group revelation.

And this rejection of the cheap side of the commercial theatre leads us too often to a rejection of "entertainment" per se.

As in Grotowski:
No laughter during class.

No laughter during rehearsals.
No laughter during performance.

Like a church.
No laughter.
As though laughter were the enemy
Of revelation.
As though laughter were not, in fact,
Perhaps the ultimate revelation.

Tears without laughter
Is like laughter without tears:
Either one is essentially shallow.
A half-experience.
A half-vision.

Put the two together:
Not the mask of comedy
And
The mask of tragedy,

But as one face,
Twisting—

Impossible opposites
Irrevocably joined together.

Do that
And then we have made some progress.

And so—
To the Bread and Puppet Theatre.

Its origins:
Ritual
Group experience.
Symbolic theatre.

Good.
No. Better than good.
Wonderful.
Marvelous.
Important.

A view.
A vision.

Of the theatre
Too long neglected.

But at what a price!

If this theatre,
Non-verbal,
Symbolic,
Masked,
And ritualized,
Is meant to replace
The theatre of man,
Of man's anguish
And hilarity,
His god-head
And stupidity—

If man's intricate, inexorable, unexpected humanity
Is to be replaced (exclusively)
By Bread and Puppets—
By solemn figures
Ten feet tall.
Inhuman
Savagely symbolic
But frozen:
Attitudinized
Immobile
Expectable
(The very opposite of man)

Then I say
No!
And again No!
And once more
No.

It will not do.
A ritual theatre, yes!
And puppets, yes!
And bread
And wine
And sacraments
And symbolic essences
Enacted for our own ennobling

Yes to all this.

BUT NOT WITHOUT MAN!

NOT WITHOUT HUMANITY!

NOT WITHOUT THE INDIVIDUAL SOUL!

Throw out the telephones!
Throw out the sofas
And the doorframes
And the flats
And the exposition.
And the fascile.
And the expected.

Go dangerous.
Go deep.
Go new.
(And old too)

Incantation?
By all means.
And ritual.
And prayer.

Dispense with "stories" (plots)
If they seem too comfortable.

Avoid novelty.
Seek grace.
Have puppets, masks,
The whole works

But, for God's sakes,
Please—
Not without man.
And remember this:
Ritual, for all its virtues,
(And they are many
And I espouse them)
Ritual can become rote—
Its original life forces
Harden
Like coral on a reef.

Like mumbled incantations.
In a foreign tongue.

There is an ancient comfort in ritual.
But without the living heart
Without the immediacy of you and me,
Of us,
Of we,
In other words,
Without humanity—

Ritual is dead.
And deadly.

And it is a death more dead than those traditional prose plays against
which we all rebel.