

## *A Playwright's Journey Next Stop: The 21st Century*

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As I look around this historic room at all you wonders of the American theatre, I think of only one thing. During the run of *Inherit the Wind* on Broadway, that national treasure, Paul Muni, would scream at a sometimes bumbling stage-manager who came backstage before a performance to tell Muni that Laurence Olivier was out front or Laughton or Gielgud or Charlie Chaplin. (They all came!)

"Don't ever do that," Muni would plead. "And I'll tell you why. There was a fella who was a great self-proclaimed hero of the very wet Johnstown Flood. He rescued old ladies and babes in arms and even a goat and a pig off the roof-tops, and bragged about it for the rest of his life. When he got to heaven, he told St. Peter about it and asked if it were all right if he kept on bragging about what a hero he was during that great Flood. 'Sure,' St. Peter said. 'Help yourself. Go right ahead. Just remember - *Noah* will be in the audience.'"

I salute all you Noahs and Mrs. Noahs, the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Academic theatre, as we proclaim the miracle which has happened during the past half century - the joining of forces between you and the Professional or (dirty word!) commercial theatre. To paraphrase Polonius, we have "grappled each other unto our souls with hoops of steel." This alliance has enriched all of us, as it has theatre of America and, indeed, the world.

Currently I conduct a Master class in Playwriting at the Professional Writing Program of the Graduate School of the University of Southern California. A true professional, as we all know, has a creative mind and spirit which works to the *top of its form*, with every play, every scene, every sentence, every word.

Most of you found out long time ago what I have known only since 1969, when I *began* teaching playwriting at Ohio State, then as Master Playwright at N.Y.U., then as a stand-in for George Savage at UCLA, then at the Salzburg Seminar for American Studies, then at Baylor, then for the past eleven years at U.S.C. You know what a personal joy and triumph it is to spin off what you yourself have learned to the next generation and maybe even the next century and millennium.

It's not just that you learn so much from your students or that they inspire you to inspire them, it's that you become part of tomorrow - and the day after tomorrow. I always say that if you want just a tiny piece, a small scrap of immortality - *Write! Teach! Have Children!* A lot of you, including my partner of 52 years, 3 months, Bob Lee, are luckier than I: you've done all three. I have no biological, rock-'em-to-sleep, shake-'em-awake children. But then I say: "Wait a minute! Our plays are our children, too. And when my students write healthy, bouncing plays, they're my grandchildren."

Perhaps playwriting can't really be taught. It can certainly be *induced*. They can absorb and teach themselves discipline, good working habits. I hope they will be like me in only one respect, that they won't be able to sleep at night if they haven't written five pages a day. So I urge them to get plenty of sleep. If I ask young playwrights what their plays are about and all they can honestly answer is: "Oh, about two-and-a-half hours long" - then they're two-and-a-half hours *too* long.

And I tell them what I require of every play I see. I want to wake up the next morning and realize that I'm a taller human being. Something happened to me in that theatre. I understand my own life better because of what I saw and heard on that stage. My soul has been sandpapered.

And when their own plays are polished to professional perfection, I insist that they be produced with living actors and a living audience, not just as a limp "staged reading"; but with the full rehearsal learning process, and using the top professional actors and directors available. Then the playwrights know what they have, what they've accomplished, that they've planted their flags atop a truly professional mountain-peak.

And we pass along a few hints about what Bob Lee calls "Writing Without Rules." About 30 years ago, the Dramatists Guild Quarterly asked us to write a *Credo For Playwrights*. So Bob and I knocked out *Ten Commandments For Playwrights*. It started out as something of a gag - a paraphrase of the biblical commandments, but along the way they turned into something of what was commanded: a kind of personal credo. You've probably heard or read these before, as they've been widely published, at least six times in Broadway Playbills down through the years. Here they are.

