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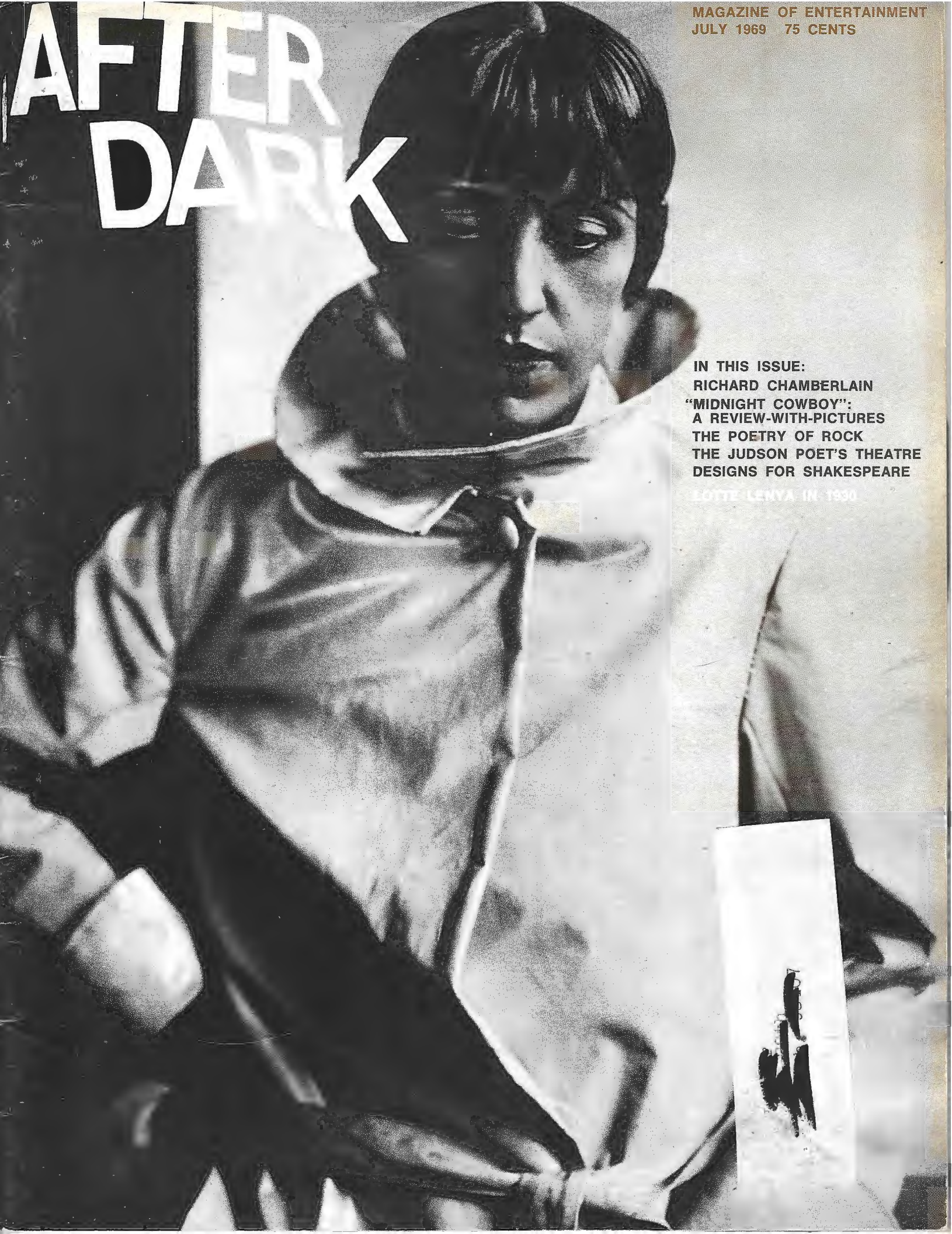
AFTER DARK



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LOTTE LENYA IN 1930

Judson's Where It's Happening

by Catharine Hughes

Above:
Al Carmines, described by Cue Magazine as "A Revved up Reverend," is associate minister of Greenwich Village's Judson Memorial Church, and one of the prime movers of the Judson Poets' Theatre. As a composer, he has also provided music for most of the theatre's presentations. (Photo by Teresa King)

Judson is Experimental. Judson is Far-out. The *New York Times* says, "There is no livelier theatre in New York than the Judson Memorial Church." (Who?) And the *Post* says it's "the most original and stimulating theatre in all New York." (Sure, but the writer's an immigrant from the *Village Voice.)* Judson has a young associate minister named Al Carmines; Al Carmines writes musicals. Al Carmines did the musicalization of Gertrude Stein's *In Circles,* also a mini-opera called *The Sayings of Mao Tse-tung,* more recently a musical version of Aristophanes' *Peace,* other things.

