

Soul Talk

Summer Theatre

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



IN THE SUMMER AFTER MY FIRST YEAR of graduate school at Catholic University where I had been cast in only one role and that a walk-on, I was hired by the Town Meeting Playhouse in Jeffersonville, Vermont to play the female lead in nine productions of summer stock, whether the lead was ingénue Angelique in *Imaginary Invalid* or matronly Beatrice in *Breath of Spring*. A graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts was hired to play the male leads.

The company would perform the current show at

8p.m. for a week and rehearse the upcoming show during the day. The male lead and I were not required to help build sets or gather props and costumes, as were the other company members, which gave us latitude to learn lines. I tried to change my appearance for each part with different hairstyles, hair colors, and fake hairpieces, and of course changes in costume helped, except that for several roles I wore my own clothes, which didn't lend me a feeling of being someone else. I hadn't much of a notion to adjust my way of walking and talking from role to role and so I expect I came off moving and sounding pretty much the same whether playing Gillian the witch in *Bell Book and Candle* or Lady Isabel of *East Lynne*. Even so, when would there have been time for building a character from the outside, to say nothing of creating the inside of a role? Still, the experience was invaluable for establishing confidence.

That was stock. The other way for young actors to learn in the field is repertory, which I encountered while still in college as an apprentice to the Champlain Shakespeare Festival in Burlington, Vermont. My apprenticeship involved running props and playing servants of little or no speech: I attended upon Cleopatra as Iras in *Antony and Cleopatra* and held the newborn baby Elizabeth at the end of *Henry VIII*.

This summer I visited three estimable repertory theatre festivals of North America. Shakespeare prevailed at two: the Stratford of Canada and Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts; the third was the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario. Typical of summer repertory, a festival actor would be performing, say, two supporting roles in two different productions scheduled at various times of the week through much of the season. The actor would have rehearsed the first role for three or four weeks during which time he may have begun rehearsing the second role. The actor would then have played the first role and eventually the second role in four to eight previews over one to three weeks. (Musicals will rehearse longer and may preview twenty-plus times over a month or more). There would have been some

degree of daytime rehearsal of a show while it was still in previews.

This sort of preview arrangement indicates that producers feel obliged to consider the fiscal needs of the theatre over the creative needs of the actor. (For example, since 80% of Stratford's \$46 million operating budget derives from earned revenues, the Festival no doubt favors previews over rehearsal since previews garner box office receipts.) But what does it do to the exploratory process of an actor to put him before an audience after a few weeks of rehearsal? From university to stock to rep to regional to Broadway, rehearsal periods are too short. Once an actor goes before an audience, including a preview audience, exploration pretty much stops and repetition sets in. Depth and details get sacrificed. Directors and actors are being compelled to settle for a level of performance well below that of The Group Theatre who sought the level of the Moscow Art Theatre. What level of realism, what level of truth, is the going model and to whom is it acceptable?

The shows I saw this summer were well produced, the performances were fine, and the festival atmospheres were entirely enjoyable. But I found myself looking for more depth and versatility, hoping to see the actor go beyond his customary way of acting. Maybe actors don't need to go so deep with language plays like Shakespeare and Shaw. But even if they wanted to, how could they? When rehearsals get skimped, what can an actor do but scratch the ground? What an actor wants is enough rehearsal to unearth the ground, so he can keep on digging through all the length of a run and not dry up. Stock and repertory forestall the digging. I would hear townspeople in Canada say that if you return later in the summer the performances will be better. But they won't be better because they won't be more human. They won't be more real. They'll be more polished and more relaxed but not more in depth.

Still, repertory has rewards. The Stratford was fostering a Greek theme: Shakespeare's *Pericles* and *Troilus and Cressida* conjoined with a unique variation of the *Oresteia* trilogy. Beginning with Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and rather than continuing with Aeschylus's *Choephorae* and *Eumenides*, the Festival was offering Giraudoux's *Electra* and Sartre's *The Flies*. Wonderful programming! The fortunate result for the actors playing Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Electra and Orestes was the opportunity to build the same character from the point of view of different playwrights from different places and periods: Greek and French, ancient and modern.

Over at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, I found a radiant *Much Ado About Nothing*, skillfully and delightfully conceived by director Daniela Varon. Building on Shakespeare's Sicily setting, Ms. Varon transported the play to the 1950s with Shakespeare's fraternal dons as Mafioso, honorable and dishonorable; with Beatrice as a proto-feminist in crinolines; and with a Sinatra-like Balthasar crooning for swooning girls. Every now and then, irrespective of rehearsal time, a show pops up like a beautiful flower with every performance lovely and alive. *Much Ado* showed that when the energies of a director and the actors coalesce, a day of rehearsal can be as fruitful as a week; quality can belie quantity.

Widowers' Houses (Shaw's first play, masterfully written at age 36) at the Shaw Festival likewise demonstrated what a difference the chemistry can make. Under the di-



Shakespeare & Co.'s *Much Ado About Nothing*.

rection of Joseph Ziegler the actors played Shaw as Shaw wants to be played: smartly, wittily, lively, mannerly, attractively and with a bolt of electricity from beginning to end. Again, with Shakespeare and Shaw, it may be that a few weeks of rehearsal is enough, if the production is fortunate and the actors speak the speech trippingly.

Audiences come from far and near to the Shakespeare and Shaw festivals in Canada. They cultivate themselves by reading the plays beforehand and discussing them afterwards. Excellent program notes by university professors stimulate and supplement discussion. Audiences can choose a matinee and an evening performance from among four to six productions in three different theatres on a given day. Over the course of the Stratford season from May to November, more than half a million people will see at least one of sixteen productions. The Shaw 2003 season consists of eleven productions of which I saw four in addition to *Widowers Houses: Shaw's Misalliance*, O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, Brian Friel's *Afterplay*, and Comden & Green's musical *On the Twentieth Century*.

The United States is blessed with Shakespeare & Company, and other Shakespeare festivals continue across the land. In addition we need an American theatre festival. In particular we need an O'Neill Festival I would like to say here and now, the concept of an O'Neill Festival ought to be taken up by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in New London, Connecticut. A theatre building lies fallow nearby in Stratford, Connecticut waiting for employment; or a start-up theatre could be built at the O'Neill Center. We need a Festival to examine the plays of O'Neill and his progenitors, the Greeks and Strindberg, and those he generated, including Tennessee Williams who exclaimed that O'Neill gave birth to the American theatre and died for it. We need an O'Neill Festival, providing months of stage work for American actors and directors and affording them lots of rehearsal time. ♦2003

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Be not enslaved by needless fears;
Acquire knowledge to allay your fears;
Search for truth and understanding;
Vast knowledge is the key to make you free.

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Be strong and you will not fall.

Yield not to fear and never give in;
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Have accomplished deeds in history to revere.

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