### *Ten Commandments for Playwrights*

- I There are no commandments for playwrights.
- II Thy typewriter shall not make graven images of yesterday's hit.
- III Thou shalt not take the names of the critics in vain; for if thou believest them when they praise thee, thou must believe them when they pan thee.
- IV Six weeks shalt thou labour in rehearsal and out of town. But remember thine opening night and keep it holy.
- V Honor thy director and thy producer, that thy run may be long in the theatre which the Shuberts giveth thee. But let them not hasten thy handiwork into production; it is earlier than thou thinkest.
- VI Thou shalt not kill the spirit which made thee want to write the play in the first place.
- VII Thou shalt not commit television.
- VIII Thou shalt not steal the shekels of thine audience with a play which doth not let them know what the hell goeth on.
- IX Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy times.
- X Thou shalt not covet hits but plays. Thou shalt not covet stars but actors. Thou shalt not covet scenery but imagination. Thou shalt not covet security but challenge. Thou shalt not covet press-clippings but a rapt and coughless audience.

For the past twenty years, my partner, Bob Lee, under John Cauble's creative wing, has been handing down those Commandments to his playwriting students at UCLA and I across town have been preaching *passion*, the joy of good work accomplished, the growing knowledge that positive, constructive collaboration must be exercised all down the line in the theatre, the hope that our students, as we try to do, appreciate the great gift of laughter and make all their serious plays funny and all their funny plays serious. Never going down the catechisms of "And then we wrote", we try to "spin-off" what we've learned from some of the masters-of-theatre we were lucky enough to work with, including many of you.

Our first work for the Broadway stage and its rather amusing aftermath, was a musical, called *Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'!* starring Nancy Walker, brilliant as a bumbling ballerina. The director was (wow!) George Abbott. The choreographer (another wow!) Jerome Robbins. It has a melodic Hugh Martin score and hilarious lyrics, including one number with the longest title in musical theatre history: "I'm the First Girl in the Second Row in the Third Scene in the Fourth Number in Fifth Position at Ten O'clock on the Nose." But *Look, Ma* was far more than just a backstage romp at the ballet. Its theme was America's unbridled love-affair with what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "that bitch-goddess, *Success*."

Most of all, we learned from the master of pragmatic theatre, George Abbott, who knew how to make things *work* on stage, who cautioned: "Of course re-writing is necessary. But not everything in one fell swoop. One thing at a time. And be damn careful. Make sure you're rewriting for the better. It's just as easy to rewrite for the worse."

Here's the aftermath. When we got back to the West Coast, we had a call from our agent saying that Samuel Goldwyn wanted us to write a screenplay. We wondered what the hell that could be. Paramount had already bought *Look, Ma* - though they never made it. And we were flattered of course - for Goldwyn had used some of the best writing around: Robert E. Sherwood, Sidney Howard, Lillian Hellman.

And we were fascinated to find out in the flesh if the famous Malapropisms attributed to Goldwyn were really spoken by him or were merely press-agent's ploys to get Mr. Goldwyn in print. You know the famous ones: "I'll answer you in only two words: "Im - Possible." Or "A verbal agreement isn't worth the paper it's written on." Or "Come to my house and see my paintings. Especially my Toujour Lautrec." Or: "I produced five films last year. Shouldn't I be in the Guinness Book of Wreckage?" My own personal fondness for such things comes from the fact that my mother was not only a pretty good poet, but was also a master of Malapropisms. When Bob Lee and I started writing together, she said: "I'm glad you're a partnership. Because everybody knows two heads are better than none!" As this Hollywood saga continues, you'll find that a couple of real-life, out-of-the-mouth-of-Goldwyn quotes really happened to us.

Face to face with the Hollywood mogul, we found out fairly fast that he wanted us to write a screenplay of the Broadway musical, *Billion Dollar Baby*, which had been Jerome Robbins stage work immediately preceding *Look, Ma*. And we wondered out loud why Mr. Goldwyn hadn't hired the original book-writers, Comden and Green.

"They had a flop, you had a hit. I never wanted to buy *Billions of Dollars of Babies*. My wife Frances made me do it. I'll never make the film. But I paid a lot of money for it - so you go ahead and write the screenplay."

Well, that's a happy shot-in-the-arm, isn't it? But we spent the next six weeks and turned out what we thought was a pretty passable script. We called the Story Editor and asked him what we do now. He told us to make an appointment with the boss' secretary and simply hand the script to Goldwyn - and just *stand there while he reads*

its. I remember that it was a Friday at 2:00 o'clock, when we were ushered into the great man's office. We handed him the script and he said: "*Stand There!*"

He moistened his finger, turned to the first page, and pointed rather belligerently at the first character to speak, the same name it had been in the Comden & Green Broadway book.