With these and similar profundities to inform me, I picked my way around some cartons and some paint cans (they were re-doing the office), nearly knocked over some art work, sat down and waited to be enlightened.

"I'm Al Carmines," said Al Carmines, not looking like the Reverend Alvin Carmines, or like someone with an advanced degree in sacred theology ('63). Looking more like the singer-piano player with the same name I'd seen at the Judson Poets' Theatre. I turned on my tape recorder. How, I asked with great imprecision, did it all begin?

"Well, it actually started as a result of the concerns of the church. This church began in 1892. It was, in one sense, the first community-service oriented Protestant church in New York, one of the first in the country where the concept was that the church should exist to serve the people in the neighborhood in whatever their real needs were, not what they thought they were."

For the first fifty years or so, that meant things like a gymnasium, language classes for the immigrants in Judson's Washington Square neighborhood, trade classes for the men, a fresh air camp for the kids and a maternity clinic. (At the time, the mortality rate for babies born in the South Village was over 50 per cent.) By the end of World War II, it meant something quite different.

"One of the great needs was obviously the arts. The Village had become a place where artists from all over the country came, young kids who were writing and composing and dancing and painting." There was only one hitch: no galleries for the painters, no theatres for the choreographers and playwrights. No place to grow and develop; no place to discover the truth and direction—or the validity—of their artistic vision.

Judson began with a gallery in the fifties, a place where people such as Allan Kaprow of Happenings fame, and Pop artists Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg did their first shows. "No commercial gallery would take a chance on them, simply because they were too far-out. Our congregation did take a chance on them and, of course, they were snapped up pretty quickly by other people."

Virginia-born Al Carmines arrived on the Judson scene in '61, by way of Swarthmore and Union Theological Seminary. "I was never really in the theatre until I went to seminary. And I began acting, but not that much, and I wasn't very good. But I came to Judson interested in theatre, and I'd gotten involved in reading a lot and seeing a lot. I learned everything here, by hit and miss, just by doing it. And, in a way, that's probably the best way to learn."

With the Judson Gallery well underway, the next move was a theatre. "There were loads of playwrights around, and they weren't getting a chance to have their plays done. There was no Off-Off Broadway then. And by '61 Off Broadway had become expensive, 10 or 15 thousand dollars. Now it's 25 or 30. For the most part, producers weren't willing to take a chance on a new writer. So we turned our choir loft into a theatre and said, this is for writers who are seriously writing plays and would like to see them done. We can't pay, we don't have any money, but we'll do them. That was really the beginning of Off-Off Broadway. Caffe Cino was already doing plays, but in '61 they weren't doing new ones, they were doing Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, things like that."

In the ensuing eight years, the Judson production schedule has read like a who's who of nearly all the most hopeful and hoped for young playwrights of the sixties. A few of the eighty-five or so new plays: Sam Shepard's *Red Cross* (revived Off Broadway last season), Rochelle Owen's *The String Game* and *Istanboul,* Ronald Tavel's *Gorilla Queen* (later moved to Off Broadway), Rosalyn Drexler's *Home Movies* (ditto), *Promenade* and *A Vietnamese Wedding* by Maria Irene Fornes, plays by Harry Koutoukas, George Dennison, Lanford Wilson.

An imposing array, but what's it all have to do with the Judson Memorial *Church?* How do you explain it to one of your fellow clergymen from Cleveland or Lancaster or Jamestown. Even to some of your own denominational figures who read about Judson and wonder what's going on. Who ask: How can you do this *as a church,* what's your "justification"?

"I used to worry a lot about justifying it in terms of that kind of question. But it really doesn't interest me any more, because I think it's more

Above:
Mark Kawasaki, Joan Baker, John Quinn, Lucinda Childs, Hunt Cole, Arlene Rothlein, Yvonne Rainer, Aileen Passloff, and Al Carmines (at piano) in the Judson Poets' Theatre's 1963 production of Gertrude Stein's "What Happened," directed by Lawrence Kornfeld, with music by Al Carmines. (Photo by Peter Moore)

At Left:
Teresa King gets her toenails painted in Robert Upton's "Do Not Go Gentle," directed by Al Carmines.

important to do what you do—as long as you feel some integrity in it—than to be able to put it in terms that the person who's questioning you might understand. What happens many times is that when you get a certain amount of publicity, whether you're Lincoln Center or Judson Church, you find yourself, unless you're very careful, spending 40 per cent of your time explaining yourself, advertising yourself, doing public relations. And the work goes to pot."

