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Program Notes: The Newsletter of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America, volume 2, number 1

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PROGRAM NOTES

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The Newsletter of LITERARY MANAGERS AND DRAMATURGS OF AMERICA, Inc.

A REPORT: 1st LMDA CONFERENCE

by M. Elizabeth Osborn

On August 21, 22 and 23, 1986, LMDA held its first Annual Meeting and Conference at New York's New Dramatists. Finishing LMDA's first active year, the close of the conference, entitled "Dramaturgy and Production," also marked the passing of the presidential gavel from Alexis Greene's hands to Cynthia Jenner's.

Opening the conference, Greene waded right in: "There has been artistic slippage and job slippage, in spite of the growth of this organization." For this reason, the first panel addressed "Artistic and Professional Goals in the Face of Financial Deficits." As was true throughout the three-day meeting, the discussion was lively and wide-ranging. "This great angst as a 'cult' derives from the fact that theatres don't have a purpose," said Oskar Eustis, who pointed out that dramaturgy did not spring organically from needs of the American theatre.

Many of those present shared Mark Bly's discomfort at the Yale-instilled notion that the dramaturg is "the conscience of the production." Larry Maslon suggested that dramaturgs find themselves "inspirational round pegs trying to go into practical square holes." Others, as Mickey Lupu stated, stressed that "the function of dramaturgy cannot but exist, whoever does it." "The artistic director has to have somebody to talk to," explained Jonathan Alper. Several speakers advocated free-lance dramaturgy, but said that institutions do not yet support director-dramaturgy or playwright-dramaturgy teams. "I'm not sure that I any longer think of

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FRANCIS FERGUSSON ON LITERARY MANAGEMENT

(Francis Fergusson, America's second dramaturg, died December 19, 1986. In honor of Mr. Fergusson, the following is excerpted from a 1928 letter to his colleagues at the American Laboratory Theatre, here published for the first time by permission of his daughter, Mrs. Nora Fergusson Neumann.

(Under the aegis of Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, formerly of the Moscow Art Theatre, the ALT opened late in 1923. It offered theatrical training and presented both new plays and a wide range of classics. Francis Fergusson became playreader and de facto dramaturg of the company, a position he held until ATL disbanded in 1930.

(His letter, really a white paper, explores some of the beliefs which Fergusson later elaborated in his seminal book, The Idea of a Theatre. It further reveals a courageous dramaturgic sensibility championing the playwright, tilting with artistic policy, and questioning his theatre's role in society.)

The fundamental point at which my views of the Theatre diverge from those commonly held here is this: I believe that the Theatre, to be healthy, must be part of the intellectual life of its time, . . . an instrument for the expression of spiritual life of its time and place. In my view all the artists of the Theatre, except the playwright, are of the same importance with reference to the art of the Theatre as the violinists and cellists are with reference to the art of music: that is to

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myself as a service organization," responded Cynthia Jenner. "Structure is political. If we don't like the structure we are in, we should work to change it."

The Friday-morning panel focused on "Dramaturgy for the Non-Linear Theatre," a title which allowed the panelists to ride off in several directions. Dramaturgs began as literary people, in charge of words, said Jonathan Marks. Now that we find an increase in non-textual theatre in America, he continued, dramaturgs do not just stick to words. Davies King, rueful that his American National Theater was in its last days of existence, cited their Count of Monte Cristo as a prime example of the importance of lineage to ANT. Anne Cattaneo, discussing her work on Orchards with Wendy Wasserstein and especially Spalding Gray, stressed the similarity of process, the necessity of understanding structure when working with artists whose theatre might be considered non-linear.

"The thing that appeals to me about non-linear theatre," explained playwright Chuck Mee, "is that it feels like a non-linear world. . . like the kind of theatre without a lot of rules--and a lot of built-in problems." Referring to his Vienna: Lusthaus experience, he went on: "It tends not to want to progress." Both Marks and Cattaneo talked about their experiences with Robert Wilson, who, they said, asks for all kinds of ideas. "They go in," Marks mused, "and come out as something else."