"No, no, no, no! You can't call a character *Steve*. *Every Tom, Dick and Harry's name is Steve!*"

Well, it was all true: *Mr. Malaprop*, if not *Mrs. Malaprop* was very much alive. Goldwyn said: "Go back to your office. I'll read it over the week-end!" Well, he evidently didn't, for we just sat for three weeks, collecting weekly checks. Having nothing else to do, we started writing *Inherit the Wind*. (Please don't tell Sam Goldwyn, Jr.). At the end of that time, the Story Editor phoned us to say that Mr. Goldwyn had finally decided to shelve *Billions of Dollars of Babies* and, of course, he never made it.

Seven years passed. We had two companies of *Inherit the Wind* running, Paul Muni on Broadway, Melvyn Douglas all over the United States and Canada, and translations into 34 languages. And at the same time there were five companies of *Auntie Mame* running simultaneously: Rosalind Russell, Greer Garson, Eve Arden on the West Coast, and Bea Lillie in London, Constance Bennett hot on the heels of Melvyn Douglas, sometimes even in the same theatres where *Inherit the Wind* had set down just a few weeks before.

We didn't believe it all, of course. This probably sounds like bragging, but when we got back to California we were pretty "hot stuff."

The first thing that happened was that we were invited to a big party at David O. Selznick's. He got us at the center of the huge living room, ignoring all the real celebrities, clapping us on the backs and wanting to know why in hell we hadn't been writing for the screen. "Well," I said, "even before I met Bob, I worked at Paramount writing Henry Aldrich pictures." (Shades of beloved Ezra Stone, whom Bob Lee directed as the "Coming-Mother" hero of radio.) And Bob added to Selznick that we'd worked for about six weeks for Sam Goldwyn. "Sam's going to be here tonight," he said. "He'll be so proud of you." "Oh, hell," I said, "he won't even remember us or recognize us!."

Well, about ten minutes later, Goldwyn came through the front door and Selznick rushed over to him, whispering in Goldwyn's ear and pointing at us.

With open arms, Goldwyn came toward us. "Boys! Boys! my discoveries!"

It look as if he planned tokiss us each on both cheeks, French style.

"You thought I wouldn't recognize you. Of course I do."

He pointed to me.

"You're named after the Revolution War General, Robert E. Lee."

Then he pointed to Bob.

"And you're *Jerome Robbins!*"

Then he put his arms around both of our shoulders.

"Boys. Boys. Since you worked for me, we've all passed a lot of water under the bridge!"

Perhaps a major Commandment for Playwrights is: *Thou Shalt Not Commit Hollywood*. If you do, come home soon to the theatre. The greats of the British stage double back and forth with regularity. And so have all our major acting and writing stars: Hepburn, Fonda, Roz Russell, Helen Hayes. Think of what a National Treasure Marlon Brando would have been if *he* had continued to come *home*. As for the current crop of active playwrights, the fact that John Guare, David Mamet, Neil Simon work with fair regularity in the Land of Milk and Money, doesn't mean that they've given up the theatre. I worry only about what somebody once called "The *Playwrotes*," so wounded by Broadway flops that they never dare to take a high dive into the treacherous waters of Broadway again, ever, or so dazzled by the more certain weekly salaries of the screenwriter after they've had one hit, that they never gamble on the financial uncertainties of the stage again.

Of course, all you have turned the tide in the past forty years, changed that exclusive spawning ground for new plays from a few blocks of real estate called Broadway to where Broadway belongs: everywhere, on the longest street in the world, clear across America. You've done it with our increasingly beautiful connections, our *Hoops of Steel!*

Some of that began with the incredible Margo Jones, who, in the early and mid-'50s had the wild, impossible idea of running a theatre in the unlikely city of Dallas, by giving birthing room to new plays, not just carbon-copies of Broadway or museum pieces. And Margo became the literary mid-wife for Tennessee Williams' early babies, and William Inge's first play, and, thank God, for one of ours: *Inherit the Wind*.