But, still . . .

"There were really two things behind it. One was the feeling that the church exists to serve the community and, in that sense, the theatre here exists to serve the playwright. The second was to give our people an idea what was happening outside, to give them an opportunity of hearing an honest word from the world. We're often closed off from the imagination and the thoughts of people who are trying to deal with this world. I think that we're undergoing a revolution in what we feel about the church's task. We suddenly saw that the church was becoming more and more irrelevant."

There was no thought of playing the propaganda game? No "religious drama" angle?

"Some churches get involved in theatre essentially for propagandistic and evangelistic reasons. And I think that's a mistake. I mean a mistake in terms of theatre, and a mistake in terms of the church. I think you diminish theatre by any propaganda. Theatre has to be free, even to say things that you don't agree with, things that are opposite to what you feel. I think the greatest thing about the church being involved with theatre is that the church should be the place where the playwrights can be the most free, because the church is not so vested with establishment interests that it's frightened of doing something far-out or that it's frightened of doing something new. It should be free enough, it should know where it is enough, so that it can afford to give the playwright real freedom and real response, honest response."

Judson produces six to eight plays a year, usually for three weekends each, usually to packed houses. Some are staged in the sanctuary, which seats up to 300, others in an upstairs room seating about 100. From the beginning, the congregation—which averages only 28 years of age—has been a strong supporter of the theatre. ("There's never been any flack from them.") And, almost from the beginning, the audience has ranged considerably beyond that congregation.

"One of the jokes here is that the first weekend you get your friends, that is the Village people who live in the area and come to everything we do, other artists, other playwrights, that type of audience. The second weekend you get people who are part of a fairly stable audience, but who are essentially that—not involved professionally in the theatre. By the third weekend, you get your uptown people, Westchester County and all of that. Probably 50 per cent of the audience here comes to see every show we do."

Money? What's it cost to produce a show? How do you finance your productions?

"We don't, for the most part."

Now, really . . .

"Money is a perennial problem. The church gives us a little seed money, a couple of hundred dollars every year, to begin with. For the first five years of the theatre we budgeted every production at $37.50, and that was everything—lights, sets, costumes, publicity. Now, we can't do that, it's just impossible, and we spend from 60 to 100 dollars. Sometimes over that if it's a huge cast, or a three-act play with a lot of sets and stuff. We take contributions at the end; we don't charge. I don't believe in charging for theatre, usually. We get between 40 and 45 cents per person now. We usually end up slightly in the red."

If Judson has a trademark, it's probably the "avant-garde" musical, shows such as *Home Movies, Promenade, Gorilla Queen,* Gertrude Stein's *What Happened? In Circles,* *Peace*—not traditional musicals, but shows with aspects of the form. "We've done many more straight plays. However, in terms of our image, I think people usually associate us a good deal with musicals, because I write music and like to do them. And probably a good deal with humor. And satire, because my music goes into that."

Although he began studying the piano at eight, Carmines has been composing only since 1962. "I didn't know I was a composer. During a rehearsal, Larry (Kornfeld, Judson's resident director) said, give us some mood music for this play. So I began to play, and they said keep it in, and we did. From then on, I've been composing."

As visitors to Judson—or to the Off Broadway *In Circles,* which ran for well over 200 performances and won the 1968 "Obie" as the year's best Off Broadway musical, or to *Peace,* also successfully transferred to Off Broadway—can testify, Al Carmines music is something quite special. "My composing is very much out of the stream of what's happening in modern music. It's not Cagian, or electronic, or any of that. It's involved with melody and harmony

Above: Jamil Zakkai and Crystal Field in the premiere of Rochelle Owens' "Istanboul," presented at Judson Church in 1965. Lawrence Kornfeld directed.

Top: Florence Tarlow, Carolyn Hendricks, Sandy Padilla, Judy London, Lee Worley, and Elaine B. Shore in the 1967 production of "San Francisco's Burning," a mad marathon which featured some 67 songs by Al Carmines. (Photo by Greenspan)

Center Left:
Nancy Zala, Lee Crespi, and Al Carmines in his musical setting of Gertrude Stein's "In Circles" which moved Off Broadway after its initial showing at Judson Church, and is available on record on the Avant Garde label. (Photo by Martha Holmes)

Above Right:
Joan Fairlie, Gretel Cummings, and Florence Tarlow in the Judson Poets' Theatre's production of Maria Irene Fornes' "Promenade," with music by Carmines.