Friday afternoon was devoted to "The Dramaturg as Objective Voice in Rehearsal," or rather to refuting the notion that a dramaturg either could or should be any such thing. "The best experiences I've had have been very passionate, intimate," explained playwright-director Emily Mann. "What excites me is when you can really fly together." "The most important thing is to be of practical, useful help to a director," thought Anne Cattaneo. "In the end you shouldn't try to be objective. The show is what it is: you should just help any way you can."

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say, indispensable, but dependent. They are dependent on the playwright as the violinist is dependent on the composer. . . . Thus the difference between them is one of degree, not of quality; they are both creators whose work depends on that of other artists; but this difference of degree is one of fundamental importance, and to neglect it is to prepare the way for . . . a critical anarchy.

. . . . The . . . way to make myself clear . . . is to try to define my position in contradistinction to those which are held by my colleagues. This is fairly difficult because my colleagues do not consciously hold any position. . . . Mr. Boleslavsky's faith is a faith in his own inarticulate intuitions and the ideas of Gordon Craig, most of which are either negative or vague. . . .

. . . . Mr. Boleslavsky's ideas provide the most convenient point of departure, because, while he never expresses them in words, being a perfect creature of the theatre, it is possible to guess at what they are by understanding the great 19th-Century Romantic Tradition which formed him, and of which Stanislavsky, Craig, and Reinhardt are also expressions in their different ways. Because of Mr. Boleslavsky's upbringing in this tradition he has a depth, a consistency and a reality which is denied to us pale and backgroundless Americans. . . . What is the Romantic Tradition, and where must we, as Americans and members of a succeeding generation, depart from it?

. . . . The late 19th-Century . . . was the period of "Art for Art's Sake." Just as Rimbaud attached a religious significance to art, declining all responsibility as a human being; just as [Jose Maria de] Heredia wrote perfect sonnets about black leopards with the idea that art in the sense of form was everything, and subject matter which relates art to other human values was nothing; just as Verlaine wrote poems about vowels, in the attempt to make art its own subject matter, so Craig projects an art of the Theatre which shall be pure form, self-subsistent and with

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"My first experience with a dramaturg crumbled the loneliness and terror of being a young director in a violent city," said Anne Bogart. Bogart, however, also fears a dramaturg might inhibit her idiosyncratic way of directing. "I'm afraid I can't be fantastical," she confessed. "Any Socratic process is a defining process," responded Cattaneo, who has worked with Bogart. "What Anne is sensing is dramaturgy's conservative, even reactionary function." Several speakers agreed that it is a bad idea to serve as dramaturg for shows you do not like, or work with playwrights you do not care for. "You have to go where your heart is," insisted Bogart. "Don't waste time doing stuff you don't really believe in."

"Crossover Audiences: Choosing Plays to Reach a Specific Audience, and Reaching Out to a Wider Audience" was the Saturday-morning topic. "If we target plays," asked Allen Davis, "are we only chatting among ourselves? If so, is this a bad thing?" The Negro Ensemble Company does plays for black audiences, said playwright Leslie Lee, "to reassess black experiences in this changing society." Black playwrights will start to write about problems in black society they have thus far left untouched, he predicted. "It is time to quit worrying about what other people think."

"Women don't come to plays that don't get good reviews from white male critics," asserted Saraleigh Carney-Hawkins, who explained that Interart's only Obies have gone to Kroetz plays, albeit directed by JoAnne Akalaitis. "There is something beautiful about ethnic theatre," concluded Edward Cohen. "Writers don't want to be identified as Jewish, but often their plays become more ethnic, honest after they spend time hanging around a Jewish theatre."

After a lunchtime business meeting, the conference resumed with a panel on "Television Story Editing as Dramaturgy" that was, noted Robert Massa in The Village Voice, "dominated by Corinne Jacker's eloquent horror stories about the pressures TV writers face from producers and sponsors." "Everything is changed by a different original premise:

that you do not own your work," began playwright and former story editor Jacker, who made clear that "Standards and Practices is the most active censorship body in the U. S. today."

Jose Rivera, who found Miranda Barry "an enormous help" in reconceiving his House of Ramon Iglesias for American Playhouse, feels he gained something from learning the rules. Perhaps in reaction to his TV writing, however, he explained, his current play is developing in a non-realistic direction. "Dramaturgs should stay in the theatre," said Rivera. "They should help writers recognize their TV tricks and get rid of them." "The biggest problem of American writers is TV," chimed in Jacker, who said writing for television had affected her playwriting so negatively that she had resolved never to do it again.