Of course, you know that every major Broadway producer and director turned it down cold. And it sat in the dark of our files for a couple of years - until Margo stumbled onto a copy. She phoned our agent, the Buddha of

Brandt & Brandt, Harold Freedman, who did a hard-sell in his telephonic Brandt, Harold Freedman, who did a hard-sell in his telephonic whisper, saying: "Margo, you don't want to do this play. They'll crucify you down there in the Bible-belt, that hot-bed of Southern Methodists and Fundamentalist Baptists." "That's not what this play is about," Margo thundered. "It's about the right to teach. To learn! *To Think*. I want to do it - right now!"

May I say a very loud "*WOW*"? That was a great lady of the theatre - a theatre innovator, a theatre evangelist.

After Margo's untimely death, Bob and I started an annual Margo Jones Award, to honor producing directors, artistic directors of theatres who matched the fervor and belief Margo had for new plays and new playwrights. We surrounded ourselves with expert help from fellow Margo-lovers: Brooks Atkinson, Dallas critic John Rosenfield, Dick Coe, Howard Lindsay, George Freedley, and, of course, Tennessee Williams and William Inge. At first we were hard-pressed to find candidates for the award. But over the past 35 years, in Margo's name, the honor has gone to some of the greats of the American theatre.

Four years ago, we expanded the award to include statesmen and stateswomen of the theatre: teachers, critics, publishers, anyone whose life-work has been devoted to encouraging playwrights, new plays, who have honored and appreciated the craft and the artistic excellence of working dramatists. That new shape of the Award, which includes the striking *Margo Jones Medal*, an honorarium, and the cheers of American playwrights, is now presented annually, appropriately at the William Inge Festival, and is now administered by Alan Woods and Nena Couch at the Lawrence and Lee Research Institute at Ohio State University, and by David LeVine in New York.

Who got the very first new Award? *Richard Livingston Coe*. But of course. The second year at Independence, Kansas, it went to *Otis Guernsey*. Last year to that patron saint of playwrights, whom you have honored here today, *M. Abbott Van Nostrand*. And a week ago last night I was happy to announce at the Inge Festival that the 1994 *Margo Jones Award and Medal* went to *Henry Hewes*.

You all know about American Playwrights Theatre, which all of you had a happy hand in starting and encouraging. The grace note of it was at the AETA Convention at Eugene, Oregon in the mid-60s. Bob Lee was the keynote speaker. In the question-and-answer session which followed, one of your members got up and asked Bob: "Why do we have to wait so long before we get a chance to do your Broadway plays?" And Bob said: "What if we gave you our plays, and perhaps the plays of a lot of other willing playwrights - *first* - not necessarily pre-Broadway or before Broadway, but *instead* of Broadway? If you all got together and said 'Yeah! We subscribe to that idea,' maybe we could make it work." And you all said, almost in unison: "Why don't you try us?"

Well, we dreamed up what seemed like a workable modus-operandi, Ohio State University offered to be the headquarters, and Bob and I presented it to the AETA membership at Minneapolis the year the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre was launched. By happy coincidence, Guthrie himself preceded us as speaker. During the questioning period, Bob Lee spoke up again. He complimented Sir Tyrone for the beautiful productions of *Hamlet* and *Death of a Salesman*, but inquired why a *new* play hadn't been included in this new theatre's schedule. In his high pitched voice, Sir Tyrone declaimed: "Because, young man, nobody can *read* a new play. You have to see it first brought to life on a stage. And the only places that's happening these days are in New York and London."

When we proposed *American Playwrights Theatre*, you all leapt aboard, to help make Sir Tyrone less of a Nostradamus. Bob and I waited to be the sixth-in-line to offer a play, so our plan wouldn't seem like self-serving.

And *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* turned out to be our most widely produced play: 154 different productions and 2,500 performances in one calendar year: and, intentionally never on Broadway. As you know, published plays don't usually sell. Bantam Books told us a few weeks ago that *Thoreau* has sold 480,000 copies. So thank you, dear midwives, for helping to give birth to our play on the stage and our play on the page.