At Left:
David Vaughan (standing), Sandy Padilla, Meredith Monk, and Julie Kurnitz in "Pomegranada," by H. M. Koutoukas, music and direction by Al Carmines, produced in 1966. (Photo by Ted Wiechers)

and rhythm and all those things. And I find that, as a composer, I have to follow those all the way through. I find myself closer and closer to what might be called found sound; I'm using moans and groans and claps and things like that. I'm even getting into Eastern music. But for me to have done it before it was right for me to do it—to do it because melody was passe—would have been a real mistake. And I think artists feel that, you know, and do have to follow where they are."

In the past year or two, Judson has attracted increasing attention outside the everybody-knows-everybody-else off-Off Broadway scene, outside the *Village Voice-East Village Other* circles. Since the advent of Clive Barnes, the *Times* has covered most productions, and ex-*Voice* reviewer Jerry Tallmer is doing likewise at the *Post*. Carmines takes a somewhat less jaded view of the critics than some of his OOB confreres. "I think the critics are important. They're like a thermometer in a way. A thermometer can't cure you, but it can tell you partially where you are. What you have to remember is, they write from where they are, too. And, if some critics like you, you get very upset. I find Clive Barnes very stimulating. I mean, I don't always agree with him or anything like that, but I find the fact that he's taking an interest in off-Off Broadway a very healthy thing for theatre in New York. And I think very wise for him, too, because I think he knows that this is where it's happening. And he certainly makes the wider audience aware of us. That's important for off-Off Broadway, because you can develop a very in, cliquey attitude, one where you push off the wider audience and begin to get a little bit esoteric. I think that's important to avoid."

Thus far, off-Off Broadway both has and hasn't avoided a coterie atmosphere. Or, rather, it has the atmosphere, but sometimes moves beyond it. Not as often as it should and, unfortunately, not as often as it might. "I don't think La Mama, Genesis, Judson or Cino, when it existed, finally gave in to simply doing plays for that coterie," says Al Carmines. "And I think that's why they were the permanent off-Off Broadway theatres. I think it's partly because we've kept open to another kind of audience, we've kept open to different kinds of playrights, and we've been finally more concerned with the work than with anything else. And that's the keystone of whether you're going to be a theatre or not. Once you get more concerned with technique, or more concerned with personalities, or more concerned with a message, or more concerned with a point of view, you're in deep water."

But isn't there another problem, too —isn't off-Off Broadway getting into another kind of bag, one where there's too much novelty for novelty's sake, too much of an inclination to make a fettish of anti-form, of ambiguity?

"Yes, but I think the important thing is for the playwright to follow to the end whatever he decided on. I think that one of the problems with off-Off Broadway is not that there's a total non-form, which might be very exciting, but that they begin to use non-form as a gimmick, but don't follow it all the way. What would it mean to really follow anti-form all the way? I think you'd get an extraordinary play from that, just as to follow form all the way would give you an extraordinary play. But to somehow stop in the middle, which is what happens, or veer one way or the other, is dangerous and disastrous.

"I think a playwright or theatre has a particular kind of vision that it's very important for him to follow, even if it's not in the mode of what's happening right now. I think one of the great needs right now is for political and social theatre. Unfortunately, you don't get political and social theatre by concentrating on getting political and social theatre. I think it's distressing to see all these people trying to write political and social plays because they think they should. They turn out to be mostly crap or pretentious or dishonest or spouting the point of view we all know and probably agree with, but not reaching beneath that."

Sometimes not reaching beyond Broadway banality?

"I feel the most exciting theatre in New York is off-Off Broadway. I think it is the most important theatre, the most exciting theatre, where real theatre is happening now. For the most part, I think the whole commercial theatre circuit is usually a step down in terms of genuine theatre and excitement. I think off-Off Broadway will be known as the liberating force of theatre in this century."

Above:
Trygaeus, played by Reathel Bean, rides to heaven on the back of a giant beetle in "Peace," a new minstrel musical based on Aristophanes' play, which premiered at Judson Church, and subsequently moved Off Broadway. It was translated by Tim Reynolds, and directed by Lawrence Kornfeld, with music—you guessed it—by Al Carmines. (Photo by Kenn Duncan)