"Dramaturgs don't have it easy," began Massa in his Voice piece on the conference. By 4:00 on Saturday afternoon, many who had confined themselves to New Dramatists for three days were ready to agree. Nonetheless, participants lit into the final topic, "Dramaturgy and the Classics Today: Who 'Owns' the Script?," with considerable energy. "What makes a classic be a classic is that it belongs to the universe, and says different things to different times," was Mickey Lupu's opening statement. "There is no other way to read or do a classic than in our own day." "Classics are living theatre things, with practical problems and necessities," suggested Larry Maslon. "The living moment owns the text."

"We are trying to give audiences a fresh way of seeing and learning something that matters to them," explained Genie Barton, who was starting work at the Folger on Romeo and Juliet with an interest in teenage suicide. (Barton discusses this production elsewhere in this issue of PROGRAM NOTES.) "An attitude of awe before a classic work can create radical theatre," asserted Rick Davies, who advocated paying attention to the intent of the author, then doing the play with great energy, avoiding historicity and behavioral specifics.

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"The contract you establish with audiences in the first few moments tells them how to see," he said. Those present appeared to support the concept of Chinese-water-torture dramaturgy, in which dramaturgs keep nibbling away at artistic directors to program an unknown classic once in awhile.

After the final panel, LMDA's newly elected officers were announced. Following this, the conference sublimed into a cocktail party featuring many separate discussions generated by the three provocative days of give and take.

Betty Osborn, formerly Literary Services Associate at TCG, is now TCG's Book Editor.

1987 Conference

LMDA has scheduled its Second Annual Conference for August 13-16 in Minneapolis. The event will be co-sponsored by The Playwrights Center of Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota Theatre and Conference Departments. There will be panels and seminars on the University campus, a performance at the Guthrie Theater and two days of readings at the Midwest Play Labs. The University will provide low-cost housing on a limited basis.

The focus will be on new plays with every play development group in the country invited. We hope that the Conference will be a major forum to reassess the past 20 years of institutional efforts to develop new American plays and playwrights and to examine the ways and means for the next 20.

LMDA encourages its members and other interested people to help in the planning and logistics. We request that literary managers and dramaturgs, as well as their artistic directors, across the country let us know immediately that you will attend, so we can create better programming. Tell us what you would like to discuss and what you would like to hear talked about by others. The more input you have, the more exciting the Conference will be. For information about the Conference, contact Edward Cohen, LMDA, 424 W. 44th Street, New York, NY 10036; (212) 864-5861.

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no values save esthetic ones; so the Moscow Art Theatre becomes a kind of convent devoted to the worship of form. No wonder that the playwright is exiled from the Theatre, or tolerated only on the same terms as the costumier, for it is the playwright who provides the subject matter as well as the form, who expresses ethical as well as esthetic values.

Thus we are in a better position to understand a general discussion of these 19th-Century Theatres, or ideas for theatres. So perfect in their way, so dead for us. Their impotence and sterility is due at bottom to a blind reliance on tradition. Where would the Moscow Art Theatre have been without the European heritage? Without Goldoni to interpret? Without Hamlet to interpret? Its life was dedicated to a sort of sophisticated reliving of past esthetic experiences. It multiplied variety, playing infinite variations on inherited themes, adding new piquancy to Shakespeare by the sauce which the director provided. But it did not blaze the way to the creation of really new and living subjects, and subjects were entirely discounted in the worship of form.

In America there is no tradition strong enough and extensive enough to nourish the worshipper of true form. The only spiritual tradition which we possess is a kind of intellectual cosmopolitanism, inherited from Emerson and Whitman with their miscellaneous acceptances. This attitude in the realm of ideas corresponds to that of the 19th-Century theatres in the realm of form, and is in its own way, equally bodyless. That fact perhaps explains why it was possible for the founders of this theatre to agree to start a great theatre without seeking, or even feeling the need of a common scale of values. They did not intend the theatre to express anything in particular for they did not have anything in particular to express. Behold us, therefore, a prey to every influence that comes along, and indeed, being nothing in particular.

The remainder of the excerpt of Mr. Fergusson's letter will appear in the next issue of PROGRAM NOTES.