Of course what you are sponsoring and developing these past years and this week-end, *The American College Theatre Festival*, has made the art and craft of theatre leap ahead eons of tomorrows, particularly from our point of view, of your carrying on Michael Kanin's brilliant plan for newly-crafted student plays at the university level. John Cauble asked me to remain over tomorrow to join in your tribute to Michael: I'll tell you in a moment why I can't. Michael Kanin, playwright, poet, sculptor, dedicated to all the creative arts, dedicated to where this planet is spinning, has been, is, always will be, our most cherished friend and colleague, along with all the other beautifully creative Kanins.

The reason I have to fly back to Kansas City well before the crack of noon tomorrow is because I've been playing hooky yesterday and today from rehearsal of our newest play, *Whisper in the Mind*. Where's it playing for most of the month of May? At one of your theatres? But of course. One of the most beautiful theatres I've ever worked in: *Missouri Rep*, founded and fostered and fondled by our wonderful colleague, Patricia McIlrath. So, you see, in what a lot of pessimists consider the dying years of this century, we remain optimistically alive as playwrights because of our never bending, never broken *Hoops of Steel*, with you.

After 39 plays, hundreds of radio-plays, screen-plays, TV specials (never sitcoms or night-time and

certainly not daytime soap operas) plus a couple of text-books, my biography of Muni, short stories, articles and lecture texts ad infinitum, Bob Lee and I each decided to write a novel, alone and unaided by the happy company of collaboration, which works fine when we play tennis with ideas and dialogue, but not when we attempt highly personal prose. Bob's novel is a dandy, look for it in your bookstore just around the corner of 1995. It's: *The Lost Letters of General Robert E. Lee* by Robert E. Lee. I know this work of factual fiction is a beauty because it passed the test for me: I wish to hell I'd written it. Bob, of course, is the ideal man to write it, being the namesake of that celebrated Virginia gentleman. In fact, Bob's wife, Janet Waldo Lee (you know her as radio's Corliss Archer and as the voice of dozens of female cartoon characters, most memorably Judy Jetson and Alice in Wonderland) is usually introduced as Mrs. Robert E. Lee. And she's invariably asked: "Is your husband related to *the* Robert E. Lee?" And beautiful Janet always answers: "My husband *is* the Robert E. Lee!"

My novel was published this past year and is called *A Golden Circle*. The subtitle is: *A Tale of the Stage and the Screen and Music of Yesterday and Now and Tomorrow and Maybe the Day After Tomorrow*. When I handed it to my publisher, he thought the subtitle was the entire novel. My leading lady, Madam Rachel, is an amalgam of a lot of actresses I have known. At the thriving age of 92, she recalls her life as a singer, an actress, the author of a book called *How To Act A Song*, mostly as a *teacher*, a life-force in the lives of several theatre generations to follow. I have put my own theories and philosophy of education and the point and purpose of the living theatre into her mouth. Here's how some of it sounds:

"I like people who speak up, who talk to me. I usually terrify youngsters your age. They think of me as some kind of high-school principal.. Of course, if I really were a principal, or some high-mucky-muck of education, I'd turn every school into a theater. A matinee every class period whatever they're trying to teach. Dramatize those dull textbooks, shove them onto stages, with music and dancing and especially a lot of laughs. That might open up the ears of all the pupils who've stopped listening, make them realize that history is a helluva comedy and damn good drama too, and that it's a show that goes on and on, and doesn't have to have a final curtain."

Later in the book, the two young people, Jed and Kati, try to convince the remarkable Rachel to write a sequel or a second-half of her long out-of-print book, *How To Act A Song*, and Kati suggests it might be called *How To Sing A Scene*. Rachel tells them part of that book might be remembering a play she acted in, *The Mandarin Lady*, long years ago, where at the finale she had played the most ancient creature anybody had ever seen. The play had been directed by the fabled David Belasco, who had dumped tons of authentic Chinese dirt onto his stage to simulate the mountain pyramiding into the overhead dark. The drama comes to life for the young people as she tells of a writer who pleads to God or the gods for "Once. Just once let me look into the face of *Truth*." Trying to be as literal as Belasco, I used, for this play-within-a-novel, an old Chinese legend, augmenting it with some personal theories of writing and even my own occasional search for a hint of truth.

At first, *Silence*. No answer to the writer's plea.

Then!

An echoing, disembodied voice rumbled like distant thunder from the skies. "Come with me. I will show you Truth."

A spot hit the first level. The writer, lured to it, climbed upward. When he turned forward, looking into the light, a kaleidoscope of colors played on his face, whirling, blending, changing, sunsets turning into rainbows, sunrises exploding into multicolored Chinese fireworks. The writer marveled. "Such colors, such beautiful colors. Colors I've never seen before. Colors beyond the spectrum of the rainbow." And he clapped his hands, the joyful discoverer. "Ah! This is the truth of being a writer: to see something *nobody else* has ever seen before and to be able to describe it all in words."

The disembodied voice called to him. "This is only a way stop. Come. I shall show you more. Climb higher, toward the clouds, toward the stars."

The whirling colors faded as a spot hit a second level, where the climbing writer's feet seemed to be touching moving clouds. He breathed in deeply, his lungs filling with beautiful scented air.

"Such perfumes! Such magical perfumes! Aromas I've never known before, so overpowering I

not merely inhale them, smell them, experience them with *one* sense, but I *see* them! Like pillars of ice and fire." His head swirled as if keeping time to a wonderful melody. "And I can *hear* the perfumes, like flowing music. Oh, listen to the perfume of the clouds!"

The writer stretched out his hands, stroking the velvet air. "I can *touch* them! And the perfumes are seeping into my pores, into my soul." He leaped up, a sudden surge of strength and self-knowledge. "Now I *really* know the truth of being a writer: we must experience everything we encounter not just with *one* sense, but *every* sense. Then we are true observers of the multiplicity of all we witness in our lives. And the unknown becomes known."

The unseen voice called out to him again. "Technique. Methodology. Reportage of the senses: every skillful writer knows he must use that. Come with me one step further. I will show you the face of Truth itself."

The voice mesmerized the writer to the very apex of the pyramid. There at the peak, in a great carved chair, sat the oldest woman he had ever seen. He half turned away for he saw that she was also the ugliest woman he had ever seen.

An ancient voice emerged from deep in her throat. "Come closer, my boy."

He moved toward her, almost unable to look at her.

"Are you Truth?"

"Yes, my boy. I am Truth."

"Thank you for the favor of being able to look into your face at last. Now I shall go tell the world about you."

"If you consider it a favor," she murmured, "do a favor for me in return. When you tell the world about me, tell them that I am *YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL*."

Jed brooded a lot about the old lady on the Writer's mountaintop. And he challenged Rachel to help him figure out what the playwright was trying to say. The reverse of the actual words?

Does even the mouth of the face of truth speak lies? And wasn't it better, Jed argued, not to sugar-coat everything? Not to cover everything with diamonds or marshmallow sauce? But to try to dig beneath the gilt (or guilt?) surface of things and uncover, reveal the deceptions: the lies told us by our parents, our lovers, our government, our churches, our teachers, mostly the lies we tell ourselves. Isn't that the subject matter of an infinite number of plays?

"Of course it is," Rachel said. "But we all lie. We lie brilliantly: to make the fiction truer than the mere factual. Who tells the truth better, Shakespeare or Holinshed? Why, Will, of course. In his years as a brilliant critic, Harold Clurman defined theater perfectly in the title of one of his books: *Lies Like Truth*. Verisimilitude: that's the word. The appearance of truth. Every play should be happening *now*. This minute. In front of the audience's eyes. Not by *shlepping* in a whole Childs Restaurant, but with the passion of belief: by the playwright, by the director, by all the actors, mostly in the heads of the audience. Better than any dull, dry, dreary history book.

"Look at me. I invented myself. I made a broad from Scranton, one generation removed from a vowel-poor half-Polish, half-Russian village, into what some people call 'The Divine Rachel,' isn't that a lovely lie? And what's every good, honest, legitimate playwright? I'll tell you what he is: a *Divine Liar!*"

Jed's pen raced to get everything down in his self-invented shorthand, shaking with excitement. Kati seemed to be soaking in every word, like Joshua's writer on his climb, listening with her elbows, her

eyebrows, her kneecaps.

"Oh children," Rachel said apologetically, "am I rattling on too much? I like to think of myself as some kind of teacher, not just passing on some nonfactual, occasionally unwise wisdom, but brushing up on my own half-remembered homework. But I don't ever want to be a pompous preacher. If you catch me sermonizing at you, or at myself, for the love of God, shut me up!"

"I've never caught you passing the collection plate," Jed assured her, "not once."

"Don't put any of that 'wasn't-I-wonderful' autobiographical stuff in there," Rachel warned, pointing to Jed's pile of notes. "We're supposed to be talking about 'How to Sing a Scene,' your title for Act Two of the book, Kati. And we've said or sung damn little about that."

Jed raised the butt of his pen in the air, like a junior high school pupil asking to be called on.

"I know," he said, "that you're not suggesting Pavarotti should play Willy Loman. But define your terms for us. Should there be a few arias in Mamet? A little recitativo by Al Pacino?"

"No. Definitely no. Come on over to the piano with me."

They sat on the piano bench, shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow. Rachel began improvising at the keyboard.

"Now, I don't have to be playing; you already know how much music there is in this instrument, played or waiting to be played. And a song doesn't have to be labeled a song in order to be music. When you hear a melody that's insistent and haunting, you can never get it out of your head. You even wake up in the middle of the night humming it.

"Well, it's got to be that way with every important scene and line of a play, even if the whole thing's not labeled a musical or an opera. As an actor, as a writer or director, too, you have to believe in the melody of each moment, or the audience won't. They won't hear your voice, they won't hear your singing. Reaching that audience, 'that collective genius' somebody called it, is the litmus paper test. Because they know. They know if you're faking the melody, or that you're not really able to sing it. It has to reach their inner, inner guts and the insides of their brain linings, so they'll never be able to forget it, or you, or the play, then they'll want to go on living in the living theater."

About a year ago, I was invited to contribute a piece to a volume called *The Courage to Grow Old*. I told the editor of it that I'd write it if he changed the title to *The Courage to Grow Young*. He didn't change it, but I wrote it anyhow. Here are a few paragraphs from it, which is my blast against *retirement*, a stopping place on this kid's journey I never intend to visit.

I'm against mandatory retirement. Why do we dump men and women of skill and understanding and continuing creativity into the concentration camp of "old age" simply because they have reached the arbitrary fencepost of sixty-five? I don't believe your chronological age has anything to do with the newness of your ideas, the freshness of your conceptions. I realize retirement from the literary life is somewhat different from the imposed cancellation of a job in the average workplace. You can't continue to drive a bus in your living room, or build a skyscraper in your bathroom. But there are always new avenues to explore, new horizons still unimagined.

As for myself, I have always preferred not merely the Pursuit of Happiness, but the Happiness of Pursuit. Unless the next play is in our typewriters or word processors, unless I am witness to student-minds opening to the wonder of the intelligence and creativity all around us, I can't sleep at night. If there is not a journey-of-the-mind awaiting me tomorrow morning, why go to sleep? Why get up? Why have any more birthdays?

There's a legend in the land that past a certain age, your sexual drives slow down, atrophy, or disappear completely. Mine, though often sublimated, have not diminished a whit, nor has the joy of foreplay and the subsequent consummating orgasm of fathering a literary child.

The theater can be life-enhancing, despite the frequent attempts by the commercial theater to disembowel itself like some mad practitioner of hara-kiri. And the metaphor of the stage goes on all of our lives, each of us trying to give a continuum of peak performances, the sign of a true professional in our art and trade. We realize this

when most of a century has slipped by as personal- historical drama, including, we hope, quite a bit of high comedy.

The most annoying question I get is: "Are you still writing?"

"Yes! And I'm still breathing."

"What was your last play?"

"I haven't written it yet. If you mean my most recent play, I'll be happy to discuss it with you."

And the most frequent question-accusation: "Oh, you're one of those atheist-agnostic fellas who wrote *Inherit the Wind* - and you're giving Jerry Falwell and all the rest of the Fundamentalists competition fits. Whatsamatter with you? Don't you believe in God?"

You're damn right I believe in God, or more rationally a Supreme Intelligence, the creative mind of the universe of which we are all a part. Constantly. Even as "senior citizens." We have been created by that Intelligence to create and *re*-create.

Let's use some literal, fundamental Fundamentalism: Genesis 1:1. God, or that Intelligence, created the universe (with the willing help of the creative evolutionary process). But please note that He, or possibly She, didn't rest on the second day or the fourth day. He kept going, and then rested (see Genesis 1:2) on the seventh day. And any Creator who could turn out a hunk of work like the universe, with great starring roles like the stars, is damn well going to get up the morning of the eighth day and go to a universal Selectric or word processor and *keep right on creating*.

I challenge my playwriting students: "You want to be God-like: Go thou and do likewise. The happy habit of a writing discipline, every day of your life, makes you get up and get to work on that eighth day, and that eight-hundredth day, and that eight-thousandth day. And when you are eighty."

When our Dean, Jean Korf, honored me by asking me to speak here today to my fellow Fellows, I told her I'd carry on a bit about *The Journey of a Playwright: Next Stop - The 21st Century*. And I thought you'd like to know about three major projects that loom large for Lawrence and Lee as we get closer to that Centennial-Millennial date. (I know a lot of wisenheimers will insist that the 21st Century doesn't begin until January 1, 2001, but we all have to write 2-0 instead of 1-9 on our checks and desk calendars, so let's let it go at that.)

Bob Lee's fascinating solo project, half-written, deadline: 1999, is *Writing Without Rules*, which had its genesis in our First Commandment for Playwrights: "*There are no Commandments for Playwrights.*"

A mutual project has been gestating for more than a decade, a play, appropriate and timely we hope: It's called simply:

### *Turn of the Century*

It's about that multi-person who straddled the 16th and 17th Centuries, *John Donne*. The parallels between his centuries and the ones we are close to leaping across are enormous: the plagues, the shifting ground of all our certainties and orthodoxies, the unending combat within each of us between flesh and spirit. More than anything, Donne's life and work and passionate beliefs combine in shaping the catechism of every life-affirming playwright, in fact every caring human being: "*I am involved in Mankind!*"

Finally, a word about my proposed second novel: the first chapter of it is already written. Is it fictional? Autobiographical? Who knows? Isn't everybody's autobiography fictional? And all our fiction autobiographical? The novel is called:

*New Year's Eve:  
December 31, 1999*

It's about a writer who decides to spend the last fading hour of the century all by himself: there's only one chilled glass alongside the jereboam of champagne. And suddenly, at five minutes to midnight, the doorbell rings. The unexpected arrival turns out to be an annoying fella he hasn't seen for almost 60 years. There's a manuscript the



size of a telephone book under the man's arm.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jeremiah?"

"I've come to ask you only one question, you son-of-a-bitch. Why the hell did you screw up my century?"

The man hands the writer his Boswell-like manuscript. The title is: *Jeremiah's Jeremiad*. The opening sequence of this book within a book tells of a 5-year-old, clinging to his mother's hand as they walk along a shaded street in Cleveland. On a formerly freshly-painted pure-white board fence, they both see that somebody had painted large that 4-letter "F" word.

"Mama, what does that mean?"

"Nothing, dear. Nothing at all. It's just that some stupid boy doesn't know how to spell *fudge*."

There begins, Jeremiah writes with prophetic certainty, the life-long battle of the alleged dramatist against prevarication, no matter how protective, and his fervent fight against censorship, and the gradual realization as he reaches maturity as a writer that the most vicious and crippling brand of censorship is *self-censorship*.

We want all of you to join us, to share our three adventures in theatre and the printed page up ahead, with you as directors perhaps, or as publishers, producers, critics, actors, even contributing your two-cents'-worth as book buyers and theatres goers, though I'm told that these days books and theatre tickets cost slightly more than two cents.

*We want to stay linked to all of you, not just with Hoops of Steel, but with Circles of Gold.*

Five years, 8 months, 7 days ahead of schedule:

***Happy New Year!***

***Happy New Century!***

***Welcome to the New Millennium!***

Notes

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